

Our Ethics

1st August, 2017

1 Introduction

This document is a guide for International Alert's trustees, staff and consultants in their decision-making. It complements legal frameworks, sectoral norms and donor regulations, along with Alert's internal policies, and focuses on how we approach peacebuilding: our strategic and operational programming choices, the way we present ourselves and our opinions to others, and our communications and external relationships. It applies to all departments, and replaces the 1997 External Code of Conduct¹.

This document is brief, and gives broad guidance applicable in diverse situations, rather than attempting to set out detailed rules and procedures. Its aim is to ensure that all our actions are seen through an ethical lens based on our purpose, values and principles, and that this becomes integrated into our organisational mindset and culture.

In addition, this document includes several text boxes outlining some of the ethical challenges peacebuilding organisations face. The document, although internal, is not confidential, and will be available on the International Alert website. We will actively and publicly promote our purpose, values and principles.

2 Why we need an ethical framework

Alert offers to help, guide and partner with those affected by conflict in their efforts to build peace. We also seek to influence others, whose actions can have an impact on peace. The benefits can be enormous, but peacebuilding is not an exact science. Sometimes we use innovative approaches that are not yet fully proven. We also make pragmatic choices that involve compromise, for example to secure the resources or the permissions we need to continue our work, or in working with a range of people with differing ideas, perspectives and values, to achieve an impact. This document provides ethical guidance to help navigate these uncertainties.

As outlined in the text boxes, the nature of our work and some aspects of how we are obliged to resource and implement it means that, *if we are not careful*, we risk making flawed programming decisions that unintentionally have an inadequate or negative impact, such as:

- Implementing programmes ineffectively
- Undermining the capacity of others to build peace
- Putting people at risk of harm, without their knowledge or consent

Mandate, culture and power. Peacebuilders aim to improve people's lives by influencing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours, and the norms, rules, relationships and structures that condition these. These are ambitious goals, for which they do not necessarily have a specific mandate from those whose lives they aim to improve. Their methodologies, strategies and plans can be informed by global values such as human rights, and their own cultural concepts. This means they can sometimes ignore or miss local approaches and aptitudes for peace, and therefore make poor programming choices; worse, they can alienate, exclude or undermine local people's agency. International peacebuilding NGOs in particular, by providing funding incentives, can encourage their partners to adopt wrong approaches, and accept budgets that are too small for the intended work, which can ultimately reduce these partners' legitimacy and effectiveness. Staff safety concerns can also create barriers between international NGO staff, partners and others, and reduce programme effectiveness.

By using approaches that are participatory and adaptable, we try to avoid imposing our ideas and approaches, or adopting ineffective or harmful methods. We seek to form relationships in which all parties communicate candidly about roles and decisions, and plan and monitor activities together.

- Legitimising harmful people or entities
- Tainting our own reputation and thus our ability to build peace, and potentially also that of our collaborators
- Being unwittingly partial – or appearing so
- Creating perverse incentives which lead collaborators to adopt short-term strategies or approaches which harm them in the long run, by reducing their legitimacy or capacity
- Communicating in ways that harm the peace opportunities, interests or security of others
- Distorting the theories of change and messages of peacebuilding, and undermining the importance of honest and transparent communication to peace
- Creating additional or worsening existing tensions and conflicts.

Peacebuilding involves innovation and creativity.

Because each conflict situation is unique, peacebuilders make programming choices based on what they believe will work for that situation, and this usually involves adapting an approach from somewhere else, or trying something new. This does not always work, and may even make things worse. There is also a risk that, in meeting donor timetables or other criteria, peacebuilders design approaches to fit predetermined goals and activities rather than in sufficient consultation with partners or communities affected.

If we develop and share our theories of change and plans in an open and accessible way, we can help make sure others understand our choices and can challenge and improve them where needed. If we monitor and learn from our activities, and adjust them where needed, we can lessen the risk of using poorly adapted approaches.

The values, norms and principles that we learn during the course of our lives guide us as individuals, and these are our moral frameworks. An ethical framework, by contrast, is a collective commitment to a purpose, principles and values based on reflection and intention by that organisation or collective *as a whole*. International Alert is an organisation comprising people from various personal, cultural and professional backgrounds and experiences, so it is important that we share a common set of ethics to guide us in our approaches and decision-making, and to which we can hold one another accountable.

3 The core elements of our ethics

Our ethical guidance is based on the interplay between our purpose, values and principles, all of which are reflected in our choices and actions.

