



*practical learning for
effective international action*

Working Papers on Program Review & Evaluation: #1

Evaluating Relevance in Peacebuilding Programs

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ABOUT CDA COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROJECTS

OUR VISION

CDA strives for a world in which people are supported to enhance their resilience, drive their own development and resolve conflicts without resorting to armed violence.

OUR MISSION

CDA facilitates collaborative learning processes among humanitarian, peace, development and corporate practitioners and policy-makers to ensure that their support is effective and accountable.

OUR PROGRAMS

The oldest of CDA's programs, **DO NO HARM (DNH)**, seeks to identify the ways in which international humanitarian and/or development assistance given in conflict settings may be provided in ways that avoid exacerbating the conflict and maximize potential contributions to peace processes. DNH's conflict sensitivity tools are now used by practitioners around the world to design and implement assistance efforts that improve the outcomes for affected communities.

The Reflecting on **PEACE PRACTICE PROGRAM (RPP)** is an experience-based learning process involving agencies whose programs attempt to prevent or mitigate violent conflict directly. One of the central insights from the RPP case studies is that, while individual peacebuilding efforts may be beneficial, they do not necessarily contribute to – or, in the aggregate, “add up” to – what RPP calls Peace Writ Large. The RPP aims to improve the effectiveness of peace efforts and their positive role in building durable peace.

The **LISTENING PROGRAM (LP)** is a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the perspectives and ideas of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance, including humanitarian aid, peacebuilding activities, or human rights work. Listening and responding to local perspectives is critical for donors and aid agencies to live up to the global commitments they have made to listen to and involve local stakeholders and to improve the quality, effectiveness and accountability of their efforts.

The **CORPORATE ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM (CEP)** collaborates with companies to ensure that they have positive rather than negative impacts on the communities where they operate. As part of this approach, the CEP assists companies in the development and implementation of practical options to build constructive relationships with the communities where they work. Ultimately, CEP supports the contribution of the private sector to stability and sustainable development.

ABOUT THE WORKING PAPERS ON PROGRAM REVIEW AND EVALUATION

This Working Paper series is based upon findings regarding program review and evaluation processes from across all of the programs of CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA). These include the Do No Harm, Reflecting on Peace Practice, Listening, and Corporate Engagement Programs.

All of CDA's programs are concerned with issues of impact, results, assessment and learning—as well as mechanisms for obtaining feedback and being accountable for program effects. This CDA Working Paper series aims to share reflections and lessons gleaned from across these programs for agencies who are undertaking their own program reviews and evaluations.

CDA produced these papers to offer practical support for practitioners seeking to evaluate the effectiveness and contributions of specific programs across several sectors. The papers do not represent final products and are working documents. CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time and experience and for their willingness to share their experiences and insights to generate and reflect on the learnings shared in these papers.

About the Author

Over the past six years Mark Rogers has helped peacebuilders use program evaluation to improve their practice. He has conducted external program evaluations in Ethiopia, DRC and the South Caucasus and internal evaluations in Burundi, DRC and El Salvador. He recently completed a one-year developmental evaluation of an early warning/early response collaboration in Liberia. He worked on context assessments in Chad, Niger, Mauritania and Kyrgyzstan. Mark co-authored a manual for peacebuilding practitioners, *Designing for Results: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs*. He has taught courses on peacebuilding program evaluation at EMU, AU and for various NGOs in Africa and Asia. Mark has served in leadership positions with Search for Common Ground, Catholic Relief Services and recently the Life & Peace Institute.

Evaluating Relevance in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Programs

The Organization for Economic Cooperation in Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has developed guidance supporting the effective evaluation of peacebuilding and conflict prevention programs.¹ This paper builds on that guidance, as well as inputs from a consultation hosted by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA), and an examination of actual evaluation practice and other sources.² It is written primarily for those commissioning program and project evaluations, with examples at the program level. The same standards could be applied to multi-donor portfolio or sectoral evaluations encompassing numerous interventions each with different degrees of relevance, with some adaptations. As a “working paper” it is not intended to be definitive or final, but rather an opportunity to deepen the discussion and practice of evaluation of peacebuilding work.

The DAC Guidance takes a criteria-based approach to evaluation. While there are certainly other valid approaches, we are working with that premise here. The five core DAC evaluation criteria include relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact. This paper focuses on the first of these: relevance.

Evaluation criteria and standards evolve through theory, practice, reflection, discussion, research, and meta-evaluation. This paper strives to identify processes that can be employed to achieve credible and useful evaluation findings about relevance. These processes are not about preparing for an evaluation, developing terms of reference, selecting evaluators, etc. There are already numerous guides on these critical processes. The focus here is on the actual evaluation methods that can be employed to examine relevance. This paper includes a first attempt at proposed standards against which program designs and performance can be compared. We hope that it will result in lively discussion and suggestions of alternative standards.

