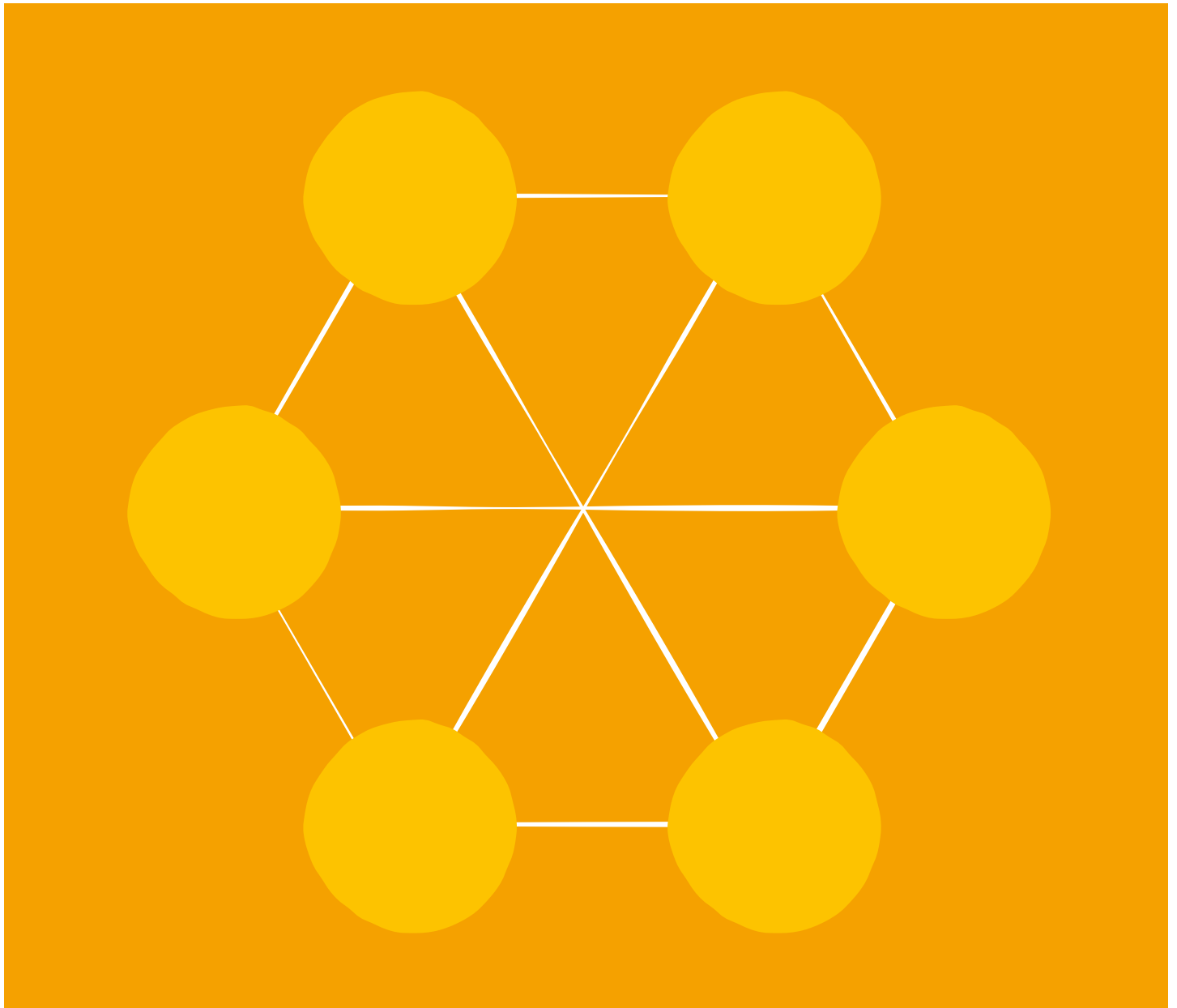![international alert logo]

Conflict sensitivity hubs:

A comparative perspective of six Conflict Sensitivity hubs

Executive summary

About International Alert

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace.

We focus on solving the root causes of conflict with people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we bring people together to build sustainable peace.

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As part of the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (FCDO)-funded project aimed at piloting a Conflict Sensitivity (CS) hub in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), International Alert commissioned a study to review existing CS hubs in six countries. The objective was to identify key lessons and to inform thinking and discussion on CS support needs and responses in the DRC. The CS hubs reviewed are located in South Sudan, Sudan, Libya, Lebanon, Myanmar and Yemen. The study focused on five thematic areas that form the basis of all CS hubs—mandate, size, implementers, activities and impact measurement methods—to understand constants and variables between hubs, and to inform thinking on a possible DRC CS hub. Semi-structured interviews were held with 52 individuals, ranging from donor representatives (17), CS hub implementers (15), experts in CS (11), INGOs or implementing agencies (7) and local NGOs (2). Information was also gathered from the hubs' respective websites. The Table below contains a comparative overview of the six hubs and the five thematic topics covered.

