

More field notes: Critical issues when implementing PCIA

A Response by
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1

The Berghof Handbook team has initiated a new round of the Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) dialogue and invited the contributors to “New Trends in PCIA” to continue the debate with a short response, reflecting on critical issues raised in the initial articles.

I have enjoyed reading all the contributions and would like to discuss a number of specific issues mentioned in all of them. I also want to share my own experiences in implementing PCIA in the field. I will focus mainly on process questions and methodologies:

1. The question of “Who should participate in PCIA workshops?”
2. The use of case studies and examples during workshops
3. The danger of workshop enthusiasm
4. Beyond workshops: The limits of workshops and the need for additional methods
5. PCIA is political: Tool-based approaches versus politics
6. The difficulty of assessing impact on the macro peace process
7. The use of indicators

1 Who should participate in PCIA workshops?

Main messages: The participation of people from the conflict zone is crucial, however, we should also be careful not to paint a black-and-white picture of “wonderful Southerners” and “evil Northerners”. The involvement of external stakeholders and workshops at headquarters can be equally important. It is also necessary to be critical towards Southern gatekeepers.

All three contributions agreed that participatory workshops with the stakeholders seem to be *the* means of conducting a PCIA process. I would like to focus in the following on some of my

experiences when engaged in PCIA workshops in the field.

First, I share the experiences of the other contributors that these workshops are key and need to be driven by the people from the conflict zone, as they are the ones who have the knowledge and the means of changing the situation on the ground.

When I was invited to facilitate a PCIA workshop for international aid agencies in Yemen, I was astonished to learn that only expatriate project staff from Europe would participate. When I criticized this, the agencies ensured that the local staff and partners from Yemen would be included in the next workshop, which actually happened. I learned a couple of things from these workshops:

Interestingly, the analysis of the conflict potential in Yemen during the first workshop, where only expatriate staff participated, was identical to the analysis of the Yemenis in the second joint workshop. However, the expatriate staff was not able to analyse any peace potential in Yemen, whereas this part of the analysis by the Yemenis was very rich and innovative and created a lot of ideas for supportive action.

At the same time, the exclusive involvement of expatriate agency staff, and especially the involvement of the leadership level of the agencies, during the first workshop created an openness for the issues of peacebuilding and conflict-sensitivity that resulted in a remarkable commitment from the leadership and expatriate staff to further engage with the issue and even create an interagency unit to deal with conflict and peace issues on the programme and the political level. I asked the expatriate participants whether this impressive result could not have been achieved by an initial joint workshop. They replied that, had the workshop started off together with partners from Yemen, they would have felt too much pressure to avoid talking about the conflict situation or to immediately make concessions to their partners. By having a series of workshops, they had more time to reflect among themselves first and were then more open for the work in the joint workshop.

Second, the South-to-South exchange as mentioned by Kenneth Bush is crucial and should be considered more often. During a workshop in the Horn of Africa with people from different African countries, the exchange between these different groups was not only rich in analysis but, most of all, a learning experience for all participating actors. Interestingly, the different cultures in French- and English-speaking Africa turned out to be a major obstacle for shared learning and were intensively discussed, as were ways to overcome the obstacle.

Thus, the importance of participation of people from conflict zones is not questioned at all; however, we should be careful not to paint the picture of the “wonderful Southerners” and the “evil Northerners”. Ownership is crucial, and participation is a means to ensure it, but there are Southern groups of people that act as gatekeepers to the real communities in need. I have not been to a place in the South where I did not, among others, find representatives of Southern, urban, upper-middle-class NGOs that control external funds, dominate workshops in the capitals and claim to reach the affected population, while never even leaving the capital. Sadly, this is one consequence of the developing “peace industry” that builds on the concept of empowering the middle level of society to reach the top and the bottom. This finding is not discrediting the concept, but it does show that we have to critically analyse with whom to engage.

I want to make a last point concerning PCIA workshops in industrialised, western countries: One could understand Kenneth Bush’s plea for Southern ownership in such a way that it would not seem appropriate to work with “Northerners” (I do not think that he means that). I believe that – if Kenneth Bush is correct and the way of dealing with development and peace work in the South is problematic because of the way “Northerners” act – it is high time to work especially with organisations in the North at headquarter levels. And my experience has in fact been a different one from that of Kenneth Bush: Often, the issues of conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding are recognised

by an organisation at headquarter level; however, insufficient exchange and communication between headquarters and the field hamper the implementation of policies in the field.

2 Case studies and examples used during PCIA workshops

Main message: The work with real cases, which represent the working context of the participants, helps to better understand the PCIA methodology and to come up with concrete action plans for implementation.

Kenneth Bush shared with us his experiences of using made-up, remote examples as opposed to a real case during PCIA workshops. I would like to add my own experiences with this issue from several workshops that I facilitated in Nepal and in the Horn of Africa for international and local organisations.