I. The Notion of Relevance

The DAC Guidance (2012) explains relevance as follows:

“The relevance criterion is used to assess the extent to which the objectives and activities of the intervention(s) respond to the needs of beneficiaries and the peacebuilding process – *i.e.* whether they address the key driving factors of conflict revealed through a conflict analysis. Relevance links the outcomes of the conflict analysis with the

¹ References are based on language from *Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility—Improving Learning for Results*. 2012. Paris: OECD-DAC. Provisional guidance on evaluation of peacebuilding programs and activities was previously published in 2008 under the title, *Guidance on Evaluating Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities: Working draft for the application period*.

² This Working Paper served as the basis for initial feedback and analysis by a mixed group of evaluation professionals and peacebuilding practitioners in December 2011. It has been revised on the basis of the feedback and is now being disseminated more broadly.

intervention’s objectives, although the relevance of the intervention might change over time as circumstances change” (DAC Guidance 2012, 65).

In short, the relevance criterion asks whether the program is working on the right issues, at the right time, with the right constituencies. In practice, some evaluations have added other considerations. The DAC Guidance (2012) provides a checklist for reviewing a conflict analysis and suggests several questions evaluators might pursue in determining relevance:

“Questions on relevance might include the following:

- Is the intervention based on a valid analysis of the situation of conflict and fragility? Has the intervention been flexibly adapted to updated analyses over time?
- In the light of the conflict analysis, is the intervention working on the right issues in this context at this time? Does the intervention appear to address relevant key causes and drivers of conflict and fragility? Or does it address the behaviour of key driving constituencies of the conflict?
- What is the relevance of the intervention as perceived by the local population, beneficiaries and external observers? Are there any gender differences with regard to the perception of relevance?
- Are the stated goals and objectives relevant to issues that are central to the situation of conflict and fragility? Do activities and strategies fit objectives, *i.e.* is there internal coherence between what the programme is doing and what it is trying to achieve? Has the intervention responded flexibly to changing circumstances over time? Has the conflict analysis been revisited or updated to guide action in changing circumstance?” (DAC Guidance 2012, 66)

Although the DAC Guidance provides needed direction, it does not provide the instructions, templates, tools and methods needed to engage in actual evaluation. This has largely been left to the evaluators to determine. This open, creative space for alternative and customized evaluation designs needs to be preserved. At the same time, emergent processes and practices can be proposed, tested, reflected upon, shared and evaluated.

Relevance presents some distinct evaluation challenges:

- Relevance is not exclusively an empirical evaluation question. Some dimensions, such as adaptability and responsiveness, can be evaluated based on data gained through observation or experiment. Other dimensions are more conceptual, such as needs/goals appropriateness.
- Context is central to the notion of relevance, and understanding of context is largely derived from data that represents a range of perspectives.
- Different points of view matter. In considering the same intervention in the same context, different people will perceive the degree of relevance differently.
- Relevance can and should be evaluated both at the design stage and throughout implementation—not just when a program is drawing to a close.

II. Dimensions of Relevance

In practice, relevance encompasses a wide range of concepts dealing with appropriateness, alignment and fit. Our research revealed six distinct dimensions of relevance.

1. *Based on Conflict Analysis*: Program design and implementation based on accurate, up-to-date inquiry and conflict analysis as a basis for determining what needs to be addressed (otherwise known as “peacebuilding needs”).
2. *Needs/Goals³ Appropriateness*: Fit between program goals and objectives and peacebuilding needs, or points of leverage.
3. *Timeliness*: Opportune, given circumstances at critical moments in time.
4. *Adaptability/Responsiveness*: Adaptive over time.
5. *Stakeholder Perceptions of Relevance*: Perceived to be relevant by stakeholders and observers.
6. *Strategic & Policy Alignment*: Alignment of intervention/program with donor and/or government policy or integration of thematic priorities (such as, gender, climate change).

These dimensions represent a menu of possible issues for consideration in any given program evaluation. At the same time, it is not necessary to assess all of them in every situation; the evaluator, the evaluand (the subject of the evaluation) and the organization commissioning the evaluation can determine which are appropriate for a specific case. For example, it may not be necessary to look at the perceptions of relevance held by multiple and diverse stakeholder groups for programs facilitating behind-the-scenes Track 1 work.

Like the OECD DAC criteria themselves, these dimensions of relevance are not mutually exclusive; there is some overlap and commonality. For example, needs/goals appropriateness has been addressed in some evaluations under relevance, in some cases under effectiveness, and in other cases under impact. Some evaluations assess program theory as part of relevance and others as part of effectiveness. The DAC guidance actually places the exploration of program theory as a first step in the evaluation process, well before consideration of any of the criteria.