Hub	Need/mandate	Size/budget/donors	Implementing agency	Activities	Impact measurement method
CSRF South Sudan	Lack of understanding of context by donors	Large institutional multi-donor funding (£1.65 million)	Peacebuilding NGO, limited physical presence	Works with **humanitarian actors**, on research, training and convening/lobbying	Outcome harvesting (supported by a Theory of Change (ToC))
CSF Sudan	Support the aid sector to be more conflict sensitive. Aims at improving aid in Sudan.	Small, single donor (£600,000)	Peacebuilding NGO, limited physical presence	Provides analysis, convenes discussions, shares learning, and provides support capacity for the **aid sector**.	Outcome harvesting
Yemen CS Platform	Lack of understanding of the context; Strategic-level interaction aiming at a shift in aid	Medium single donor (£1 million)	Peacebuilding NGO, academic institution	Capacity support for aid actors individually and for **the aid sector**; lessons sharing and learning	Logframe (combined with a ToC to understand pathways for change)
CS Forum Libya	Lack of understanding of the context	Medium, Multi-donor US$ 200,000	Peacebuilding NGO, limited physical presence	Provides **international humanitarian actors** with updated conflict analysis. Organises workshops and research activities	Survey measuring change to activity by participant (as part of a ToC)
Myanmar NGO	Respond to the complexity of the conflict context	Large, paid services (no institutional donor funding)	Local NGO, large physical presence	Provides paid research, facilitation and training services to **all actors** involved in the country	n/a
CS Forum Lebanon	Local NGOs' lack of awareness of CS in their work; also triggered by the Syrian refugee crisis	Small, local funding	Local peacebuilding NGO, with a physical presence	Provides support for mostly local **humanitarian actors** by training and convening	n/a

CS hub background and target audiences

The study found **most hubs were initially donor funded and devised** (with the exception of Lebanon). The primary reason for their creation was the identification of risks resulting from international community responses that lacked sufficient **understanding of the context,** together with donor appetite and interest **to better coordinate assistance, particularly humanitarian and development assistance**. Hubs differ in size and in staffing. Some are quite large, with multi-year donor funding; for example CSRF South Sudan. Others are quite small and 'organically' grown (Lebanon). Most hubs have had a primary focus on humanitarian actors, with the exception of Myanmar, which worked with all actors involved in the aid sector, including development and peacebuilding agencies. International organisations, including INGOs, UN agencies, and donors, were the primary initial target group of most hubs, with the exception of Lebanon, which clearly focussed on local actors from the start, and Myanmar. Some hubs also gradually included local actors as services recipients, mostly in relation to capacity building. Most hubs are run by a consortium of implementing agencies, typically peacebuilding and conflict resolution INGOs and research institutions (Yemen, South Sudan), or by a single NGO (Libya and Lebanon).

Key services and functions of CS hubs

CS hubs typically undertake a combination of the following activities: a) **research, analysis;** b) **training - capacity building** and **c) convening/lobbying.** Research and analysis are considered 'core' hub activities. In the majority of cases, these products have been targeted towards donors, as these often lacked contextual information to inform their programmes and policies. Research outputs have often also been disseminated to the wider aid sector. Concerning **capacity building**, all CS hubs offered training to implementers, mostly INGOs, usually in a demand-driven context rather than at an institutional level. Most training offers were generic. There were few examples of directing hub resources to tailored trainings for aid implementers – for example to directly respond to their respective mandate or capacity level. Training for donors was typically focussed on informing new staff on contextual analysis. Hubs did not systematically review or provide recommendations on donor policies and practices.

Some CS facilities also **convene strategic sector/cluster meetings,** mostly around thematic issues. During these meetings, CS facilities present CS issues and/or offer options for joint action and synergy between aid actors. Examples of successful applications of CS principles at 'cluster' level are the development of a Humanitarian Response Plan, including a CS lens, in South Sudan, and joint scenario planning exercises in Libya. In Libya, bi-monthly meetings are organised during which INGOs and donors are briefed on the changing context and potential implications for the aid community.

Lessons on impact of CS hubs

Evidence varies in relation to measuring the impact of CS hubs. In some cases, indicators were not clearly defined at the hub inception stage, highlighting the need for donors and implementers to invest more time in agreeing parameters and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems at the outset. Indicators for measuring behaviour change in relation to CS are relatively new and good practice is evolving. Nevertheless, several key lessons were highlighted in this study:

1. **Additional support and guidance is required to support uptake of research findings and implementation of recommendations by implementers and donors**. This could take the form of guidance notes or hands-on accompaniment and mentoring, both of which are resource-intensive. Resourcing for this would need to come from within hubs or from the target actors themselves.