Our purpose

Our purpose is to contribute to peace, and inspire, inform, support and enhance the efforts of others to do so.

By ‘peace’, we mean the capacity within and between societies to anticipate and manage conflicts without violence, while collaborating to improve people’s lives. This means that people see processes and outcomes relating to governance, safety, livelihoods, justice and well-being as fair, and that people trust each other and those in power, and work together for their mutual benefit.

We achieve this by:

- Working with people directly affected by conflict to find peaceful solutions
- Shaping policies and practices to support peace, and
- Collaborating with all those striving for peace globally to strengthen our collective voice and impact.

Relationships. Peacebuilders work with governments, politicians, civil society organisations, communities, businesses, international organisations and individuals. These relationships are necessary to build peace, but each of these have their own interests and values, which may negatively influence peacebuilders in their work, or give the impression this is the case, and undermine their effectiveness. For example, a donor’s foreign policy or a politician or company’s poor reputation could adversely impact the effectiveness of the peacebuilder’s work.

Before we form relationships with others, we consider their ethics, the ethical nature of the relationship itself, and any impact on Alert or on others with whom we will work. We proceed only if we are satisfied about the impact. It is helpful to review the relationship continually as it evolves. Our relationships should be candid and based on trust.

Our values

We value:

- **Progress** because no society is perfect, and each contains both the need and opportunities for improvement
- **Fairness** because everyone should have access to opportunities, and should not be treated arbitrarily, nor discriminated against, because of status or identity
- **Respect** because everyone should be valued and respected as a person with inalienable human rights and her or his own values and views
- **Inclusion** because the participation and collaboration of people with diverse and complementary knowledge and perspectives is critical for cohesion and the quality of outcomes
- **Openness** about intentions and actions, because this is an essential element of trust, accountability and collaboration.

Competition. International peacebuilders compete for resources, relationships and opportunities. But in outcompeting others, they may prevent the peacebuilding outcomes others would have achieved. Competing with local organisations might also undermine their ability to sustain and build themselves, thus ultimately reducing prospects for local peace. When international peacebuilders cultivate their own reputations, and build up their achievements for competitive purposes, they may obscure the achievements and reputations of others.

We can reduce this risk by considering the ethical implications before taking on programming opportunities. We should only compete when we judge that we can deliver at least as effectively as our competitors. Collaboration, especially with local peacebuilders, and taking care not to step on others' toes, will further reduce this risk. We should avoid taking too much credit, and credit others for their contributions, where due.

We recognise and respect that these can be broad ideas, subject to interpretation. But woven together, they clarify each other. For example, while 'progress' is widely interpretable, its meaning is clear when interwoven with the concepts of fairness, inclusion, respect and openness.

Our principles

A principle in this context is a statement fusing our purpose and values, providing dynamic guidance on how we work and how we make decisions. Sometimes there are tensions between principles, and at such times we need to reflect and discuss the case before determining a course of action.

- We integrate the views and experiences of people into the design of policies and programmes that will affect them, and continue to do so as we learn and adapt
- We are clear and open about our intentions and plans, and how they contribute to peace
- We monitor the consequences of our actions, and discontinue or change any that are not contributing to peace
- We avoid increasing people's risk of harm by our actions, though we respect the choices they make themselves
- We do not abuse the power which unequal relationships at times confer on us
- We will work with those who can make a difference for peace, even when we disagree with their ethics or actions – unless by so doing we contribute to harm, undermine peace, or impede our or others' ability to build peace
- We adopt a position of humility, and do not take on roles or activities we cannot reasonably achieve. Nor do we claim achievements and outcomes that are not our own.

Transparency. Peacebuilders operate in complex situations where full transparency may hinder their work, or potentially put themselves or others at risk. At times, they may present their work in different ways to obtain consent from different stakeholders. This may also put people at risk, distort the theories of change and fundamental messages of peacebuilding, and undermine the honest and transparent communication that is needed for peace.

We aim for clarity and openness as far as possible. If the need for confidentiality outweighs this commitment to openness, we must be explicit about this internally. Candid communication with partners we trust can also reduce these risks.

4 Practical guidance

If we are to be seen as ethical practitioners, we must take our purpose, values and principles seriously. This means taking individual and collective responsibility for adhering to them, and holding each

other accountable. We will also make them public so that others know about and can remind us of our commitment – and are perhaps also inspired by them.

