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# Working Paper

## SDC's Governance Support in Fragile, Conflict and Violence-Affected Settings

SDC Networks on Governance and Fragility, Conflict and Human Rights  
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# 1 Introduction

Fragility, conflict, and violence are crucial challenges that threaten development achievements. Conflict and violence adversely affect the lives of millions of people and drive most of the humanitarian needs worldwide: individuals are displaced, livelihoods are devastated, and opportunities for broader growth, development, and prosperity are destroyed. By 2030, two thirds of the world's most vulnerable people could live in fragile, conflict, and violence-affected settings (FCVAS). Sustainable Development Goal 16 specifically acknowledges this link between peace, security, and development. It is for this reason that development agencies and UN member states are allocating a growing share of their assistance to FCVAS. Addressing challenges in these settings and supporting prevention are a strategic priority for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

From 2017 to 2019, SDC's Democratisation, Decentralisation and Local Governance (DDLG) and Fragility, Conflict and Human Rights (FCHR) Networks engaged in a learning journey on governance in fragile contexts.<sup>1</sup> The main aim of the learning journey was to better understand how governance programming is done in FCVAS and what the main learnings of SDC programmes in this realm are.<sup>2</sup> Overall, six cooperation offices (Afghanistan, Burundi, Egypt, Honduras, Mali, and Ukraine) took part in the learning journey, in order to enable joint learning from practical experience in country offices.

Issues of governance are crucial in FCVAS. On the one hand, fragility, conflict, and violence are **causes of weak governance** processes and low state capacity. On the other hand, dysfunctional governance processes are also often the **origin of fragility**, conflict, and violence. For example, certain groups may experience inequality because of (or the lack of) state or government actions and this in turn leads to a lack of trust between governments and citizens and thus a broken social contract; or when there is a lack of trust in government because

of the overzealous use of security measures to contain violence.

International donors often have a challenging relationship with FCVAS, which is also determined by the contested nature of the state. In these settings, aid often has a highly technical focus; for example, on economic growth programming and technical assistance around infrastructure, health, peace building, and migration. If there is support to governance reforms, it often tends to be limited to peace building, electoral reform, and local government reforms. Having such a focus on technicalities may make sense, particularly in situations where regimes that are not perceived as legitimate might be strengthened through technical and finance-focused governance reforms like budgetary reforms, modernising the judicial system, and capacity building. While international actors do sometimes exert pressure in response to corruption and other issues, criticism depends on the importance of a regime in other strategic areas of the respective donors. Often, gender equality and women's rights present a laudable exception to donors' unease to promote governance-specific programmes.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, the **conceptual approach** to understanding governance in FCVAS is outlined. Then, the findings on governance programming from case studies established with country offices in Afghanistan, Burundi, Egypt, Honduras, Mali, and Ukraine are discussed. Section 3 looks at the learnings on **strategic priorities**: decentralisation and local governance (3.1), strengthening accountability and participation (3.2), and supporting civil society (3.3). Then in Section 4, learnings concerning **operational issues** are examined: working in the triple nexus (4.1), and through a Theory of Change (4.2), adaptive management (4.3), and remote monitoring (4.4). Section 5 concludes with a summary of the main aspects and findings of the overall learning journey.

<sup>1</sup> The journey started with a study on state-of-the-art governance in fragile contexts which focused on evidence-based results of interventions and support in situations of violence. After that, together with six country offices, the networks engaged in country-specific case studies to address particular questions in more detail. These case studies looked at situations of different fragilities, from open conflict to augmenting authoritarianism. The findings of these two processes were presented at the DDLG F2F 2018 in Kiev. As a follow-up, the Mali office requested a second study on remote management of interventions in its country. Also, an inductive process on what trust building means for SDC staff was established. The findings on the latter were presented during the F2F CHR 2019 in Geneva.

<sup>2</sup> Governance support can be approached directly through programmes overtly designed to influence governance structures, or indirectly by incorporating governance transversally into other programming, including work in and on other sectors like agriculture and food security (livelihoods), employment and income (infrastructure), or humanitarian aid. In this Working Paper, we focus on those programmes that are designed to influence governance structures directly.



## 2 Conceptual considerations – who governs fragile, violent, and conflict-affected settings?

In this Working Paper, FCVAS are understood as low-income countries with low or contested state capacity that are either experiencing or are at high risk of violence or conflict. Fragility, conflict, and violence are not the same, but they can exist concurrently, with each shaping and being shaped by the other. For example, some countries in the Middle East currently suffer from large-scale civil conflict, while countries in Central America mainly suffer from violence like homicides, and yet other contexts are fragile because of their authoritarian or weak state capacity. While large-scale conflict often leads to a deterioration of state capacity, the state reaction to urban violence can be focused on hard security, and authoritarian states create heightened conditions for political violence by undermining democratic institutions.

