December 2021

Lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis: 6 Opportunities to Strengthen Conflict Sensitivity across the Humanitarian-Development-Peacebuilding Nexus

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The COVID-19 pandemic, and efforts to control its spread—including lockdowns, social distancing measures, and border closures—have led to unprecedented health, humanitarian, and socioeconomic shocks worldwide. These shocks, in turn, are raising the likelihood that risks for many forms of violent conflict—crime, armed conflict, violent extremism—may increase. It is crucial for the United Nations (UN) to adopt a conflict-sensitive lens in all relevant operations across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding (HDP) nexus to prevent an increasingly volatile situation from deteriorating further.

COVID-19 is not only a health and an economic crisis; the pandemic, and our policy responses to it, are also **exacerbating risk factors for violent conflict.**[1] To avoid a further surge in violent conflict, national actors and multilateral organizations must work together to integrate a conflict-sensitive lens into their COVID-19 responses and recovery plans. The UN is best placed to lead such an effort at the global level. Already, the UN has played an important role in drawing attention to the potential risks to peace and security precipitated by the COVID-19 crisis, be it through the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), the Security Council, or UN County Team (UNCT) programming.[2]

However, efforts to integrate conflict sensitivity across the UN's HDP operations remain ad hoc.[3] The UN Comprehensive Response to COVID-19 only refers twice to conflict sensitivity, and the UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19 did not request a conflict analysis in the response plans.

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[1] Risk factors for violent conflict emerging amid the pandemic include: an increase in state repression and violations of fundamental rights as government actors' endeavor to enforce a state of health emergency; a surge in child abuse linked to lockdowns; job losses; increases in prices of basic goods; worsening inequalities; and the disruption of peacebuilding activities.

[2] Examples include: early on, the PBC convened an ambassadorial-level meeting on the impact of COVID-19 on peacebuilding and sustaining peace, and in August 2020, the Security Council held a briefing on "Pandemics and the Challenges of Sustaining Peace." At country level, the UNCT in the Philippines revised its cooperation framework with the government in response to the UN's COVID-19 socioeconomic response framework, re-titling it "UN Socioeconomic and Peacebuilding Framework for COVID-19 Recovery in the Philippines," with peace as a crosscutting component.

[3] Céline Monnier, "Adopting a Sustaining Peace Lens to the COVID-19 Response" (CIC, 2020), https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/adopting-sustaining-peace-lens-covid19-web-final.pdf.

What does the word "conflict" refer to in the conflict-sensitive approach?

"Conflict" can refer to a wide range of situations of opposition over values, resources, political power, and other issues. Ideally, conflicts in a society can be regulated peacefully, for example through the justice system or a political process. When they are not, violence can be deployed by diverse set of actors: the state, armed groups, criminal groups, extremist groups, etc. Because of this wide variety, different understandings of conflict exist across the UN system. This policy brief understands conflict-sensitivity to be relevant in all contexts to address risk factors for violent conflict.

However, our interlocutors reported that some country teams included this analysis nonetheless. The Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP) did task UNDP with mainstreaming "social cohesion and conflict sensitivity across the humanitarian plans in priority countries and nationally-led response plans,"[4] which is an important step in the right direction. Interviewees suggest, however, that the implementation was not without challenges.

At the country level, staff of agencies, funds, and programs (AFPs) across the humanitarian and development sectors, as well as peace and development advisors (PDAs), have striven to adopt a conflict-sensitive approach to the pandemic, with different levels of success. Nevertheless, interviews reveal that UN staff across the AFPs continue to feel unprepared to adopt a conflict-sensitive approach in their COVID-19 responses or more broadly.

Throughout 2021, New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) has engaged UN actors from across the HDP nexus to reflect upon this challenge. Through interviews and workshops, as well as a review of conflict-sensitivity documents produced by the UN, we have explored the many challenges facing UN staff as they seek to operationalize conflict-sensitive approaches amid the pandemic. Some of these challenges are specific to the pandemic, while many others predate it. We have also facilitated discussions among a diverse group of UN staff to identify opportunities for addressing preexisting and emerging violence dynamics within and across the UN's humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding operations.