2. **Most CS facilities are able to convene various actors** involved in the aid sector to discuss CS, **but the meetings do not systematically translate into the adoption of joint CS approaches,** joint analysis, joint programming or joint strategies. There is a need to be clear about what impact/changes can be expected from a hub and its potential limitations–for example, a reliance on "buy in" and take-up of its recommendations.

3. **Efforts to lobby donors to become more conflict sensitive, individually and collectively, were made by a few CS hubs,** notably in Libya and South Sudan. In other countries there were obstacles such as lack of priority on the part of donors, and/or conflicting foreign policy agendas.

4. **CS facilities—especially in the context of the DRC—need to maintain their independence from INGOs and from donors to gain credibility and carry out their missions effectively**. This requires multi-donor funding when possible, and independent identification and branding, i.e. own logo and email address.

5. A **clear, realistic mandate is essential for an emerging hub,** i.e. WHAT a hub is going to do, for WHOM, and WHERE. While the ambition *can* be to work at all levels in the long run, a clear mandate with clear objectives in the early phase is crucial. Working at all levels through offering many different types of services, including capacity building/technical support; information/analysis provision, coordination/alignment/political presents too many challenges in the inception phase.

6. It is equally important to **build trust and to ensure commitment from the beneficiary community**, i.e., clearly define who the main beneficiaries are, e.g. donors, INGOs, local implementing partners, as their needs and demands may be different.

7. It is important to **balance engagement between international and national actors**. While CS hubs are often donor driven, local actors' buy-in is essential as the services offered concern ALL actors in the aid chain in conflict areas.

8. Specifically for the DRC, **engage local actors from the beginning,** as they have demonstrated a clear interest in benefiting from the services of a hub. Local actors have shown enthusiasm for CS as an approach that can improve the effectiveness of their programmes and enhance the effectiveness of the whole sector through improved collaboration.

9. **There is a gap between knowing what CS is, its underlying principles, and how to incorporate it within programmes** and within an institution as a whole. Often the missing links are a) **a lack of appropriate tailor-made tools**, and b) **a focus on CS at programme level** without looking at institutional obstacles such as management buy-in and lack of conducive procedures/environment.

10. Most CS hubs **struggle to provide adequate recommendations around what the donor community can do with the information they provide**, both collectively—how/when to coordinate—and individually—how to integrate CS in their own strategies and policies.

11. Overall, most actors consulted for this study suggested that **CS is becoming more prominent on the agenda of cluster group meetings**, and **CS is gradually being adopted in programme design and set-up** by most

actors they engage. For instance, CSRF in South Sudan has assisted many organisations to integrate CS ideas and approaches into their programme proposals. Evidence of impact has mostly been achieved at programme level; less so at organisational and sectoral levels.

Recommendations for a CS hub in the DRC

Based on the review of CS hubs, and analysis of the DRC context, this study identifies a gap in CS support in the DRC that could usefully be filled through the creation of a facility. There is demand and need from donors, humanitarian and development actors in the DRC for more support on CS. At the moment, such support is provided ad hoc by some donors. There is no centralised offer.

Recommendations for actors wanting to support improved CS in the DRC are:

Scope and mandate:
- A CS hub should have a general objective and primary mandate to act as a CS expertise centre for the whole aid community.
- UN agencies are also critical actors which do not currently have access to CS support. A facility providing CS advice and support to the UN Country Team is critical for the DRC, given the scale of UN activities and approaching United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the DR Congo (MONUSCO) transition. Further scoping is recommended to define how the CS advice and support may be best provided. This study recommends as most effective an independent CS hub, housed outside of the UN and providing services for UN and non-UN actors.
- Priority geographic focus should be eastern DRC (North Kivu, South Kivu, Tanganyika and Ituri) and the Greater Kasai provinces, including Kasai and Kasai Central.
- The CS hub should start small, take a flexible and adaptive design approach, grow gradually, and generate demand for its services in an incremental fashion.

Public/audience
- The CS hub should focus on the international community initially, namely donors and (I)NGOs – mostly those involved in the humanitarian sector, though not excluding development and peacebuilding actors. Ideally a CS hub would also support the UN as well as International Finance Institutions (IFIs), including the World Bank, The African Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
- A secondary priority would be to target government officials. Further reflection would be required on government engagement in the DRC context based on lessons from other hubs. The CS hub should have a well-crafted engagement strategy with the government, given the sensitivities of collaborating, or being perceived as collaborating, with a party in the conflict.