In all FCVAS, **questions of governance and the state are crucial**: 'At the center of virtually every civil conflict is the issue of the state and its power – who controls it, and how is it used. No conflict can be resolved without answering those questions[...]' (Kofi Annan, cited in Malone 2004). Governance structures and processes are often at the heart of the causes of fragility, conflict and violence *and* are at the same time strongly impacted

by these same forces themselves (see Figure 1). FCVAS are often **the product** of social, economic, and political systems that might not be perceived as legitimate and as leading to discrimination, corruption, or marginalisation. As the state with its governance processes strongly determines those systems, its legitimacy is also questioned, as well as its monopoly on coercion or conflict resolution. And this bad governance can again be the cause of renewed conflict.

Generally, governance structures and processes in FCVAS are complex because they often exist without a central government authority or they exist despite a central government authority that has no reach nor legitimacy *vis-à-vis* its citizens. As once termed 'governance without government' (Menkhaus 2007), communities in these situations devise **alternative arrangements** to provide basic services (like security, education, and water) that the absent state is supposed to assume. Thus, the complexity in FCVAS arises partly because many different actors take up a plethora of different roles: customary or traditional institutions, community-based groups, humanitarian organisations, armed or criminal groups, diaspora groups, and private sector companies (see Box 1).

**Figure 1: Fragility, conflict, and violence as causes of dysfunctional governance, and dysfunctional governance as the cause of fragility, conflict, and violence**



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## Box 1: Informal actors in hybrid states

Hybrid states combine traditional democratic institutions with other kinds of governance (i.e. customary leadership). Hybridity can be seen as a constant process of negotiation as multiple sources of power in a society compete or merge (i.e. traditionalists vs modernists, autocrats vs democrats) and engage in mimicry of western-style institutions,<sup>3</sup> domination or accommodation (Boege, Brown and Clements 2009). The stakeholders that take up public functions – like church leaders, diaspora communities, savings groups, or traditional authorities – are often called ‘informal’ actors. [SDC has looked at how it interacts with these informal actors and produced a short guidance on the topic.](#)

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# 3 Learnings from strategic priorities in SDC countries<sup>4</sup>

As indicated above, donor interactions in FCVAS are not straightforward and depend on a lot of different factors. A recent study (Green 2017) showed that initially, donor approaches in FCVAS were heavily oriented towards strengthening the ‘weak or fragile’ state through advice and training for governments on the (often implicit) assumption that the problem was one of capacity. However, this approach failed in situations where power and politics were not aligned with the values of donors, triggering a shift towards programmes in state accountability and citizen demand for services. More recent attempts seem to move beyond this dichotomy and aim to bring different players together to join forces for solving specific collective action problems.

SDC’s approach to working in FCVAS is very context dependent. At the same time, the limited insights from the six case studies seem to suggest that some of SDC’s strategic governance priorities remain the same in FCVAS; namely, a focus on strengthening bottom-up state building and governance processes, strengthening accountability and dialogue, and working with a broad range of civil society actors. In the following, learnings from different programmes on these issues are discussed and takeaway messages are identified. Apart from the learnings from case studies, insights from evidence-based academic research (Justino 2018) linked to the issues concerned have been collected and are presented in Boxes 2, 3 and 4.

## 3.1 Local governance and territorial power sharing

Often state authority in FCVAS is fragmented and efficient state institutional capacity is lacking. Therefore, collective action and coordination across different groups is important. Switzerland supports this in two ways: on the one hand, by supporting local governance, and on the other, by supporting conflict transformation through power-sharing agreements (often supported by the Division Human Security).<sup>5</sup>

Collective action is more easily achieved at a local level, where people know and trust each other, than at the national level. Also, the state at the local level is ‘closer to the people’ and ‘has a face’ so that interaction and trust building becomes easier. Accordingly, in several SDC interventions, local authorities and councils are supported in the

establishment of participatory plans as a way of improving delivery of public goods and services, thereby establishing local participation and autonomy in decision-making processes.

Local governance programmes might also support a larger agenda of greater political and institutional decentralisation in FCVAS and establish some kind of power-sharing where empowered local authorities can serve as a ‘check and balance’ to an often very strong central administration. Two key objectives are: (1) to strengthen local social cohesion in ways that promote inclusive local forms of governance, and (2) to broaden marginalised groups’ political representation and (often regional) power sharing in governance systems.

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<sup>3</sup> (Isomorphic) mimicry in development is understood as the negative consequence of donor-assisted reform efforts to establish formal institutions similar to developed countries.

