
Reflection IV: How can the use of knowledge improve our action?

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There is a lot of learning in the peacebuilding field: from experiences, from evaluations, from research. And the field has learned a lot – for example, in doing better conflict analysis or developing theories of change. Yet too often we end up reverting to a standard set of knowledge transfer approaches – training, handbooks, manuals. Yet change is slow. Perhaps it is not about having the right instruments and making them more effective. Perhaps it is more about understanding how we can better engage in joint learning while taking into account busy operational schedules and institutional realities. Existing planning instruments can help adjust interventions to make them more effective, but joint learning processes are needed to “think big,” about the relevance of what we do to get to inclusive societies, when we do it, with whom, and for what purpose.

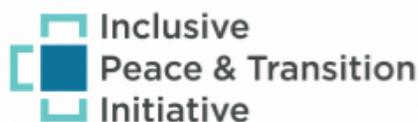
An example of the challenges we face is the journey of the conflict sensitivity agenda over the past 20 years. CDA’s Local Capacities for Peace project, which gave birth to the Do No Harm approach, was an immense joint learning exercise to make the development community more sensitive to conflict. Huge efforts were made to get institutional buy-in through collective learning processes with innovative approaches, and today, the Do No Harm approach has become a mantra. But we still see many of the same mistakes repeated in conflict zones that Mary Anderson analyzed in her famous book that gave rise to the conflict sensitivity debate. It is fair to say that conflict sensitivity has not been systematically implemented into mainstream development, humanitarian, or (more surprisingly) peacebuilding work.

Why is it so difficult to bring knowledge into practice, even when we try to do it collectively? The experiences from the conflict sensitivity debate indicate an excessive focus on toolboxes and insufficient attention on integration into operational realities. Organizational structures, politics, and power relations within the aid system, which underpin its operational procedures, have been neglected. Learning often became an expert business of toolboxes and checklists rather than a transformation of practice.

So how can we better put knowledge into practice? I have seen that, tools and instruments need to be integrated into standard procedures, but also that learning is a relationship issue. A tool will only have a chance to succeed if it is integrated in a way that takes into account the relational and practical realities of a process. We also need a collective debate on the politics of power in our field. We need to talk about how we integrate this into our operations, so that

we can pursue real transformative change, that can contribute to inclusive peace.

Research findings can help tremendously to show the patterns of success and failure of peacebuilding efforts, and can support efforts to make inclusion concrete and real, and not a box-ticking exercise. Research findings can help, but we need to understand how to implement them meaningfully, taking into account the operational realities of local civil society organizations and their partners alike. I am looking forward to engaging in this conversation with you.



This reflection piece was a contribution to the online consultation [“Civil Society & Inclusive Peace - A Reality Check”](#) co-hosted by IPTI, Peace Direct and GPPAC on 27 February - 1 March 2018