Given that this research focused exclusively on relevance and impact rather than all the OECD DAC criteria, we elected to preserve the overlaps and commonalities with the other criteria. Anyone using this paper to explore how to evaluate relevance needs to be aware of and include dimensions that in a more comprehensive effort might be situated within the effectiveness or sustainability criteria and which bear on relevance as well. In other words, an evaluation focused exclusively on the criterion of relevance would be well advised to consider all the dimensions here when designing an evaluation.

This document (like others) offers lines of inquiry for each of the dimensions of relevance. At the very least, the lines of inquiry serve as checklists, but, at best, evaluations reach beyond

³ For the purposes of this paper, goals refer to the upper level results in a program or project’s hierarchy of results, not just the single, highest aspiration.

simple presence/absence or yes/no determinations when more nuanced information is available. Evidence and analysis need to precede judgments. For example, evaluations stating that programs align with policy should describe how alignment is demonstrated, where there are gaps, and how implementation realities influence the actual application of policy.

III. Standards in Evaluating Relevance

“First to be more effective, the standards require adaptive, responsive and mindful use. They should not be applied literally and superficially following a simple recipe. Rather, evaluators must discover how to apply them adaptively in each specific situation to achieve evaluation quality” (Yarbrough 2011).

The draft standards proposed here are offered in the same spirit. Standards are intended to assist in the pursuit of evaluation quality, rather than provide exact procedures to be rigidly applied in every situation. Standards can be adjusted upwards for advanced and sophisticated initiatives. However, some minimal thresholds are helpful in establishing credibility.

Dimensions	Proposed Statement of Standards
R-1 Based on Conflict Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Key current and historic issues/causes are defined. b) Key conflict and peace dynamics and drivers are analyzed. c) All stakeholders identified, and needs, positions and interests are analyzed and the key or strategic stakeholders have been distinguished from others. d) Conflict related systems are explored and understood. e) The analysis is nuanced and transparent. f) The data collection and analysis employ mixed methods and triangulation. g) Contradictory evidence is acknowledged and addressed. h) The analysis leads to a statement of peacebuilding needs, distinct from development needs, including priorities that inform program design.⁴
R-2: Needs/Goals Appropriateness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The needed changes specified in the analysis are directly connected to the broader changes targeted by the program. b) The program makes a logical contribution to meeting peacebuilding needs, or points of leverage. c) The interventions are necessary and sufficient to address peacebuilding needs. d) Consideration is given to the prior interventions.
R-3: Timeliness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The interventions are timed and sequenced to occur when they are more likely to succeed. b) Windows of opportunity are acted upon in a timely way. c) Sufficient time has elapsed for results to be achieved.
R-4: Adaptability/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Contextual changes are considered in timely way. b) Conflict analysis is updated (or undertaken) as situation changes.

⁴ The standards and lines of inquiry regarding conflict analysis proposed here offer many of the same considerations as the DAC Guidance (2012) but suggest some different elements as well.

Dimensions	Proposed Statement of Standards
Responsiveness	c) Needed programmatic changes are made. d) Flexibility within a vision—long-term vision/strategy is balanced with flexible responses to changing circumstances.
R-5: Stakeholder Perceptions of Relevance	a) The "strategic who"/key people perceive the program to be relevant. b) Strategies are in place to build popular understanding and support.
R-6: Strategic and Policy Alignment	a) The intervention is known to and recognized by policy makers and policy implementers as consistent with their own policies. b) The evaluated agency constructively engages in conflict-sensitive policy development and improvement. c) The intervention considers policy-related linkages between micro, mezzo and macro levels.

Each of these dimensions is explored further below. In order to illustrate the application of the different processes, a single example will be used throughout the paper. Since few programs evaluate all the dimensions, the example is fictitious. Any resemblance to actual programs is coincidental. The example uses the most accessible and simple processes.

IV. Evaluation Questions and Analysis

R-1: BASED ON CONFLICT ANALYSIS

Rationale and Clarification

Stories of unintended negative consequences from development and peacebuilding programs working without a conflict analysis or with an inaccurate conflict analyses are legend. Most peacebuilding evaluations check to see whether or not a conflict analysis has been done and report on the process and methodologies used. Few comment on the quality and fewer still have on hand multiple conflict analyses that they can use to make comparisons.

Lines of Inquiry about Conflict Analyses

Many conflict analysis frameworks and tools are available, ranging from DFID’s Strategic Conflict Analysis and USAID’s Conflict Analysis Framework to approaches to the analysis of conflicts using systems thinking (causal loop diagrams).⁵ Regardless of the framework and tools used, there are a number of good practices in conducting conflict analysis. In the context of an evaluation, potential lines of inquiry include:

- Whom did the program engage in the conflict analysis?
- How were multiple perspectives included?
- What were the multiple or mixed methods used to validate major findings?