<sup>4</sup> The findings are not attributed to specific case studies if these findings are or could hamper the good relations of cooperation offices with their partners.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of different power-sharing agreements, look at the [database of the University of Edinburgh](#).

The experiences of SDC in implementing this kind of programme is very context dependent, as shown by the examples below. While in some contexts this approach might yield positive results, in others, political opportunities are such that change is a more long-term effort.

- **Decentralisation in fragile, conflict and violence-affected contexts is often highly contested, is a long-term endeavour, and needs a lot of political sensitivity:** In one context, SDC has contributed to building the capacity of provincial councils and municipalities. While the central government was engaged and supported the process, there was a significant gap between donors' expectations of increased de-concentration and subnational governance and the government's prioritisation of central state building and hesitancy to decentralise power. Thus, while there might be an interest from certain actors within the central administration to get the overall political buy-in, in a situation where the legitimacy of the state is contested territorially it is very difficult, as the stakes are very high.
- **Long-term engagement at the local level pays off:** Switzerland's long-term presence and decentralisation support in another context have, however, engendered local trust and knowledge that was leveraged after a violent conflict began. This became even more important when the central government identified decentralisation as a main approach to resolving the conflict. While citizens did not report improvements in public service provision, corruption, and economic development, tangible results from decentralisation reform included improved infrastructure and steady trust in regional authorities, despite rapidly diminishing trust in central authorities.
- **Support for vulnerable groups at the local level:** In the same context, SDC has also successfully supported the expansion of governance interventions to conflict-affected

and conflict-adjacent regions. Citizen Advisory Bureaus in two conflict-affected regions have helped to address urgent needs through legal and psychological assistance. However, it is less clear if public councils in the regions have served to advance vulnerable groups' needs and concerns. Regardless, there is evidence that the citizens and officials involved in programme implementation benefit from a greater sense that they can create change and remain involved in future programmes.

- **Continuous services even during violence:** In the same vein, in another context SDC's continued support for state and regional government institutions have allowed state institutions to remain open and provide public services. This has reduced the humanitarian impact and potential for conflict escalation. SDC's decentralised sector budget support has particularly enabled continued provision of government services, despite the programme's slow speed and lack of flexibility. The central government has a positive perspective of the programme, as it ensures that funding to local authorities is transparent and traceable.
- **'Going local' as adaptive measures to authoritarianism:** In another context, SDC ended financial and technical support for the central government in favour of subnational entities. The cooperation office also avoided controversial language and cut ties with rights-based civil society organisations (CSOs) in favour of community-based CSOs working on issues accepted by the government, such as economic advancement. Informal networks like professional associations proved central to maintaining programming as formal institutions became uncooperative. Lastly, SDC undertook careful monitoring and set clear conditions to avoid regime capture of aid funds. However, with rising authoritarian practices and control at subnational levels, it is unclear if this strategy will hold.

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## Box 2: Improving local and public service delivery: What academic evidence says

A World Bank study on its specific way of supporting local governance and public service delivery through its Community-Driven Development (CDD) programmes showed a limited effect on social cohesion, local capacity for collective action, or social inclusiveness. Other recent governance interventions have attempted to strengthen state institutions' reach through improving public goods and services provision, which has had overall positive results. Cash transfer programmes, government welfare expenditure, and government investments in infrastructure may also be useful tools to improve the social contract and avoid violence and conflict.

Source: Justino (2018).

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## TAKEAWAYS

- Programmes are valued locally for bringing key actors together, empowering local actors, and fostering decentralisation.
- Think about the distributional consequences of local governance support and carefully consider the geographic distribution of programmes in a situation of regional disparities and conflicts. Governance interventions produce winners and losers that may themselves shape how systems of governance will operate in the future, and for whom.
- Local-level interventions may affect other levels of government and the prevalence of local-level interventions may inhibit scaled-up interventions. Thus, it is important to strengthen the relationship between the central government and the local governance level (i.e. through monitoring and evaluation activities).
- Monitor whether elites and the general population perceive the resource distribution from the state budget as fair and transparent, and determine whether available mechanisms to express concerns and grievances between central and local levels are effective.
- Emphasis on capacity building for local authorities' project implementation and monitoring is highly important, as public officials and development professionals may not be able to physically access conflict-affected regions.
- Relatedly, communities may lack the capacity to take advantage of SDC's beneficiary empowerment approach that gives intermediaries the autonomy to implement programmes according to realities on the ground (see Section 4.4 on remote monitoring). Here, it is important to carefully create strategies together with the local partners to ensure the involvement of vulnerable groups in decision-making to express their needs and concerns.

