

Do No Harm and Peacebuilding: Five Lessons¹

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Recently, in Afghanistan, a new road was planned in an area where two groups were in conflict. These two groups had longstanding arguments with each other, and the arguments kept erupting into violence whenever the proposal for the new road was discussed. An NGO took the groups through DNH, and eventually the groups began to focus on the sources of their arguments and the other dynamics of their conflict. They began to see that there were warlords who were benefiting from the prolonged and exacerbated conflict and they began to resist those influences. Currently, the disputes between the two groups appear to be resolved.

Also, that road was built.

This story illustrates one of the ways DNH has been used as a tool for building bridges between communities and addressing the conflicts that exist among them.

The Do No Harm Project began in the mid-1990's, exploring the question, "how can aid be given in ways that, rather than exacerbating or prolonging a conflict, help people to disengage from fighting and develop systems for settling the problems in their societies?" We collected the experiences of workers in the humanitarian and development fields. We worked with people in multiple countries in different contexts doing different types of work. We collected their stories and we began to see patterns emerge that eventually led to the development of the Do No Harm Framework, the Do No Harm Book, and a series of training modules. In the Implementation and Dissemination phases of the Project, we shared the lessons we had learned with practitioners, and worked with them to apply Do No Harm to their humanitarian and development projects.

But we were careful to assure people that we were not attempting to change their mission or mandate. During that time, there was a great deal of concern about "mission creep." Organizations were wary of any tool or approach that looked like it might change their agenda. So, in those trainings, we emphasized repeatedly, emphatically, and forcefully, that the tool was developed by examining the experiences of humanitarian aid and development workers and so it was NOT a tool for peacebuilding. We told people that peacebuilding requires a different set of skills. We told them that peacebuilding often requires a political solution, which DNH cannot offer. We told people all of these things.

And then they used DNH for peacebuilding anyway.

And they used it well.

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Over the life of the Do No Harm project we have been thinking about how people use the tool and what parts of it are useful. We have heard stories of people working in the same country, in the same organization who had quite different experiences with DNH. One person would tell us that the tool was useful and had changed the way they were working, and another, equally smart and capable colleague did not feel that the tool had value for their work. People asked us to dig more deeply into this problem to find out why. So, in 2006, we started a new series of case studies to examine how people were learning, thinking about, and using DNH; which parts of the tool they find useful, and why; and to explore the challenges that prevent people from using DNH. We call these the Reflective Case Studies. The evidence from these cases has led us to re-examine our efforts to move the focus of the project away from peacebuilding work. Simply, we have seen people use DNH to do effective work in peacebuilding at the local level. The fact that this work is done on a local level seems important because, as the DNH Project has learned, local knowledge and understanding of a context is vital. As we gather more evidence about where DNH has worked for peacebuilding, and where it has not, we will come closer to understanding the boundaries of the term local. The examples that we have seen include face-to-face contact between the conflicting groups and involve issues that are resource-based or interpersonal.

When practitioners use DNH for effective peacebuilding work, we have seen that they do five things:

1. They assume that their context is dynamic
2. They examine their context through a dividers and connectors lens
3. They analyze dividers and connectors daily
4. They look hard for opportunities to apply DNH
5. And, finally, they do not create connectors; rather they build on existing connectors in their context.

1. Assume that the context is dynamic.

Individuals who use DNH in peacebuilding work assume that the context in which they are working is dynamic. They are aware that the context is evolving and changing all the time. They assume that dividers and connectors will change in importance and relevance as their project develops or due to outside factors.

In Nepal, the civil war ebbed and flowed through the countryside. Organizations in that context needed to pay attention to the interplay of the dynamics of the context. Four dynamics that we saw people tracking were Maoist insurgent/King's government issues, caste issues, economic grievances, and ethnic conflicts. At any time, one of these dynamics could be the key driver of a local conflict. However, organizations and aid workers needed to pay attention not only to what the current key driver of conflict was, but how the other dynamics of the conflict interacted around that driving force. For example, people noted that when the Maoist insurgents increased their forces in any particular area, conflicts with the King's government's forces were likely to increase. However after the forces dispersed, caste related conflicts often arose in their wake. Or during harvest times there were economic concerns about immigrants (usually Nepalese!) from India crossing the border to look for work, which led to conflicts with local workers and these conflicts could take precedence over the other factors. Aid workers also found that ethnic issues were present in many places and could feed into the other three dynamics.

Organizations working in Nepal found that they needed to be constantly monitoring their context for changes. As troops moved in and out of villages, other, previously dormant or low level, conflicts could flare up. In order to be responsive to these changes, they needed to track them as they happened.

2. Examine the context through a Dividers and Connectors lens

In order to do effective peacebuilding work using DNH, people have told us they need a thorough understanding of the dividers and connectors in the context. They need to know which dividers are the strongest and most dangerous and also which connectors are strong enough to bring people together and overcome the dividers in the context.