The objective of this policy brief is to amplify UN staff "asks" in these regards and, based on these, to provide recommendations for strengthening implementation of conflict sensitivity at the UN.

Key opportunities to strengthen conflict-sensitive approaches at the UN

1. Convey the benefits of conflict-sensitive approaches to operational staff

UN conflict-sensitivity experts and staff in UN policy departments consistently report that it has been a challenge to convince their operational colleagues that **conflict sensitivity is a critical "whole-of-system" responsibility**, including, if not especially, amid a global pandemic.

Notably, many country-level staff members have no peacebuilding background and may not understand the significance of addressing risks to peace in the midst of an acute health and socioeconomic crisis, especially in contexts where there is not yet a discernible increase in violent conflict. Humanitarian staff, in

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[4] UN, "Global Humanitarian Response Plan: COVID-19," https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/global_humanitarian_response_plan_covid-19_.pdf.

Unpacking conflict sensitivity

The **conflict-sensitive** approach is a risk informed approach, to deliver all development, humanitarian and political assistance in a way that averts creating new risks for conflict (or increasing existing ones) and that strengthens resilience. It is at a minimum a "do no harm" approach, but all actors can also go further and use it to foster peace through their programming. Conflict sensitive programming is based on an analysis of what connects and divides a population. In other words, programs should foster social cohesion (e.g. by decreasing inequalities) and avoid creating further sources of tensions.

particular, emphasize the importance of "doing no harm," but question whether it is possible or advisable to address root causes of violent conflict, which are invariably structural and political, through humanitarian aid—particularly at a time when immediate emergency needs have surged. Development actors, meanwhile, often believe that development actions by themselves foster peace and so see little need to adapt their ways of working. Evidence shows, however, that this is not necessarily the case, and, in some instances, development programs can even increase risks of violent conflict.[5]

Crucially, the reluctance on the part of operational staff to view conflict sensitivity as a core, shared responsibility of the UN system is in many ways epistemic. Indeed, there remains a lack of available evidence on:

- The ways that aid programs can and do **exacerbate risk factors** for violent conflict if they do not consciously take social fault-lines into account, and
- The ways that aid programming, when carefully designed, can **alleviate tensions** in addition to achieving its humanitarian or development objectives

As a result of this evidence gap, staff report that they cannot confidently identify key features of a successful conflict-sensitive approach.

Recommendations

Interviews suggest several mutually reinforcing approaches to clarify the importance of conflict sensitivity among UN staff.

- UN policy departments should produce, and make readily available, concrete **evidence showing how conflict-sensitive programming can (and does) address risk factors for violent conflict without detracting from its other objectives**. Such evidence should have in mind the different goals and obstacles facing humanitarian versus development staff, and should take into account both preexisting and COVID-induced violence dynamics. Policy departments of some AFPs have been striving to do this by commissioning their own research, sometimes through partnerships with organizations such as Interpeace and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). This evidence could be expanded upon and centralized in a database, for instance, by the UNDP-DPPA Joint Program/Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO)/Development Coordination Office (DCO), for easy access by resident coordinator offices (RCOs), PDAs, and AFPs. Evidence generated by UNCTs could also be included in this database and for use as inspiring practices.

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[5] Paige Arthur and Céline Monnier, "Development and Prevention: National Examples of Linkages" (CIC, 2019).

- **UN leadership should reaffirm that conflict sensitivity is a system-wide responsibility, and that staff will be held accountable in this regard**. A clearer understanding of what "success" looks like when it comes to conflict sensitivity amid and beyond the pandemic, and how outcomes will be evaluated, should be developed, based on research and again taking account of different actors' mandates and ways of working.

2. *Develop a consensus across the UN of the key risk factors for violent conflict and establish a data collection system*

Implementing a conflict-sensitive approach requires an understanding of risk and resilience factors for violent conflict and how they are impacted by aid programming. There is, however, no agreement across the UN on a list of what are the risk and resilience factors or root causes for violent conflict. This is the case even though publications such as the UN-World Bank report, *Pathways for Peace*, have consolidated evidence on risk factors. More broadly, research shows that while each context is specific and should be analyzed thoroughly, certain stresses are more likely to lead to outbursts of violent conflict than others. Yet a common understanding of these risks and stressors is often absent. Moreover, there is no consensus across the UN on the specific risks that COVID-19 has generated.