## 3.2 Strengthening accountability and dialogue

Existing research shows that state institutions' accountability and legitimacy are key determinants of peace and political stability. The risk of violence or conflict depends largely on: (1) how politicians and public administration officials credibly commit to using public funds for the public good and not for their own gains; and (2) how state and non-state actors compete for the control of resources (financial, human, or territorial) and that they do it without resorting to violence. Thus, one question to ask when supporting governance interventions in FCVAS is what politicians and public

administration officials lose or gain when pursuing a certain reform.

Thus, apart from strengthening state capacity at central or local level, **strengthening accountability** from a civil society and citizen perspective and empowering their ownership in solving problems is crucial. There is emerging consensus that state legitimacy is enhanced not by service delivery *per se* but by the opportunities the process provides for citizens to interact with the state positively (Denney, Mallett and Benson 2017). And citizen engagement

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### Box 3: Strengthening accountability through information campaigns: What academic evidence says

The use of information campaigns to improve accountability and legitimacy had mixed results. They indicate that there is insufficient understanding of how information can increase democratic participation and make democracy work. Accountability is not something that one can inform about to make it better; rather, accountability measures need to be put into practice by the people themselves so that they can experience the impact themselves.

Source: Justino (2018).

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## Box 4: Strengthening civil society: What academic evidence says

Donor responses to shrinking civil society spaces can be broadly categorised into four groups. First, policy and strategic efforts to pressure governments to conform to domestic and international laws and norms. Second, operational responses to defend grantees and individuals and to change programming and reporting requirements. Third, facilitation of alliances among CSOs and reinforced resiliency to strengthen their place within society. Fourth, the generation of evidence of threats to civil society and promotion of arguments and narratives in support of CSOs. The majority of donor efforts have centred on the second point, with limited long-term responses and direct confrontation with governments.

Source: Justino (2018).

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provides exactly that by getting citizens involved in identifying priority needs, registering complaints, voicing disagreements, and providing feedback. Accountability mechanisms aim to empower citizens by giving them the space and channels to hold the state accountable and that may also facilitate a change in the mindset that citizens can influence the state.

FCVAS are generally characterised by low levels of trust, social cohesion, and state and citizen organisational capacity. Particularly in situations of conflict and violence, strengthening social cohesion through governance programming is crucial. Possibilities to establish **dialogues** among a multitude of actors throughout a governance process is highly valuable in order to find a way out of violence and conflict. This creates significant space for external actors to contribute to capacity building and reinforcing the social contract, convening discourse and cooperation among actors with low levels of trust, and facilitating unlikely alliances.

- **Bottom-up multi-stakeholder dialogues:** An SDC water management programme in a context characterised by high violence employed a 'bottom-up' approach to governance by focusing on consensus building among local actors, particularly families and producer associations. This approach acknowledged that state institutions are peripheral in *de facto* water management of this region. At the same time, the programme tried to establish the link between formal (state) and these informal mechanisms, bringing together officials, academics, and non-profit professionals who

were not previously in direct dialogue and enabled greater information sharing. In line with examples included in Section 3.1, SDC has also acted as an ally for subnational actors advocating for decentralisation.

- **Multi-level trust-building dialogues:** In another context, SDC brought together officials from municipal and national levels in a series of 'information events'. These dialogues have facilitated working relationships and trust between the central government and officials, particularly from those regions where violence and conflict were prevalent. Inter-regional interactions and dialogues have helped to counter regional stereotypes and encourage the identification of common issues.
- The **civil society** space is shrinking globally and is particularly under threat in FCVAS. Governments that are antagonistic to civil society usually perceive it as a threat to power, resources, or influence, and seek to delegitimise CSO actors as being 'foreign agents' or 'anti-state'. This phenomenon typically accompanies weakening democracy and therefore increases the potential for conflicts being resolved through violence. Consequently, a healthy civil society that embodies democratic values and reinforces good governance is an important ingredient to conflict transformation. Civil society is necessary to defend human and civil rights and to support social and political accountability processes.

[Jointly with NGOs, SDC has conducted a learning process on supporting civil society in a shrinking space.](#)

## TAKEAWAYS

- Working on accountability in sectors like water, health, or education can be a good entry point instead of working on accountability in governance (like parliaments) itself.
- SDC's presence can empower local actors through provision of funding, fostering an increased sense of being able to facilitate change, and offering 'protection' resulting from association with an international donor.

- Creating space for participation should be paired with supplying mechanisms to ensure civic space is used.
- Strategic and long-term partnerships with local actors can help to address upcoming implementation challenges as well as ensure a good mix of long-term and 'quick response' activities.
- Programmes designed to facilitate dialogue and consensus open valuable space for exchanging information. At the same time, they need to make sure that they are not perpetuating hidden and latent conflicts, following the concept of 'do no harm'.
- Close collaboration with the diplomatic staff can help steer the waters of political risks when working on accountability.