⁵ DAC Guidance (2012), Annex A describes many of the main conflict analysis tools. For systemic conflict analysis see Reflecting on Peace Practice Program at www.cdacollaborative.org.

- How was the available longitudinal data integrated into the analysis?
- How did the program bring stakeholders into the process?
- How were the “right” (strategic) stakeholders identified?
- How did the analysis integrate the voices of stakeholders, particularly those marginalized or difficult to reach?
- How did the analysis manage the fact that that stakeholder groups are rarely homogeneous or unanimous in their perceptions?
- Was systems thinking included in the analysis?
- What existing analyses, prior evaluations and related literature were reviewed?
- How did the analysis help to distinguish strategic peacebuilding interventions from one-size-fits-all interventions?
- How and when was the conflict analysis last updated?

Comparing Performance with Conflict Analysis Standards

Even if the lines of inquiry all result in very positive findings, the evaluator still needs methods or processes for comparing a program’s conflict analysis with the proposed standards drafted in this guidance. Those standards are:⁶

- a) Current and historic issues/causes are defined.
- b) Key conflict and peace dynamics and drivers are analyzed.
- c) All stakeholders are identified, and needs, positions and interests are analyzed and the key or strategic stakeholders have been distinguished.
- d) Related systems are explored and understood.
- e) The analysis is nuanced and transparent.
- f) The data collections and analysis employs mixed methods and triangulation.
- g) Contradictory evidence is acknowledged and addressed.
- h) The analysis leads to a statement of peacebuilding needs, distinct from development needs, including priorities that inform program design.

There are at least four avenues by which to explore the program’s performance relating to conflict analysis with the minimal standards above. Again, mixed methods and triangulation are advised.

- Seek validation by external experts – recognized authorities on the conflict who are not affiliated with the program.
- Obtain validation by representatives of stakeholder groups.
- Compare with other concurrent conflict analyses or research (rare, but increasingly possible) or widely accepted peacebuilding needs, or points of leverage.
- Ensure conformity with the guidance recommendations for the frameworks and tools employed in the conflict analysis. Were the analytical frameworks implemented as intended?
- Add your own.

⁶ These proposed standards offer many of the same considerations as the DAC Guidance.

Application of R-1: Conflict Analysis

The project being evaluated was a relatively small project with numerous partners and part of a larger program implemented by a large and well-established peacebuilding INGO. No formal written conflict analysis was done as part of the project conception or design. However, two of the twelve staff are generally considered as national authorities on the conflict. A comprehensive stakeholder analysis was done as part of a formative evaluation. The INGO requested that the summative evaluation consider the relevance of the program.

In the absence of a conflict analysis, the evaluator looked for existing analyses done by others. During the course of the project the conflict has stalled, and there had been relatively little change in the key drivers of conflict. Fortunately the evaluation coincided with the publication of research conducted independently by one of the leading national NGOs and an International Crisis Group (ICG) report. Some dimensions of the conflict were covered by both reports, while other dynamics were emphasized differently in the two reports. Both reports were descriptive and prescriptive.

The evaluator was able to consolidate the dynamics raised in the two reports into a comprehensive systems map that closely resembled an established systems archetype. This approach can introduce issues that may not have been considered in the original design. In this case, given the stagnation, the issues raised in the current analysis were valid and known at both the time the program was conceived and were still valid when it was evaluated.

R-2: NEEDS/GOALS APPROPRIATENESS

Rationale and Clarification

Perhaps the most challenging task in the design of a peacebuilding program is connecting the peacebuilding need(s) and the proposed intervention(s). All too often organizations favor doing more of what they do best, assuming that what they do best will meet peacebuilding needs or points of leverage. This presupposes the existence and use of a quality conflict analysis that spells out the peacebuilding needs, or entry and leverage points. For example, in a context of grave social injustice, do poverty reduction programs act as peacebuilding interventions?

Part of relevance implies a close connection between needs and intervention. There is a difference between needs/goals connections and programmatic ends/means connections, or program theory (why the chosen approach/means will result in the desired ends), within a given program or intervention. Here the focus is on needs/goals connections. There is some debate over where to integrate program theory—under effectiveness, relevance or impact. In practice, needs/goals connections cut across all three criteria and should be considered in all.

For example, consider a conflict analysis that reveals that the primary peace activists have been gaining widespread popular support and have since become more vulnerable to harassment and attack. Which of the following three interventions would be most appropriate?

- International advocates accompany activists to discourage attack.
- Diplomatic pressures are brought to bear on national authorities to increase protection and security for activists.

- Widespread media campaigns seek to normalize the activists' messages and diversify the voices carrying these messages.