Governance and implementation modalities
- The CS hub should be implemented by a consortium of specialist national and international implementers, to ensure credibility, increase buy-in, and support maximal perception of neutrality.
- As was highlighted in a recent CSRF review,[1] and confirmed by most interviewees, there is a difference in knowledge uptake between working **for** a stakeholder (conducting a conflict analysis **for** an INGO for instance) and working **with** a stakeholder (providing tools, guidance and accompaniment for the stakeholder to design its own conflict analysis and assess the impact of the context on the conflict and vice versa).

- The CS hub should identify proportionate and inclusive governance modalities. A supervisory/strategic steering board should be comprised of key donors as well as representation from the UN and IFIs. An executive/technical board made up of implementers and one or two members of the supervisory board is recommended to oversee the day-to-day running of the hub. Additional structures for donor 'sign off' on programmatic spend might be required contractually but should be minimised as much as possible.
- The CS hub will need to demonstrate independence from donors and existing actors. It could be hosted within a peacebuilding NGO with an existing operational footprint; however, the hub should have its own branding and identity, including name, website, logo, email.

Coordination with existing structures and support to the UN Country Team

- The CS hub should take into account what other actors are doing in the DRC, including the UN Stabilisation Support Unit (SSU) in MONUSCO, which has a coordination mandate on stabilisation programming. Other convening actors include the INGO Forum, the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), and the Comités Régionaux Inter-Organisations (CRIO), among others. We recommend that the SSU could perform complementary functions to a CS hub, for example by sharing information with the CS hub (e.g. its conflict analysis and International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy (ISSSS) guidance, and by helping disseminate analysis/research and guidance conducted by the CS hub.
- In its capacity-building activities, the CS hub should also make use of existing work undertaken, in particular the Conflict Sensitivity thematic guidance materials developed by Transition International in 2021 and supported by GIZ and the German Development Ministry.

Priority activities to be undertaken by the hub

- The CS hub should start with a focus on generating, consolidating and supporting dissemination of **analysis,** and conducting **training** activities, particularly to the international community. These are relatively low-cost and high-return activities that would immediately fill a gap. A carefully developed open-access context analysis which is updated regularly would be a good starting point to engage external parties, acquire brand awareness, and generate further demand for services.
- Tailored capacity building and accompaniment for strategic humanitarian and development actors would add unique value to a CS facility and would further support buy-in from a cross-section of UN and non-UN actors.
- The CS hub should engage in convening activities with all actors in the aid sector—to reflect on good practice regarding CS, discuss challenges and strategies to overcome them—once it has built an excellent track record and it is recognised as an institution adding value.

Concerning the research/analysis offer, the hub should:

- Share regular up-to-date information such as briefings on the conflict context with the whole aid community, per province, territory, and possibly *groupement*.
- Synthesise existing research, reports and analysis on the conflict context, per programme type and per province/territory.
- Write guidance notes on a regular basis on what this research means for programmes and policies, for donors and programme implementers.
- Conduct outreach activities to disseminate the guidance notes, to ensure proper uptake. Alternative media, infographics, social media channels may be used.

Concerning the capacity building offer, the hub should:

- Offer training to new donor/(I)NGO/UN staff on the conflict context of the DRC, and on basic CS principles.
- Develop a training offer for implementing agencies and donors on CS principles and practice.

- Offer support to donors to review programmes and projects on their adherence to CS principles and standards.
- Accompany donors and implementing agencies in the process of integrating CS principles in their programmes/organisations on a regular basis, through the development and execution of Action Plans.

Resourcing

- An estimated budget for a DRC CS hub is US$ 600,000 in year one. This would cover four permanent national staff, including two analysts and two trainers, and one senior international advisor, as well as operational costs, including website design/maintenance and travel.
- To ensure its sustainability, neutrality and maximal buy-in, the CS hub should ideally have multi-donor support as well as inclusive governance. As actors become more familiar with the work and added value of the hub, it could charge for some services, e.g. training, and explore some paid service provision to donors, large INGOs and the private sector.

Staffing

- Ensure staff includes a sound mix of researchers/academics with significant experience working with implementers, or with a background within an implementing agency, as they will make operational recommendations and will need to have credibility with actors in the field.
- Ensure staff stay politically objective, given the sensitivities. CS principles of inclusivity, transparency, accountability and representativity in terms of gender, ethnic and linguistic background should be applied in the recruitment process.
- Create a pool of researchers and a pool of CS experts to choose from. A list of existing research institutions (Congo Research Group, Ghent university, Kivu Security Tracker, to name a few) and of reliable local researchers should be drafted in order to provide rapid support if needed.
- Ensure those researchers have an impeccable reputation and excellent academic and analytical skills, and are able to write synthesis materials and update them on a regular basis.
- Ensure the researchers hired for analyses are a good mix of international and national actors; international academics can bring impartiality while national researchers can bring their local knowledge and networks.

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