### 3.3 Working with informal actors

Apart from civil society actors – a concept that a lot of western donors are familiar with – there are other kinds of **informal actors** that have considerable influence over how large sections of the population interact with governance processes: what information they access, how they vote in elections, or to what extent they participate in deliberative forums. Particularly in FCVAS, they often substitute the state by providing services. These non-state institutions that play a role in governance can be both drivers and restrainers of local democracy and social inclusion. Patterns and sources of authority are complex and varied, and the understanding of governance opportunities and challenges are incomplete if we hold on to narrow conceptualisations of politics and governance based only on formal state institutions, or on direct interactions between the state and individual citizens. In particular, local community organisations are viewed as efficient informal institutions where information and social norms are transmitted and enforced among local networks. Rather, interventions can be more effective when informal institutions and relationships are taken into account. [SDC conducted a learning journey on working with these kinds of informal actors.](#)

Another kind of actor with whom it is more difficult to set rules of engagement are **armed actors**. The kind and possibilities of engagement will depend strongly on the context as well as Switzerland's history of support in a given context. Armed actors are often in a dilemma: while violence serves as a means to address grievances *vis-à-vis* an established government, and legitimises an armed group's action, it also has a delegitimising

effect (Mampilly 2012; Schlichte 2009) whereby it may cast a shadow of suffering and destruction upon the population whose interest they claim to defend. However, it might be prudent to test the acceptance of interventions through intermediaries – particularly if the people of a certain area perceive armed actors as legitimate – and also provide services to the population in this area, working in and on the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus (see Section 4.1).

- **Making headway by working with customary and religious leaders:** Facilitating service provision through state and non-state local authorities has helped to reduce conflicts over resources and re-established the legitimacy of the state through service delivery. Service delivery has also provided a source of dialogue and concert among groups. However, non-state actors have connections to armed factions. Therefore, SDC has needed to develop and continuously negotiate a 'red line' that weighs the tangible and ethical concerns of interacting with armed factions and providing services in their territories.
- **Working in and on the nexus:** A discussion between colleagues from two contexts showed the differences in how interaction with armed actors might be possible, taking into account the evolution of a violent conflict. In one context, it was clear that only humanitarian personnel can interact with armed actors, while in the other context, it was development personnel who facilitated access for newly incoming humanitarian actors.

#### TAKEAWAYS

- One context showed that Swiss programming currently takes 18 months of project planning and then, often budgeting is awarded to partners in large lump sums. However, there are very few civil society actors who engage in governance work and most are unable to absorb such large grants. Therefore, SDC activities would benefit from more flexible tender, project planning, and funding processes.

- Do not overlook non-state and informal actors as they are often more influential than formal state actors.
- As a development agency, an indirect engagement with an armed actor always needs to be context dependent and can be widely different from country to country. Important questions are: Is the engagement beneficial to the development objective? Is it harming relations with the partner government? Is it possible to implement projects in an area controlled by armed groups? Can a planned programme be relevant without indirect engagement with armed actors? What distributional effects will an intervention have (Grävingholt, Hofmann and Klingebiel 2007)?
- When engaging indirectly with armed actors, consider: (a) the interaction must not be an end in and of itself; (b) it is crucial to always be able to react quickly to changing circumstances; (c) SDC's rules and values must be communicated; (d) consider the above-mentioned issue of legitimacy of both non-state armed groups and the government; (e) try not to go alone – seek international backing for this engagement either through an agreement or through coordinated action (*ibid.*).
- Strengthen the 'social contract' along with institutions and understand how insecurity, power, and legitimacy of power holders are perceived by citizens.
- Emphasise internally driven governance reforms as they are often more accepted than those imposed externally.

To conclude, the different experiences from the case studies show that externally supported governance interventions in FCVAS are sensitive and the achieved change should always be defined together with the institutions and population concerned. Thus, possible objectives of interventions might be more and better public services; public officials able to govern well in partnership with informal

institutions; civil society and the private sector working in consensus, participation, and with accountability; and citizens using mechanisms that allow for legitimate and peaceful expression, peaceful transformation of conflict, or society working together to improve the management of disputes. This change and how to get there will always be context dependent.

## 4 Operational considerations of governance programming

This section addresses three aspects that are relevant to operationalising governance interventions in FCVAS, from a coordination and management perspective. Key points include the relevance of working in and on the 'nexus'; the importance of understanding one's own possibilities in FCVAS

through context analysis and Theories of Change; the relevance of adaptive management as a useful tool to respond to the complex and dynamic nature of FCVAS; and remote monitoring to collect information when physical presence incurs significant security risk.