Obviously the answer depends on the context. Each of these interventions might be more appropriate in one context or another. Hence the evaluation seeks to understand the rationale for choosing specific interventions (at the goal level) and the rationales for not choosing other potential interventions in this context at this time.

Lines of Inquiry about Needs/Goals Appropriateness

- How did the program make the bridge between the peacebuilding needs and the chosen interventions? Do the needed changes revealed through the analysis correspond to the changes sought by the program design?
- Why select this intervention (at the goal level) in this context at this time?
- What is the logical connection between the intervention and the peacebuilding need(s)?
- What other intervention options were considered?
- Are there other equally/more appropriate interventions? If so, why were they not pursued?
- Has the same intervention been attempted previously? If so, what happened? Why will this time be different?

Comparing Performance with Needs/Goals Appropriateness Standards

The proposed standards for needs/goal appropriateness are as follows:

- a) The needed changes specified in the analysis are connected directly to the changes targeted by the program.
- b) The program makes a logical contribution to meeting peacebuilding needs in the context.
- c) The interventions are necessary and sufficient to meet a specific peacebuilding need.
- d) Consideration is given to prior interventions.

In order to determine how appropriate the goals are in term of the needs, the evaluator can:

- Determine which interventions are connected to which needs (logic modeling);
- Compare the changes specified by in the key need statements with the changes specified in the goals and objectives;
- Examine the program's or intervention's place within the larger peacebuilding work underway at the place and time in question (intervention mapping);
- Determine if the interventions are both necessary and sufficient;
- Compare with similar "successful" interventions in similar contexts (where possible);
- Compare with "successful" interventions is the same context (if they exist);
- Comparison of SWOT analyses⁷ for each of the most viable alternative interventions;
- Add your own.

⁷ A SWOT analysis is an assessment of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Application of R-2: Needs/Goals Appropriateness

With a formal written conflict analysis in hand that was valid at the inception of the project, the evaluator was able to examine the connections between the peacebuilding needs at the time and the overall goals of the project. A table was developed with nine peacebuilding needs along one axis and the four broadest goals and objectives on the other axis. Some of the goals addressed more than one need. The matrix was then populated with corresponding known outcomes. Where no outcomes were evident, the change common to both the need and the goal was inserted.

Articulating and examining the logical connections between the needs and the program interventions is essential. Problem statements and goals are not always mirror images. However, there should be a direct logical connection between the changes indicated by the conflict analysis and the changes stated or implied in the program goals.

In our example, out of the nine key needs specified in the conflict analysis, one intervention had already demonstrated outcomes for two of the needs.⁸ Where there were no outcomes yet, the goals in the design were directly connected to three other needs in the conflict analysis – both the need and the goal focused on the same change.

For two of the needs, the changes intended by the intervention were related to the needs, but not directly related—there were multiple intermediating variables. The evaluator and the program team explored what it would take to gather information on those variables and how the program might be able to use this information. During this discussion, the evaluator learned that these two interventions had been attempted in an earlier project and had been included at the insistence of the donor. A previous evaluation of these earlier projects had found problems in implementation and had never explored relevance. Staff generally felt that this was the weakest part of their project. When asked what they would do instead, they proposed two alternative interventions. In both cases the changes specified in the alternative interventions were more closely related to the needs than the two interventions in the current program. A SWOT analysis jointly conducted by staff, partners and the donor and facilitated by the evaluator resulted in modifying one of the interventions and replacing the other with the alternative proposed by staff.

That left two critical needs that were not addressed by any of the program goals. Further inquiry revealed that programs being implemented by other organizations were addressing both needs. After meeting with the other organizations, the evaluator recommended ways in which collaboration could enhance their results.

⁸ This is an example of where deconstruction complicates matters. Presumably the issue of attribution will be dealt with either under effectiveness or impact. If, later in the evaluation, the outcomes listed in the table are found to be due to forces other than the program, the evaluator will need to revisit the needs/intervention appropriateness and examine the actual needed and intended changes.

R-3: TIMELINESS

Rationale and Clarification

Windows of opportunity in peacebuilding can be difficult to detect and are often fleeting. Interventions may have arbitrary shelf lives as well as fluid maturation and expiration dates. Timeliness is an essential dimension of relevance and is closely related to readiness. Timeliness can refer to the overall program as a whole or to specific interventions within a program. Timeliness is also commonly addressed within the effectiveness criterion. Duration and durability are addressed under the sustainability criterion. We will also see that timeliness is related to the next dimension, adaptability/responsiveness.

Lines of Inquiry about Timeliness

- Why is this the time for this intervention?
- Which conflict dynamics are time sensitive?
- What would have happened had it been implemented earlier?
- What will happen if it is delayed or implemented later?
- How long is the window of opportunity likely to remain open?
- How ready are stakeholders to take advantage of the opportunities created by this intervention?
- Has there been sufficient time for needed preparations?
- Are emergent dynamics perceived, analyzed and acted upon by the program?