Just like Kenneth Bush, I decide to take on an assignment only if I know that the organisation wants to build its own capacity and engages in a process in such a way that they are not growing dependent on outsiders, but only rely on this support for the short-run. In order to find out whether this is the case, it is important to understand the goals of the process, the stakeholders involved, and the flexibility and openness of the organisation. Often, a workshop is a starting point for such a process. In our first talks, I ask about the objectives of the workshop and discuss with the involved stakeholders whether they want to use their own cases – which I usually recommend – or work with other cases.

Most of the time, organisations want to work with their own cases. In my experience, this is very good because it usually leads to a better understanding of the methodology and also creates a lot of ideas for immediately changing the planned intervention. Thus participants leave the workshop with a concrete action plan for implementation.

What to do when organisations refuse to use their own cases? I usually work with similar cases from other countries without naming the organisations involved and adapt these cases to the situation in the country in question. This creates a feeling of “This is exactly what happens in our case” and it often paves the way to their own cases. I also try to reserve a day at the end for “any other topic”, which is then often used to go through their own cases. An additional option is to work with story telling. In a workshop with organisations from Somalia and Congo in Kenya, I presented different organisations’ experiences in the same field of work from other countries. Focussing especially on the “How not to do it”-issues, this story telling opened the way for the participants to critically tell stories about their own mistakes and possible ways forward. This intermezzo of story telling paved the way to engage more deeply with the methodology during the next session.

When we do work with real cases, it is important what kinds of examples we choose. This, of course, depends on what the process and the organisation need. We jointly discuss this question, and I advise the organisers if necessary. It often does not help the process to take a case that is already decided or finalised, or a case where the involved stakeholders are not ready to engage in the process. What are good cases depends foremost on the objectives of the entire PCIA process. I have worked a lot with organisations that wanted to integrate the conflict/peace lens into entire country programmes. In these cases it made sense to choose cases on different levels, e.g. one group worked on the national level, another group on a sector level that was highly affected by the conflict situation (the water sector in Yemen, the education sector in Sri Lanka, or the health and rural development sectors in Nepal). Yet another group worked on the project level. This division enabled the participants to understand the methodology on different levels. It also allowed participants to choose the group that was most relevant for their work.

3 Beware of workshop enthusiasm!

Main message: Good workshops are great, but the ultimate success of a workshop only shows when the methods and tools are used, and when the participants initiate changes in the conflict situation.

We should not overestimate what can be achieved by a workshop. During a good workshop, the atmosphere is often very nice and people leave feeling empowered and enthusiastic. However, this feeling can quickly be counteracted by the workload of an intensive job in a war zone that makes it very difficult to implement the learning of the workshop. As facilitators we need to be aware of this. We can be happy when we have supported a good process, yet should not be too flattered by a good workshop evaluation with a lot of praise for our great facilitation. On the contrary, we must raise people's awareness that the process must be continued and that a workshop does not tell us anything about the utilization of the results and the final impact of the learning. Therefore, we should develop – with the involved stakeholders – a clear and realistic implementation and follow-up plan with concrete tasks assigned to the involved stakeholders.

4 Beyond workshops: The limits of workshops and the need for additional methods

Main message: Participatory workshops are crucial but not sufficient. Other social science research methods, especially field research, are needed to assess the effects of interventions.

Can we do every important PCIA step during workshops? In my experience, the answer to this question is clearly a “no”. Participatory workshops are crucial but not sufficient. Other social science research methods are needed.

During a PCIA assessment in Sri Lanka that was focussing on planning new programmes in conflict-affected areas of the island, a pre-study on what had already been implemented by other actors in the same area was a necessary step for clarifying the potential programme of the organisation. The results of the study were used during the workshop to assess the relevance of the organisation's programme in Sri Lanka (compare the relevance assessment methodology in my initial contribution¹) as well as the cooperation potential with other actors.

Another example comes from the project level: During a PCIA assessment of the work of local NGOs in Nepal, it was necessary to visit the remote conflict-affected areas in the country to talk with the communities in order to assess the effects of different local organisations' conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding work. The picture that many of the local NGOs presented of the effects of their work contrasted starkly with the actual achievements on the ground. For example, during a workshop many local NGOs had claimed to have had tremendous impact on peacebuilding in certain regions through linking development with peace work. Visiting the communities the picture was mixed: on the one hand, a lot of empowerment work had been done; on the other, when people in remote rural areas that were squeezed between the conflict parties wanted to use their skills to claim their rights in front of the security forces, they were simply arrested or killed as they had no access to justice. Thus a lot of the empowering peace work did actually more harm than good. In those communities, though, that had active youth who were standing up for their rights in combination with access to regional and national human rights networks, the peace work had a lot of positive effects, in some cases even much more so than envisaged by the organisations prior to the

¹ Paffenholz 2005 at www.berghof-handbook.net/articles/PCIA_addTP.pdf.

interventions. In short, these intensive and often exhausting field trips enabled the PCIA assessment team to match the workshop with the reality on the ground. During the workshop, all the findings of the field trips could be used for working on the improvement of the programmes.

5 PCIA is political: Tool-based approaches versus politics

Main message: PCIA is political. Therefore, single PCIA processes always have to be aware of the macro situation in the country.