### 4.1 The triple nexus

The 'triple nexus' refers to the interconnection between peace, development, and humanitarian actors. There is a high potential for programmatic overlap, contradiction, and untapped synergy among peace, humanitarian, and development

actors in FCVAS. Working within the nexus is particularly promising in the context of protracted conflicts. Harmonisation of the three actors offers an opportunity to seek sustainable solutions to chronic crises through complementary short-term

humanitarian aid and long-term development and programming. Ideally, engaging the nexus allows for greater complementarity and coherence among intervention types while still acknowledging each actor's comparative advantage. The nexus is important not only because external actors have the same overarching goals of peace and prosperity, but also because recipients' needs are interconnected. However, there are significant obstacles to nexus implementation including organisations' different normative frameworks and capacities, institutional incompatibility, and differing interests and incentives. Additionally, humanitarian actors may view engaging with peace and governance processes as undermining their apolitical principled stance (Medinilla, Shiferaw and Veron 2019).

In practice, engaging the nexus first involves recognising each actor's comparative advantage and identifying shared goals. Actors can then undertake comprehensive stakeholder, conflict, and/or context analysis through shared resources, contacts, and information. **Collaboration also enables more cost-effective interventions by reducing overlap and/or contradictory programming.** Additionally, participating in the nexus facilitates coordinated political engagement and diplomacy to promote peace building and humanitarian access. Outcomes are then collectively measured in terms of reduced vulnerability and unmet basic needs, increased resilience, and responses to the root drivers of conflict (OECD 2020).

## TAKEAWAYS

- An important learning in one context was that cooperation offices should balance long-term objectives with short-term flexibility in rapidly evolving contexts.
- 'Emergency' plans must be more deeply analysed and considered when emergencies extend into protracted conflicts without foreseeable resolution.

Engaging the nexus does not just pertain to collaborating with partners in country offices but also refers to greater cooperation within the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs among the Humanitarian Aid and the Global, Eastern, and

Southern Cooperation departments. SDC recently conducted a thematic evaluation on the nexus and currently explores opportunities for greater internal harmonisation, which may in turn inform collaboration with other donors.

## 4.2 Conflict/context analysis and Theory of Change

In most of the case studies, one astonishing insight came to the fore: very rarely did all the staff of the cooperation office, let alone the implementing partners, have the same understanding of the conflict. In one context, the negative stereotypes that were held by some government and implementing partners *vis-à-vis* people living in a conflict zone were detrimental to the programme's success. Therefore, one recommendation included increased training and continued conversation around conflict sensitivity to ensure all project partners understand and can apply the concept.

Additionally, conflict analysis and Theory of Change (ToC) formulated at the strategic level should be shared with all participants to promote a common understanding of the conflict and how to address it. The importance of a joint analysis (Swiss embassy staff, SDC staff, implementing partners, and eventually other donors and state partners) and an understanding of the political context and underlying power relations stem from the insight that staff and partners are also part of the political context themselves. It is vital to understand their 'positionality', thus how their (and ones' own) identity influences or potentially biases the understanding and outlook of the conflict.

External interventions should account for their impact on domestic power dynamics and what pressure points might reignite or prevent conflict or violence. 'Doing Development Differently' and 'Thinking and Working Politically' are both methods of analysis that recognise that external actors work within a local political and social context. These methods enable strategic interventions based on close context analysis and an iterative process (Green 2017). See [SDC's information package on these kinds of analyses and approaches](#).

A ToC is an attempt to describe how change comes from within the partner country. As there might be not one particular way, some authors prefer to talk about pathways of change, where the question for external partners is then how to strengthen the conditions for certain pathways to come to fruition. A ToC can be defined as a description of a programme's entire chain of influences, from output to impact, and intended contribution, essentially serving as a descriptive hypothesis for why an external actor believes a programme will have a particular impact (Goodier, Appgar and Clark 2018).

ToCs in fragile and conflict-affected settings must be closely tied to context, conflict, or political



economy analysis to ensure that interventions are attuned to the drivers of fragility, conflict, and violence (Woodrow and Oatley 2013). Change may happen more quickly in violent contexts; however, intervention outcomes can also be less predictable and failure can result in greater human suffering. Traditional aid programmes have struggled to adjust to the unpredictable rhythms and risks of violent conflict. Conflict-sensitive approaches are a critical enabling factor that both reduce the risks and increase the chances of success. Several ways in

which a ToC could take up the specificities of these settings are discussed in Green (2017). In order to be responsive to **rapid and significant contextual changes**, which more often happen in FCVAS, flexible short-term activities and rapid feedback and response mechanisms are necessary. Even though **short-term activities** and goals are important, particularly in FCVAS, they need to be compatible with long-term objectives that acknowledge the **generational time span of conflict mitigation**.