Comparing Performance with Standards on Timeliness

The standards for timeliness include:

- a) The interventions are sequenced or timed to occur at times when they are more likely to succeed.
- b) Windows of opportunity are acted upon in a timely way.
- c) Sufficient time has elapsed for results to be achieved and observable.

To determine how timely the program is, evaluators can draw on several means of analysis:

- Compare interventions with key events and windows of opportunity plotted along a timeline.
- Situate interventions with key events within cyclical dynamics (i.e., episodic conflicts) using systems mapping.
- Identify essential preparations and prerequisites to ensure readiness.
- Consider timing and sequencing issues prioritized in the conflict analyses.
- Add your own.

Application of R-3: Timeliness

Although the drivers and root causes of conflict did not change much over the period of the project, there was considerable movement and jockeying that opened different and unexpected windows of opportunity. From open-ended discussions with program staff and partners, the evaluator was able to identify five major shifts in programming over the course of the project. These were placed along the upper row of a timeline in an excel spreadsheet. Along the lower row of the time line events and milestones relating to the conflict were inserted. In discussions with small groups of stakeholders time slots representing windows of opportunity were added to the middle row of the timeline. Adjustments were made after reviewing reports with actual dates.

This analysis revealed that three of the program shifts were clearly reacting to changes in the conflict. The other two actually anticipated developments within key political processes. In one case the program had reoriented and renamed an initiative so that it would be seen as a complement to another larger more established initiative, rather than in competition with it. In the other case the project had anticipated a contagion effect and opened activities in neighboring areas where conflict at the time had not yet been manifest through open violence. When the situation deteriorated several months later, they already had the relationships needed to be able to circulate and implement preventive activities.

Interviews with experts, authorities on the context who were external to the project, revealed two windows of opportunity that had not been mentioned by staff and partners. Staff explained that they had considered one of these windows of opportunity, but it was closed to them before they could mobilize an intervention. The other window was unknown to them and represented some possibilities they could still act upon.

The timeline helped focus discussions around timeliness. Again, the effectiveness of the interventions had yet to be established. However, the early shifts in programming in anticipation of future needs seemed to reflect the program's understanding of some elements of the context even in the absence of a formal written conflict assessment.

R-4: ADAPTABILITY/RESPONSIVENESS

Rationale and Clarification

Where peacebuilding programs operate, few contexts are static. Many are dynamic and some are dynamical—both dynamic and unpredictable.⁹ Where timeliness is impossible to ascertain, because of the unpredictable dimensions of the conflict, adaptability and responsiveness take on greater importance. In other words, in dynamical conflicts, timeliness may not be possible, making rapid adaptability and responsiveness all the more critical.

⁹ Explaining the “characteristics of complex adaptive systems” in *Developmental Evaluation: Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*, Michael Quinn Patton defines ‘dynamical’ systems as those in which “interactions within, between, and among subsystems and parts within systems are volatile, turbulent, cascading rapidly and unpredictably” (see Patton 2011, 8).

Lines of Inquiry for Adaptability and Responsiveness¹⁰

- How do changes in the context affect the value and accuracy of the conflict analysis?
- How is the conflict analysis updated to integrate new dynamics?
- What changes in the context required corresponding changes in the program?
- How and why has the program adapted to changes in the context?
- How have general best practices been adapted to the specific situation?
- What has been the rationale for persevering with the program in light of a changing context?

Comparing Performance with Standards for Adaptability/Responsiveness

The proposed standards for adaptability/responsiveness include:

- a) Contextual changes are considered in timely way.
- b) Conflict analysis is reviewed and updated as the situation changes.
- c) Needed programmatic changes are made.
- d) Flexibility within a vision - long-term vision/strategy is balanced with flexible responses to changing circumstances.

Evaluators can consider:

- Exploring how changes in the context are integrated into the conflict analysis and overall understanding of the context (process mapping);
- Determining how updates to the conflict analysis affect programming choices and shifts (changes in logic models); and
- Exploring how programs maintain their long-term vision while adapting to a changing environment (also known as internal strategic alignment).

Application of R-4: Adaptability/Responsiveness

The timeline established earlier also revealed changes in programming in response to a changing environment and/or windows of opportunity. Through a combination of interviews and mapping, the evaluator developed chronologies of events that led to the two responsive shifts in programming. Comparing the two examples helped establish the processes of adaptation.

The evaluator also inquired about the analyses that took place as part of these shifts. Since there was no formal written conflict assessment, it could not be consulted or updated. However in one case, which coincided with a formative evaluation, the program did undertake a detailed stakeholder analysis as part of the shift in programming. As a result, they were able to reach out to some of the hard to reach groups that had not participated in the earlier activities. Staff saw this as compensating for early shortcuts rather than as adaptability or responsiveness.