Table 1: Risk factors for violent conflict
The table below summarizes some of the risk factors for violent conflict. Risk factors were often present before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic increased them.

RISK FACTORS/ STRESSES	INTERNAL	EXTERNAL
Political	• Lack of trust between citizens and state • Manipulation by political leaders of inequalities between groups (regional, ethnic, racial or religious) • Perceived threats to values and status	• External political interference and support for violence
Security and Justice	• Legacy of violence and trauma • Ethnic, religious, or regional competition	• Invasion, occupation • Cross-border conflict spillovers • Transnational terrorism

	• Real or perceived discrimination • Human rights abuses	• International criminal networks
Economic and social	• Youth unemployment • Inequality, vertical (crime) and horizontal (civil conflict) • Natural resource wealth • Severe corruption • Rapid urbanization • Gender inequality and prevalence of domestic violence	• Price shocks • Climate change

Source: *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (World Bank, 2011) p. 7, and World Bank and United Nations, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (World Bank, 2018). Adapted by NYU CIC in Sarah Cliffe et al., "Are we facing a wave of conflict in high-income countries?" (CIC, 2021).

A key challenge to establishing this common understanding is lack of capacity to undertake periodic robust risk assessments at country level, a challenge that the pandemic has only exacerbated. Interviewees report that collecting the data needed to inform a pandemic-inspired analysis—measuring the increase of unemployment, debt, spikes in food prices, domestic violence, and inequality, among many other risk factors—has been complicated and time-consuming.[6]

Another obstacle is that AFPs tend to undertake analyses in siloes. There is no integrated approach to addressing the variety of risk and resilience factors present in a given context, which is crucial to foster peace. Humanitarian needs assessments and vulnerability analyses, for instance, do not frequently inform the macroeconomic surveys undertaken by development actors, while macroeconomic risks are not necessarily incorporated into the thinking and strategies of humanitarian agencies. COVID-19 has not changed this situation, despite the compound risks it presents.

Recommendations

To address these issues, the UN can undertake the following courses of action:

- **Use the current need to understand the compound risks generated by the COVID-19 pandemic to advocate for a process to clarify the common risk and resilience factors that all AFPs**

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[6] This was compounded by the fact that UN staff were often in lockdown, making it more difficult to conduct interviews and focus groups.

What is in a conflict-sensitive tool?

In general, conflict sensitive tools have **three main sections**: first, how to carry out a conflict analysis; second, how to identify opportunities for peace; third, how to incorporate these two analyses into programming.

should be on the lookout for. The Joint Program/PBSO/Development Coordination Office can collect and summarize the latest evidence/research on risk and resilience factors for violence and share with RCOs, and particularly with the PDA when there is one. See for instance the table above. It is also important to update thinking on, and repositories of, risk factors in light of the pandemic, and to ensure that risks spanning the HDP nexus are accounted for. The Joint Program/PBSO/DCO can also add the latest research on risk and resilience factors in the database mentioned above.

- **Identify context-specific risk and resilience factors across the nexus at country level and establish a data collection system:** To ensure that conflict-sensitivity is context-driven, the RCO should organize periodic UNCT-wide discussions on risk and resilience factors for violence, with humanitarian and development AFPs sharing information about the evolution of the risks in their specific area/sector of operation. Conflict analysis and input from peacebuilding experts should be included in these discussions.

3. *Streamline guidelines and toolkits on conflict sensitivity to make them easier to use and access*

Both AFPs and the Secretariat have striven to build operational staff's capacity to implement conflict sensitivity by producing guidance tools. Our interviews and workshops reveal that UN staff have struggled to use this guidance during the COVID-19 crisis. Some commented that there were "too many tools," while others said they were unaware of tools' existence. Several UN staff reported that specific conflict-sensitive tools for COVID-19 were developed too late by headquarters to be useful to field staff.