## TAKEAWAYS

- SDC's experience in one context highlights the importance of **context analysis** beyond the programme level to one that also considers regional and national power dynamics.
- A **political economy and power analysis (PEPA)** in another context helped identify the key actors, the feasibility of engagement with the state, and where to build capacity. It led to conflict-sensitive programme management with the aim to limit the programme's negative impact, such as being labelled as partisan.
- SDC staff and implementing partners in at least four of the six contexts held **differing perspectives** on the drivers, actors, and dynamics of the conflict; therefore, shared conflict analysis, ToC, and general communication are highly important.
- In one context, the cooperation office benefited extremely from investing in **conflict-sensitive programme management (CSPM) for partners**.
- **Clear and continuous communication** helps to avoid 'cognitive dissonance' between realities on the ground and ideas of change in the office, as well as to resist the manipulation and distortion of information that is endemic in FCVAS.

## 4.3 Adaptive management

Linking up to the insights gained from working with ToCs, **being 'adaptive'** improves the ability of aid agencies to respond to the complexity and fluidity of FCVAS. Adaptive management acknowledges that **solutions to complex and dynamic issues cannot be wholly identified from the outset but instead emerge through systematic and intentional monitoring and learning during implementation**.

Adaptive management can be **passive**, where monitoring and reflection activities identify unpredicted challenges and programme adjustments are made as needed to meet desired outcomes. **Active adaptive management** intentionally plans for experimentation and adjustments to strategies from the start. Adaptive management ultimately aims to renew the way programmes are managed on three levels: new thinking on how an organisation and its staff seek to solve problems, new processes and practices, and adapted tools and methods.

The process typically involves an iterative cycle that includes design, implementation, reflection, and adaptation activities that are informed by system monitoring and stakeholder involvement. Several practices are generally found within adaptive management approaches: (a) **promoting experimental learning** through periodic data-driven reflective deliberation among different stakeholders; for example, multiple pilots could be implemented in parallel and be taken further through selection and amplification; (b) **contextual embeddedness** is sought through ongoing engagement with stakeholders and the general context; and (c) encouragement of **staff and teams** with trust, creativity, open communication, and autonomy. Several adaptive management tools are used within SDC that are particularly relevant in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

## TAKEAWAYS

- The **MERV** (Monitoring Entwicklungs-Relevante Veränderungen – Monitoring of Development-Relevant Changes) is a useful tool for context monitoring, especially at the country level. It can be time and effort intensive as it is updated every three to six months; however, a ‘light-touch’ version of MERV is sometimes used.
- **Regular informal meetings and reflection points** can also provide opportunities to review and adapt strategies and programmes. Such meetings are most impactful when linked with monitoring and learning systems that ensure they are directly connected to programme adaptation rather than a ‘box-ticking’ exercise.
- **Informal networks and relationships** are particularly important in conflict settings where formal institutions are weakened or hostility and disinformation are rampant. Therefore, cultivating relationships and networks is crucial in order to remain up to date on contextual changes and being able to continue programming in the face of adversity.
- It is important that SDC’s objectives, ToC, and any adaptations to these modalities are **communicated** in due time to local partners.
- Focusing on intermediate aims and remaining patient for long-term results is a prerequisite for implementing governance programming in FCVAS. Strong relationships and **high-quality human resources** assist SDC’s ability to continue operating during crises.
- A strategic shift from a project management approach with clear time plans and milestones over several years to promoting change **impacts the roles and functions of SDC staff**. Rather than a project manager, they become a facilitator of change.
- Implementing partners may become facilitators rather than service providers. Often, partners benefit from support and guidance to fulfil their **new role as facilitators** of change, enhancing their knowledge particularly on governance processes.

An overview of SDC’s use of adaptive management identified several challenges in its current implementation (Prieto Martin, Apgar and Hernandez 2020). First, the changing political context in Switzerland through increased bureaucracy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a greater business orientation, and a more outputs-focused perspective have created greater administrative burdens. These changes threaten to

undermine openness to risks and experimentation. Second, SDC’s decentralisation means that an individual resistant to working with flexibility, and to learning and reflection, could create a bottleneck in the implementation of adaptive management. Third, SDC possesses tools and guidance for adaptive management but lacks an overall integrated and streamlined plan to facilitate more explicit and impactful use.

## 4.4 Remote monitoring

Remote monitoring is often necessary in fragile and conflict-affected settings where maintaining a physical presence incurs significant risks. Remote monitoring generally includes monitoring the context evolution, programme implementation and effects, and partner organisations’ compliance and performance.