The other case revealed that considerable effort went into analyzing changes in the context without any documentation or formal process. Participants had taken full ownership of one of the program initiatives and had coalesced around a vision distinct from that of the project. Staff recognized the

¹⁰ Conflicts exhibit both long-term, fairly stable dynamics that change only slowly, as well as more volatile and short-term dynamics that shift rapidly. This differential affects whether and how a program intervention interacts with the conflict environment.

importance of participant ownership, somewhat reluctantly ceased to push the preconceived program approach, and explored others ways of supporting the participants' vision.

A review of the situational updates included in the project's monthly reports revealed an emergent trend over the course of six months; markets that had closed during demonstrations and violence were opening and were widely attended by all factions, while schools remained closed. Although the program was aware of this development, it did not expand its outreach work to the markets and maintained its exclusive use of school-based outreach. The original design, they explained, focused on school, not markets. They felt obliged to stick to it.

R-5: STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF RELEVANCE

Rationale and Clarification

This dimension addresses of the question, "relevant according to whom?" Different stakeholders may engage differently in different interventions or engage at different times. Program managers need to know how different stakeholders perceive the relevance of the program interventions, as this may influence stakeholder participation. Understanding stakeholder perceptions of relevance may help identify unintended consequences, build stakeholder ownership and monitor the shifting alliances found in many conflicts.

Lines of Inquiry relating to Stakeholder Perceptions of Relevance

- Which constituencies (both "key" and "more people"¹¹) are essential to the program's effectiveness? (linked to conflict analysis)
- Is the program engaging the right constituencies?
- How do different stakeholders see the relevance of the program?
- What rationales, criteria and values do different stakeholders raise in their assessment of relevance?
- What do they think would help make the program more relevant?

Comparing Performance with standards for Stakeholder Perceptions of Relevance

- a) The "strategic who"/key people perceive the program to be relevant, including, where possible, the hard-to-reach.
- b) Strategies are in place to build popular understanding and support.

The evaluation can assess stakeholder perceptions of relevance by:

- Comparing actual vs. planned engagements of key people with planned/needed engagements of key people and actual vs. planned engagement of more people;
- Determining how stakeholder's view and value relevance; and
- Exploring options that would leverage greater stakeholder perceptions of relevance.

¹¹ In *Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners*, CDA's Reflecting on Peace Practice Program introduced the concept of "key people" strategies, which are those that target people with the power to decide for or against peace, and "more people" strategies, which are those that reach out to educate or mobilize wider groups of citizens (see Anderson and Olson 2003).

Application of R-5: Stakeholder Perceptions of Relevance

Questions relating to stakeholder perceptions of relevance were added to a stakeholder survey covering a wide range of evaluation questions. The program kept and updated e-mail addresses for most of the people who had participated in program activities, in three different activity streams. Different questions were developed for each stream. One question, with a five-point scale, put to all three activity streams asked, “How relevant were the program activities to key civic and political issues facing your group?” The survey of the education stream also asked participants to rank the educational themes (listed in the question) in order from highest relevance to lowest relevance for them.

Key informant interviews were also conducted with more open-ended questions about how well the program activities corresponded to the peacebuilding needs. Political office holders and CSO leaders found the program to be more relevant than did community members. More participants in activities focused on personal growth and development through experiential learning found the program to be relevant than did participants who participated exclusively in the formal education stream.

By plotting the results from all three activity streams on one graph, disaggregated by number of activities in which respondents participated, the evaluator was able to compare the perceptions of relevance of the “one-activity-only participants.” Activity streams A & B were both found to be somewhat relevant and were not found to be statistically different from each other. However, Activity C was consistently found to be more relevant than B and C for one-activity-only participants. Two-activity participants tended to rank the overall program as more relevant than did one-activity only participants. Participants who engage in Activity C, exclusively or in combination with one or both of the other streams consistently ranked the overall program as more relevant than all participants who had not engaged in Activity C.

Activity C engaged key leaders through a detailed and rigorous selection process and fewer participants, whereas participation in streams A and B were self-selecting and able to accommodate much larger numbers of people. Semi-structured interviews with stream C participants found that Activity C was highly relevant to them on a personal level as leaders and somewhat less relevant to the key civic and political issues facing their group.

R-6: STRATEGIC AND POLICY ALIGNMENT

Rationale and Clarification

This dimension addresses the alignment between the program or the intervention and existing related government policy and/or donor policy. As used here, alignment is value-free – it is neither good nor bad. It simply refers to the relationship between interventions and policy.

Policy makers sometimes want to know how well violence prevention or peacebuilding programs conform with and support specific policy initiatives intended to contribute to other related issues such as gender equity, fragile states principles and capacity building. Program managers need to know how their work compares with existing policy.