That is not to say that there were no guidelines available at the beginning of the pandemic. Indeed, there is **a plethora of UN conflict-sensitive tools across the UN system**.[7] Staff note that this abundance is the cause of considerable confusion. As one interlocutor put it, 'The plethora of similar tools with different agency or sectoral branding is part of the problem. What is the difference between a Conflict and Development Analysis and a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)?" Another added, "The work becomes tool-driven, not goal driven." In addition to creating a lot of work for operational staff, these guidance documents are often duplicative, and looking at them in isolation may be a waste of time and resources.

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[7] UN staff from the workshops shared tools with CIC. The tools can be divided into several categories. The first looks at the overall country context. The second encompasses tools made specifically for a given AFP or sector. Some UN staff also report using non-UN tools, such as conflict trees or stakeholder mappings. Several interviewees also mentioned that human rights tools can be considered part of a conflict-sensitive approach.

Notably, interviewees express concern not only about the abundance but also the variable quality and granularity of the existing conflict sensitivity tools. They lament that the tools tend to have a generic audience in mind; they do not speak to the different mandates, functions, and levels of expertise of UN staff.[8] An interviewee wondered for instance why the guidance is the same for a peacebuilding expert as it is for a procurement officer? Existing tools also tend to contain specialized jargon, which makes them difficult for non-experts to understand and use. Interviewees further emphasize that the tools tend to be overly long and complex, and often do not take seriously the time and resource constraints facing country-level staff.

Recommendations

Based on UN staff asks regarding the availability of tools, several concrete actions can be undertaken:

- First, a UN entity—possibly PBSO, the Joint Program, or DCO—or a research center should **identify all conflict-sensitive tools** that are currently available for use by UN staff.
- Second, AFPs, the Joint Program, PBSO, and DCO, should create a **database that organizes these different tools** and socialize it among operational staff. For instance, the Joint Program could include such a database in its resource package. This socialization would aim to systematize and normalize the use of a conflict-sensitive approach.
- Third, AFPs should bear in mind the different roles and expertise of operational staff, and **ensure that staff receive tailored guidance appropriate to their functions.**
- Fourth, some UN staff also asked if it would be possible to look at all the relevant frameworks, **identify common principles, and summarize them in one short document** (to be supplemented by role-specific guidance). Ideally, this would be a standardized but flexible document, describing a conflict-sensitive methodology. One interlocutor requested "something meaty enough and not branded to one agency." Requests were also made to **highlight the overlaps between conflict sensitivity, human rights, and gender analysis to avoid duplicating the work**.

It is noteworthy that, through a system-wide effort, a new guidance note on conflict sensitivity has been drafted to summarize what a conflict-sensitive

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[8] Indeed, conflict-sensitivity specialists express frustration at the extensiveness of the available guidance; they would prefer much shorter, nimbler frameworks. On the other hand, non-experts report that many guidelines do not go enough into detail. For instance, risk and resilience factors are not always referenced or described.

approach should look like.[9] This document may address some of these concerns but has not yet been released and is fairly long.

4. *Provide better access to trainings on conflict sensitivity*

Our interlocutors underscore that training is even more important than guidelines or toolkits to understand the logic and the processes of conflict sensitivity. As one workshop participant said, "If staff are properly trained on conflict sensitivity and are clear about what it's being used for, there would be no need for HQ to develop COVID-19 tools, because the staff would already have adapted and adjusted to the new threat/risk." Several interviewees note that trainings on how the pandemic has impacted violence dynamics would be especially useful.