The development units and the humanitarian aid units of SDC have joined forces and established insights on different tools and mechanisms to carry out remote monitoring in FCVAS (Sida and

Oakley 2019). **Third-party monitoring (TPM)** has become an increasingly popular tool for remote monitoring. Its potential benefits include neutral observation that has the advantage of contextual knowledge and local language skills, and cost efficiency when assessing projects. TPM can also verify implementing partners’ monitoring data and quantitative and physical outputs. However, potential drawbacks of TPM include a lack of technical expertise on monitoring and humanitarian principles, low-quality data and reporting, and it is difficult to resolve conflicting information. Repeated

use of the same firm may harm objectivity, and competing firms may be incentivised to report what the agency wants to hear in order to win contracts. Moreover, inappropriate behaviour by the TPM may harm the agency's reputation and TPMs often focus on inputs and outputs, rather than outcomes and impacts (see Box 5).

Other remote tools are **beneficiary, community-led and peer monitoring**. Remote beneficiary utilises community members to document programme implementation, usually through photography. Peer monitoring involves partnering with other organisations in the area to triangulate data.

Improvement in **information and communication technologies** have aided remote monitoring:

- **Digital data entry** allows for more rapid, efficient, and transparent data collection from the field, but requires physical access and the ability to use technical equipment on the ground.

- **Mobile phones and online platforms**, like WhatsApp, also aid information collection and dissemination. However, phone use may exclude vulnerable households that lack phones or are not literate.

- **Remote sensing** through satellite, radars, and aerial vehicles facilitates limited observation of context monitoring. However, it may be cost prohibitive and objectionable to local groups. There is also the potential for third parties to intercept data from these sources.

- **Big data and crowd-sourced data** are also potentially powerful tools. Big data are massive quantities of information collected by companies and governments. Crowd-sourced data can employ many online volunteers to sift through large amounts of data. However, these tools are more useful for monitoring physical infrastructure rather than soft programming.

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### Box 5: Considerations when using remote monitoring

- Monitoring for learning usually requires ground-level information gathering; therefore, remote monitoring tools should consider how collected data will result in adaptation.
- Care should be taken that remote monitoring does not become a substitute for face-to-face interaction as this always allows for opportunities to build trust between an agency and its partners.
- Central challenges to remote monitoring include greater disconnect between the context and beneficiaries and programme staff. It may also exclude marginalised voices and limited beneficiary engagement in programming.
- Importantly, remote monitoring involves a risk transfer to national actors who have less security resources and training.
- Remote monitoring is primarily useful for capturing quantitative data and may take information out of context through remote collection.

Source: Sida and Oakley (2019).

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# 5 Conclusions and recommendations

- **Political possibilities.** Managing violence is a central challenge to governance interventions in countries that are either in conflict or are at risk of violent conflict. A critical weakness of existing governance interventions in FCVAS is that governance interventions are often disconnected from the political contexts in which they are implemented. Political analysis should assess the power and interests of elites, armed non-state actors, and citizens.
- **How informal networks can inspire understanding.** Cultivating formal and informal networks is important to gain accurate information and updates on the conflict. ToCs and conflict analyses should be frequently updated to respond to contextual changes and be openly communicated among staff and partners to ensure a common vision and understanding of the conflict. Use of MERVs can be particularly useful as they are created every three to six months.
- **Leveraging informal governance.** Informal actors are often the most influential in conflict contexts where formal structures have broken down. As such, intervention design must acknowledge that governance often emerges from conflict and that the breakdown of governments in FCVAS does not necessarily lead to the end of 'governance'. Rather, older or newly emerging informal governance processes are established and compete with the existing ones. Interventions should also identify and better understand which points of pressure and breakdown can reignite local tensions and violence as well as which points of resilience and opportunities can prevent future violent outbreaks.
- **The distributive effects of governance support.** It is not clear that political inclusivity is always necessarily associated with political stability. Distributional differences affect how local self-governing institutions deliver local public goods. For instance, when elites or interest groups capture power and resources at the expense of other sections of the population, high levels of distributive conflicts can lead to local institutional failures.
- **The winners and losers of governance reforms.** Formal and informal taxation is a key distributive mechanism to how resources are mobilised and distributed. Changes in social norms and attitudes towards violence, cooperation, reciprocity, and trust is another mechanism that impacts resource distribution. Therefore, contextual analysis should take both institutions and norms into account. Practitioners should also be aware that governance interventions produce winners and losers that may themselves shape how systems of governance will operate in the future, and for whom.
- **How a multi-level approach can be taken up.** A large proportion of recent and ongoing governance interventions in conflict settings has taken place at the community level. However, this unit of intervention may restrict the possibility of scaled-up interventions that can effectively shape state governance structures. Moreover, local-level interventions may affect governance at the national level, and vice versa. There is a need to develop new multi-level analytical perspectives on how interventions to strengthen governance systems in weak states are designed and implemented. Additionally, international donors should consider the dynamics and impacts of interventions at one level of governance on other levels.



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