This dimension may be further complicated when the existing governmental and/or donor policies are either conflict insensitive, discriminatory or conflict causing. Some programs have clear policy change objectives to address the detrimental aspects of existing policy and

ineffective policy implementation. Others may be intentionally out of alignment with corrupt or discriminatory policies in order to model a viable, more conflict sensitive or just alternative.

This dimension is related to coherence and is sometimes addressed as part of the discussion on coherence rather than relevance.

Lines of Inquiry relating to Strategic and Policy Alignment

- How does the program engage at the policy level?
- For the major interventions, what are the policy implications?
- What donor and national governmental policies are intended to be supported through the program or interventions?
- What donor and national government policies need to be modified and how should they be modified to be more conflict sensitive and contribute more fully to peacebuilding?

Comparing Performance with standards for Strategic and Policy Alignment

The intervention:

- a) Is known to and recognized by policy makers and policy implementers;
- b) Engages constructively in conflict-sensitive policy development and improvement; and
- c) Considers policy-related linkages between micro, mezzo and macro levels.

Application of R-6: Strategic and Policy Alignment

The donor reported that the program was intended to support its policy regarding the peaceful and democratic transfer of political office. A simple review of the subject matter in the educational and media activity streams A & B revealed topics including democracy, elections, representation, etc. “How,” the evaluator asked, “did the other activity streams align with this policy? Do all activities need to align or is the educational activity stream enough?”

A review of the syllabus and facilitator’s guides for activity stream C found no references to democracy, elections and representations. Some participants, however, mentioned discussions of one or another of these themes. Although this particular activity stream did not intentionally align with the donor’s policy, participants were free to introduce and discuss these issues as part of the activity and in a few instances did. Since the evaluation did not systematically raise this with all activity C participants interviewed, the frequency of times it was volunteered by interlocutors is not representative of all those partaking in activity C. No effort was made to assess the appropriateness of the donor’s policy because the donor had already shifted to a different set of priorities.

V. Conclusions

Peacebuilding programs operate within conflict and policy environments. They draw on conflict analysis in order to determine effective interventions for specific dynamics at certain times in specific places, involving strategic stakeholders. They build in flexible and adaptive processes to

respond to changing environments and changing perceptions of stakeholders. These factors determine how relevant programs are to the conflict.

Deconstructing the notion of relevance into different dimensions, while helpful in understanding different components, presents real challenges in offering an overall consolidated evaluation finding related to relevance. This paper offers no single normative standard for determining whether or not a program is relevant, or how relevant it is. There is no ranking or weighting of the different dimensions and no scoring system. The importance of each criterion will vary according to the context, the program and the reasons for evaluating relevance. However, the group consulted for this paper held that a quality conflict analysis leading to need/goals appropriateness are the most critical dimensions in evaluating relevance of peacebuilding initiatives.

Programs seeking to learn more about their relevance through program evaluation should prioritize and focus on the dimensions most likely to generate useful information. Efforts to evaluate all six dimensions in their entirety within a given program are likely to be superficial, incomplete and not very useful.

Evaluations should help explain the ways in which programs are relevant, describe what makes programs relevant and explore ways in which they might become more relevant. We expect the dimensions and standards presented here to evolve, as both peacebuilding practice and peacebuilding evaluation gain additional experience and continue to evolve.

Criteria-based evaluation (like the approach of the OECD DAC) appears here to stay. It is not, however the only approach to evaluation and may best be used in conjunction with other approaches. Paradoxically, criteria-based evaluation is dependent on other goal-free, ethnographic, and other naturalistic approaches to identify new criteria and new dimensions. While we value the structure and ease of comparison offered by criteria-based evaluation, we also encourage evaluation approaches that are not criteria-based. Learning derived from evaluations for the larger field of peacebuilding depends on diverse approaches to evaluation.

VI. The Growing Edge

In this effort to contribute to a deeper and meaningful discussion about relevance in peacebuilding evaluation, several questions remain unanswered. Some of these include:

- Is relevance paramount among the OECD DAC criteria? If a program is not found to be relevant to the conflict, how is further evaluation likely to contribute to the knowledge base in peacebuilding?
- How should evaluators deal with a high degree of relevance on one dimension coupled with a low degree of relevance on another? For example, a program might demonstrate strong needs/goals appropriateness and untimely implementation—the right thing at the wrong time. How should evaluators “value” these different possibilities?

- Are there degrees of overall relevance? Is there an acceptability threshold? How relevant does a program need to be in order to be of value?
- How to deal with situations where relevance determinations are pre-determined or embedded within a larger policy rather than being made by the program?
- How does relevance interact with each of the other evaluation criteria? What are the evaluation ramifications of that interaction?

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