Such trainings are in short supply for operational staff across the HDP nexus. This is true even for conflict-sensitivity experts: some PDAs reveal that they have not received any training since their induction. What trainings do exist may also be unaffordable. Notably, the UN System Staff College (UNSSC) offers training courses on conflict-sensitive approaches, but these courses have a tuition fee, which may present a significant hurdle for staff if their organization or a donor is unwilling or unable to cover the cost.[10]

Recommendations

- **AFPs and donors should provide access to a general training for all UNCT staff by covering the costs of developing such a training.** This training should explain what is conflict sensitivity, where to find more information about it, and enable staff members to identify when it should be used. It should also clarify what success looks like and who to reach out to for guidance (UN or outside experts) to ensure a conflict sensitive approach. All staff do not necessarily need to know how to carry out a conflict analysis, but they should be able to identify when it is needed and who can do it for them.
- **Create tailored, periodic conflict sensitivity training for experts.** All PDAs, AFP focal points on conflict sensitivity, and UN peacebuilders should receive a periodic (maybe annual) inter-agency training on conflict sensitivity. During these, the UNSSC should share the latest research on risk and resilience factors and conflict sensitivity and create space for peer-to-peer exchange and coaching on specific situations. A starting point could be a training on the impact of the pandemic on risk factors for violence.

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[10] E.g., the individual fee for the online training course on "Conflict-sensitive approaches to programming" is currently $1,000.

- **Provide follow up coaching on conflict sensitivity.** A one-off training will not address all UN staff questions on the operationalization of conflict sensitivity. AFPs and the Joint Program should create opportunities for their staff in the field to discuss specific cases they are dealing with, with conflict-sensitive experts to get real time support to design their approach.

These trainings should be included in budgets to make sure that all UN staff can afford them.

5. *Make sure that risk analysis is translated into conflict sensitive programming*

Our interlocutors reflected that conflict analyses often remain "paper on a shelf" rather than influencing planning and programming.

The challenge is twofold. First, there is a lack of mechanisms to ensure that UNCT operations as a whole are conflict sensitive. In theory, system-wide frameworks such as Common Country Assessments (CCAs), and UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCFs) provide an opportunity to generate a comprehensive strategy for integrating conflict risks into programming across the HDP nexus. Yet this often does not happen. UNSDCF guidelines, for instance, do not prioritize the analysis of violent conflict risks, and therefore may have limited influence on programming in this regard.

Second, interviewees highlight that even if the CCAs and the UNSDCFs were conflict sensitive, that would not be enough. These frameworks are only adapted every couple of years, despite how fast the context in a given country can change. In many countries, the COVID-19 crisis emerged in the middle of a CCA/UNSDCF cycle, quickly rendering these frameworks out of date.[11] Moreover, when a conflict analysis is produced for the whole UNCT, it may still fail to influence AFPs' programming. One of the reasons mentioned by our interlocutors is that when such an analysis is produced—by a PDA or UNDP—it tends to have countries as the unit of analysis and may overlook local, regional, and/or transnational as well as sectoral dynamics. Consequently, these analyses are often difficult for AFPs to use to adapt their programming, even when they are integrated into a CCA/UNSDCF.

To address these challenges, many AFPs have been developing their own guidance on conflict sensitivity that is more tailored to specific sectors and contexts, to inform programming, such as WHO, WFP, FAO, and UNICEF.[12]

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[11] In some countries such as the Philippines, however, both the CCA and Cooperation Framework were revised and included a conflict-sensitive analysis in response to the inter-related impact of COVID-19 and the changes in the peacebuilding context in the south of the country.

[12] For instance, in its guidance WFP looks at "how procuring and transporting food and other in-kind products into a context characterized by limited resources can contribute to entrenching unfair power structures," World Food Program (WFP), "Conflict Analysis and Conflict Sensitivity Risk Assessment," Guidance Note (WFP, 2021), p. 25.

One issue is to ensure that these complement UNCT-level efforts rather than supplant them. Another challenge is to create the necessary space, expertise, and incentives for operational staff to fully implement the guidance and adapt programming accordingly.