However, this does not mean we will create a set of rigid rules and procedures about how we do peacebuilding – our work is much too complex for this. It means returning to the values and principles for guidance and inspiration where there is uncertainty, or where compromise is called for. Every new trustee, staff member or consultant must understand and agree to our ethics, and we recommend that each Alert team formally discuss and review its work from an

ethical perspective at least once a year. We will review and if necessary update this document every five years, to ensure it remains relevant and incorporates lessons learned along the way.

Our ethics do not require an additional management system. Alert’s management and team structures are designed to enable effective decision-making and collaboration, and examine decisions and actions from an ethical perspective. However, in cases of doubt – if, for example, there is tension between what is politically expedient and what seems ethical, or if a decision or action is challenged by others on ethical grounds – it is useful to involve a higher level of management. Our performance management system offers opportunities to discuss an employee’s approach to our ethics, and hold him or her to account for this.

In addition, the following practices that enable ethical decisions and behaviour should be adopted as far as possible:

- Taking care to be **reflective** in our work, and pausing to consider the ethical implications of important decisions or initiatives.
- Making ethical considerations a **part of our organisational culture**, and ethical discussions normal and routine.
- **Examining ethical questions explicitly**, listening to and considering the perspectives of those with questions about the ethics of any proposal or action, and providing a clear explanation for decisions where doubts are raised.
- Using **collaborative approaches that draw on diverse points of view** in planning and decision-making, as a matter of course.
- Always emphasising **learning**, so that together with our collaborators, we understand what has and hasn’t had the desired impact, and adjust accordingly.
- Using **participatory methods for design and implementation, and to define and evaluate progress**. Where we cannot use participatory methods, we take care to consider different stakeholders’ perspectives.
- Making sure we understand the contexts in which we work, including how people from **different groups and with different identities** can participate in and are impacted by our actions, and that our efforts are conflict-sensitive.
- Creating and communicating clear, unambiguous and easy-to-understand **theories of change and strategies for impact**, and safe spaces to challenge these.

Research, publications and advocacy. When peacebuilders conduct research, they risk exploiting the subjects of their research by denying them agency in, or ownership of, the research. Peacebuilders use publications and advocacy to raise awareness of opportunities that they believe will lead to good outcomes. But if the research is misused, or policy recommendations misjudged, this can cause harm to people who did not knowingly choose to take this risk.

We aim to involve groups that are directly affected in our research, and in determining recommendations that emerge from that research. We involve people with differing perspectives in decision processes, to reduce risks.

- Insisting with ourselves, our donors, partners and others whose permission we need, on **adapting our approaches** where needed for ethical reasons.
- Deploying **qualified staff and consultants**, and **working with qualified partners** – and building up capacity where needed.
- Explaining the reason for decisions to colleagues, where **ethical tensions** exist: for example, where the need for confidentiality (which might be necessary because we value respect, or to avoid exposing people to harm) outweighs our commitment to clarity and openness.
- Adopting **explicit mitigation approaches** in cases where compromises are made.
- In **forming relationships** – for example with funders, civil society organisations, governments, companies, individuals and suppliers – we consider their ethics and the ethical dimensions of the relationship, and any impact on Alert or others, before deciding whether to proceed.
- Considering in ethical terms whether **activities conducted by one part of the organisation might undermine or endanger others**, and taking conscious decisions about if and how to proceed.

Organisational funding. Sometimes best peacebuilding practice and external accountabilities can conflict with each other. When using donor funds, peacebuilders are accountable to the donor, and must also comply with the laws and policies of the relevant government. In contrast, the people for whose benefit they work have little opportunity to hold them accountable. This may distort programming. Projects may be too large, too rigid, too fast or too short-term, have the wrong partnerships or be based on distorted theories of change. They may align with narrow considerations preferred by donors, at odds with local priorities.

By using approaches that are participatory and adaptable, and by trying to fit short-term projects within longer-term and wider strategies, we can reduce these risks. Donors will often agree to adapt programming approaches. We aim to assign qualified staff and work with qualified partners on our projects, and we will not accept funding where we cannot ensure this.

¹ This revised ethical guidance was prepared through extensive internal consultation during 2016-17, by a staff group consisting of Banu Altunbas, Debbie Ball, Liz Kearsley, Olfa Lamloom, Phil Vernon, Rabindra Gurung, Richard Businge, Ryan Grist and Summer Brown. We would also like to thank two external participants for their influential participation and guidance: Dr Mike Newman, Emeritus Professor of Politics at London Metropolitan University, and Dr Simon Longstaff, Executive Director of the Ethics Centre in Sydney, Australia.