In rural Kenya, there is an area where different pastoral tribes graze and water their cattle. Some of the most desirable grazing land in the area was completely inaccessible to any of the tribes because each claimed that it was theirs. If a tribe ventured onto that piece of land, other tribes raided their cattle and there were some violent conflicts. An NGO working in the area began their work by approaching the community leaders in each tribe separately, and talking to them about the conflicts. They described the other tribes as traditional enemies and cattle raiding as restocking their herds. The NGO introduced the community leaders, and later others in the communities, to the DNH framework. The groups began to talk about the conflict in terms of the access to resources rather than traditional warfare. Through this process, the community leaders came to the conclusion that in order to solve the conflict and gain access to the resource for their own community, they would need to discuss the resources with the other tribes. The NGO facilitated meetings among the community leaders of the area tribes over the next few weeks. Within a month, all the tribes had access to the area that had previously been too dangerous to enter.

This NGO examined the dividers and connectors in the context and used DNH with the communities to create a space for their own analysis of the conflict. Once the communities had determined that they were fighting over access to land and water and not a traditional disagreement between certain enemies, a conflict that had once seemed inevitable became something they could solve. They began to magnify what was connecting them and minimize what was keeping them at odds.

3. Analyze Dividers and Connectors Daily

Because people assume that the context in which they work is dynamic and because they are attuned to the dividers and connectors in that context, they are always monitoring for changes in the dividers and connectors in the context. They know that things are always changing and in order to be able to adapt their project or program to that change, they must be aware of it as it is happening.

In Uganda, an organization holds a staff meeting each morning to talk about upcoming projects or the results they have seen from their projects. Important changes in the context are noted. The staff also constantly ask one another, "Are you doing harm?" Although there is a note of joking about the question, it reminds them of Dividers and Connectors and to look closely at possible negative impacts of their projects. They do not do a formal DNH analysis of every project every day, but through the daily conversations and stories about their work, they remind each other to constantly think about their impact on Dividers and Connectors.

4. Look hard for opportunities to apply DNH

People who use DNH for peacebuilding are always looking for opportunities to apply the tool. For people working in contexts of conflict, the dividers are often glaringly clear. One local staff member of an NGO told us, “Today I work on what will get my family killed tomorrow.” He emphasized that in his context, he directs his project everyday toward addressing the dividers he sees as the most dangerous.

People are often less clear and certain about the connectors in these contexts. They can overlook the small, day-to-day ways that people come together and bridge their divisions. But we have seen that the people who apply DNH to peacebuilding work well seek out the connectors and hold a magnifying glass to them. In fact, people have used exactly these words when describing their activities.

A Kenyan colleague told us, “We look for the connectors in the context and try to get people to magnify on that. The DNH tool in itself works for community organization and building communities’ capacity to manage their own conflicts.” This person found space in her budget to run DNH workshops by using funds set aside for intercommunity meetings and used the DNH tool to highlight existing connectors.

5. Do not create Connectors; work on existing Connectors

Finally, in CDA’s experience, those who set out to create a connector do not meet with success. New connectors do arise in contexts of conflict, but they are accidental; an example of the dynamic nature of any context. But in trying to create a connector between two groups where one did not exist before, we run the risk of increasing tensions, rather than decreasing them. Peace work is at its weakest when it ignores what is already working to bring people together and tries to substitute for that with a new or externally determined connector.

After the war in Kosovo, peacebuilding organizations working in the context tried to promote a multi-ethnic society among Serbs and Albanians. Many agencies designed multi-ethnic economic projects for people from both sides of the conflict. The hope was that people would work together on these projects, and that cooperation would lead to a Kosovo identity, rather than an ethnic Serb or ethnic Albanian identity. Many of these projects did not succeed.

In one farming co-op, multi-ethnic groups raised funds to purchase shared farming equipment. In the end, the groups split the money between the Albanians and Serbs and purchased the tools they each needed. In a project to re-establish garbage collection, an aid agency attempted to employ both Serbs and Albanians. When the project became economically sustainable, the NGO left. After the NGO left, the Albanian workers dismissed the Serb garbage collectors.

In Kosovo, people talked about living side-by-side, rather than *with* the other group. The idea of multi-ethnic workplaces and activities was not something they had been practicing prior to the war, and so it never had been something that connected them. People told us that they participated in these projects to get access to international assistance, rather than to increase multi-ethnic space in their community.

Peacebuilding and the Future of Do No Harm

Much of CDA’s early resistance to use of the tool for peacebuilding came from being cognizant of our limitations, and being skeptical about pushing beyond them. Since the tool had not been developed by peace practitioners, we did not want to assume that DNH could substitute for the skill sets involved in

peacebuilding or for political solutions to a conflict. But we also have seen the peacebuilding work that people have done with DNH. We have heard people say that it works for them, and people are continuing to explore the tool's usefulness in peace work.

There is no formulaic approach to using any tool. A tool cannot substitute for knowledge or thinking, but it is something a thinking person uses to do better work. We, at CDA are anxious to know about your successes and failures with DNH. And of course, we look forward to hearing how you have used DNH in surprising and interesting ways that we probably told you were impossible.