Recommendations

- **RCOs should make sure that CCAs and UNSDCFs are informed by a conflict analysis** and that this analysis reflects risks and needs at transnational, country, and local levels.
- **AFP leadership should ensure that conflict sensitivity is not only integrated in UNCT analyses, but also in individual AFP programs**, taking into account local and sectoral dynamics. This should include the design and implementation of programming, financing, communications, relationships with different stakeholders, hiring and procurement processes, and team configuration. This can be accomplished by, inter alia, ensuring that those in charge of monitoring and evaluation include indicators and metrics on how programs are or are not addressing risk factors for violence.
- **AFP leadership should ensure that their staff has enough time to adopt a conflict-sensitive approach**, particularly during a crisis such as COVID-19, without diverting them from their other responsibilities. That may be done by mobilizing additional capacity at headquarters to support the work of implementation at field level. In addition, conflict sensitivity experts might be embedded more systematically in teams at field level.

Other actors besides UN leadership/policy departments can help to ensure that conflict sensitivity is properly integrated into UN operations. Recommendations in this regard include:

- **Member states should stress the importance of conflict sensitive approaches during governing body meetings**, among other fora;
- **Donors and trust funds should make conflict sensitivity a requirement to secure funding** wherever appropriate, including at the programmatic level. Donors should also **provide more flexible funding**, to enable programs to adjust to new circumstances and risk factors as they arise.

6. *Support national actors in their conflict-sensitive efforts*

National and local actors around the world have struggled to contain the spread of the virus while minimizing the knock-on effects of pandemic containment measures. While the UN has played an important role in ringing the alarm at the international level about the potential risks for peace and security, it has not focused enough attention on advocating for conflict-sensitive responses at

national or local levels, or on equipping national and local actors with the tools to conduct their own conflict-sensitive analyses or to use such analyses to inform national policymaking. In certain cases, UNCTs have drawn attention to the impact of national responses to COVID-19 on peace. In addition, the Joint Program provides catalytic seed funding (up to 50,000 USD) to PDAs to work with the RC, UNDP, and UNCT teams to support conflict prevention, that can include a training budget for national actors on conflict sensitivity.[13] While these are promising approaches, they need to be scaled up and systematized.

Meanwhile, **in all the UN guidance tools that CIC has reviewed, none of them have a section dedicated to the role of national actors in implementing a conflict-sensitive approach**. That is the case even though, as the Security Council's[14] and General Assembly's[15] sustaining peace resolutions highlight, prevention and peacebuilding—of which conflict sensitivity is an essential element—is the responsibility primarily of national governments and authorities. One of the interviewees called this omission the "UN prevention paradox," and pointed out that oftentimes the UN undertakes conflict sensitivity completely separately from national and local actors, when national ownership should be a core component of the approach. As another interviewee put it, "How can the system as a whole support rather than replace or supplant national solutions?"

Interviewees stress the problem that in some instances, national actors appear unwilling to undertake a conflict-sensitive approach, given the political sensitivities involved. The term "conflict sensitivity" itself can be a deterrent in this regard, as some national actors do not want to be perceived as at risk of conflict. The UN can adapt the terminology—for instance by using "violence sensitivity," since no society is immune to violence and the terminology might be perceived as less stigmatizing. Moreover, CIC's own work in this area suggests that there are other concrete ways to "take the fear out of prevention" by explaining its benefits and by underscoring that conflict sensitivity can and should be sovereignty-supporting.

Recommendations

It is critical that the UN support the capacity of national actors to engage in conflict sensitivity. In this regard:

- **Member states can adopt a self-directed guidance on conflict sensitivity that international partners could then support**, when

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[13] UNDP and UNDPA, "Preventing Conflict, Sustaining Peace: Joint UNDP-DPPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention: 1 December 2018–31 December 2023" (2018).

[14] Security Council, S/RES/2282 (2016); https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2282 (2016).

[15] General Assembly, A/RES/70/262 (2016), "Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture"; https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/70/262.

needed. The crime prevention field has for instance adopted ECOSOC resolution 2002/13, which is a guidance on how to design government-owned prevention systems, which could be a model. It includes a definition of the types of risk factors for violence, advice on national and local coordination system, and on how to develop evidence-based policies.

- **RCOs, PDAs and AFPs should systematically engage with national actors to raise the importance of adopting a conflict sensitive approach**, while taking care to ensure that efforts in this regard do not become overly politicized. They should particularly learn from national actors' expertise, support their efforts, and train them on how to be conflict sensitive, wherever appropriate.

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