I agree with Kenneth Bush that PCIA is fundamentally political. While PCIA, the way I understand it, can be used on the macro level of politics as well as on the project level of interventions in conflict-affected areas, we must understand that all the different levels of interventions are peace-building blocks in a country. As my colleagues from the UK point out in their article, there is a need to link PCIA on all levels with a macro peace strategy. I would like to give some evidence for this remark: When the Nepali king took over power in the beginning of February 2005, leading to a further escalation of the conflict and increased human rights violations, time was not ripe for conducting PCIA on the project level, as many organisations could not even work in the most conflict-affected areas. Time was riper for macro-political interventions. For example: through joint analysis of the situation and pressure from human right groups in Nepal and the North, the international donor community started to increase pressure on the king and the “government” of Nepal.

Another example comes from Sri Lanka: An analysis of the effects of different donors’ policies on the conflict situation and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka came to the conclusion that a lot of donors and agencies are supporting conflict-sensitive work; however, especially the big donors – such as the development banks – do not implement such approaches and thereby counteract much of the conflict-sensitive work. In response, the British Department for International Development (DfID) seconded a peacebuilding advisor to the Asian Development Bank in order to influence the policy of the bank. This illustrates that PCIA can go and must go beyond the project level of intervention.

Still, PCIA can be also political on the project level: A PCIA assessment of development projects in Nepal came to the conclusion that one of the conflicting parties, the Maoists, did not allow certain development projects for ideological reasons (for example rural banking projects as they perceive these projects to not support the poorest of the poor). Another assessment of human rights work in Nepal after the royal coup in February 2005 showed that it was not timely to continue to conduct human rights training, but necessary to engage in protection programmes for human rights activists. The decision to stop these projects or adapt their implementation to the political context is a fundamentally political issue beyond any technicality.

6 Assessing the impact on the macro level of the peace process is difficult

Main message: Assessing the impact on the overall peace process is important; however, more modesty and realistic goals are needed.

To assess impact of an intervention on the macro process is a very difficult task, because it is difficult to isolate the exact contribution an intervention has made from other contributions if something changes in the peace process (the ‘attribution gap’). Moreover, methods for solid impact

assessment can be costly. Interestingly, however, the PCIA debate – and even more so the debate on the evaluation of peace interventions – is very much focussing on assessing impact on the macro peace process. Actors are trying hard to find the link between, let's say, a peace journalism training project and changes in the macro peace process. While I believe that it is necessary that intervening actors ask themselves before the start of an intervention how it will affect “peace writ large”, does every intervention truly have to reach the top? Does that not depend on the specific goals of an intervention? Is it not one of the main problems that peace actors too often set too ambitious goals? If the goals are set as high as achieving peace writ large, it is only fair to look for impacts of this intervention on peace writ large. Would it not be better to focus on relevance for peacebuilding first (“Are we doing the right thing?”) and, second, look for a link between this relevance and the immediate outcomes of our interventions rather than to always aim high?

The example of peace journalism training can demonstrate this: Often, goals are formulated like this: “Making a contribution to peacebuilding in country X through peace journalism”. Stated more modestly, it could read as follows: “Changing stereotypes in conflict reporting to contribute to more accurate reporting”. Before starting the project, it would be necessary to assess the relevance of such an intervention for peacebuilding, that is, to ask: “Is such an intervention appropriate for peacebuilding in the country at this very moment?” In the current situation in Nepal, for example, where journalists are constantly threatened by the conflict parties and put in jail if they report certain issues, it is not the right time for such a project. Other measures, such as protection projects for journalists and political pressure towards the conflict parties, are more appropriate.

7 The use of indicators

Main messages: Organisations are able to develop their own monitoring indicators. Measuring indicators needs to be part of the project's activities and has to be planned from the very beginning of an intervention.

All three articles look into the role of indicators. I would therefore like to give an example from the field: During a workshop in Kenya, the participants of a peace NGO working in different African countries developed result-chains with indicators that led from the activities of the interventions towards the peacebuilding need they wanted to address with their peacebuilding training projects (compare the methodological background in my initial article). To find existing indicators was difficult, as peace research up to now does not provide us with a set of standard indicators as other fields do. The participants therefore developed their own indicators. This was not too difficult since they know the situation best and understand what kinds of indicators can be realistically used to monitor the intervention's effects. During this process, participants realised that – if they wanted to seriously assess the outcomes of the training programme on the peace and conflict situation – they had to change the original project design by adding additional activities such as follow-up workshops and surveys to assess the utilization of trained skills by the trainees at a later stage. If they wanted to assess the impact the training programme would finally have on the macro peace process, more additional activities would have to be added. They identified, for example, “changed behaviour and attitude of the population” as an important indicator. To measure this indicator, methods such as public opinion polls on changing attitudes and behaviours of the population would be needed. It was then decided to only go up to the outcome level of the result-chain, as assessing the actual impact was too costly for a single NGO (compare figure 4 in my initial contribution).

For this reason, it is worth the effort that different actors and agencies engage in joint impact assessments.