

ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF COMPLEX CRISES

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Increasing resilience, strengthening governance, creating peaceful change – a companion paper to *RESPONDING TO COMPLEX CRISES*

Introduction

Mercy Corps' distinctive strategy in complex crises¹ is to simultaneously deliver timely, effective humanitarian action and address the causes of the crisis². The Resilience, Governance and Partnerships, and Conflict Management teams support Mercy Corps' responses to the world's most difficult problems, crafting innovative, evidence-based program strategies that have the potential to turn crisis to opportunity.

Why focus on conflict management, resilience, and governance in complex crisis interventions?

The 'new normal' - conflict frames most of Mercy Corps' humanitarian work

Violent conflict is a dominant characteristic of the complex crises that are part of the 'new normal' for Mercy Corps.³ In Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Central Africa Republic, and Ukraine, violent conflict and the resulting loss of lives and displacement shapes the crisis and frames the humanitarian response. Moreover, in these environments, the nature of violent conflict has shifted, with the rise in violent extremism in many of these contexts.

Complex crises are the major drivers of suffering

The majority of the world's poorest people now live in conflict-affected areas,⁴ and increasingly these complex crises are the major drivers of extreme poverty and suffering in the world. The one quarter of the world's population who live in fragile and conflict-affected situations are more than twice as likely to be under-nourished as those in other developing countries, more than three times as likely to be unable to send their children to school, twice as likely to see their children die before age five⁵, and more than twice as likely to lack clean water.

Complex crises are different from natural disasters, and require different approaches

Complex crises are often protracted, lasting years. While traditional emergency responses follow a linear

Mercy Corps' strategy for impact in complex crises

To create transformational change in complex crises we must:

- » Deliver timely, effective humanitarian action at relevant scale.
- » Act on the root causes of complex crises where possible.
- » Influence key actors to create system wide change.

¹ A complex crisis is "A situation with complex social, political and economic origins which involves the breakdown of state structures, the disputed legitimacy of host authorities, the abuse of human rights and possibly armed conflict, that creates humanitarian needs. The term is generally used to differentiate humanitarian needs arising from conflict and instability from those that arise from natural disasters." (ALNAP) ALNAP and many others use the term 'Complex Political Emergency' (CPE). Mercy Corps prefers the term 'Complex Crisis' which is used synonymously in this document.

² While there are some complex crises that are not conflict-related (e.g., Haiti and poor governance) and there is potential for future complex crises to be primarily due to other factors (inflation and currency devaluation; climate, etc), the vast majority of our current complex crises are conflict related, exacerbated and instigated by poor governance and poverty (i.e. fragility). Mercy Corps' strategy assumes that in future complex crises we must be prepared to address conflict as a primary cause.

³ Not just for Mercy Corps. Conflict affected, post-conflict, or fragile countries receive over half of US foreign assistance. http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnady739.pdf

⁴ Conflict-affected refers to active and post-conflict situations. In complex crises due to conflict, we are referring to active conflict.

⁵ Half of all child deaths occur in conflict-affected areas (The 2011 [World Development Report on Conflict, Security and Development](#))

continuum of relief, followed by recovery and then development programming (which often includes peacebuilding and governance), the complex crises that we face today demand a more flexible approach. Often in complex crises, the distinction between the emergency/relief phase and the recovery and development phases becomes blurred, if not invisible. Modern conflicts ebb and flow, sparking new humanitarian crises that can persist for years as violence, displacement, and suffering becomes an everyday reality. Waiting until the emergency phase ends, in these situations, may compound and extend the crisis, turning it into a protracted one. In these instances therefore, we cannot wait until the relief phase is over to begin addressing the cause of the crisis, which in most of these cases stem from conflict and fragility. To be relevant and effective in these environments we must be prepared to layer, sequence, and integrate relief, recovery, and developmental programming,⁶ which incorporate needed responses to manage violence, repair the relationships and improve governance—all essential for recovery and resilience. We must look for windows of opportunity to address basic needs and root causes of the crises simultaneously even in the most acute complex crises.

Complex crises threaten neighboring areas with spillover effects. Unlike most natural disasters, conflict-related crises do not remain in a discrete geographic location; violence spreads both within and between states as we have seen in Syria, Iraq, the Sahel and South Sudan. Therefore, we cannot focus our attention solely to the areas of humanitarian crisis, but need to concurrently support neighboring areas to remain resilient.

Violent conflict erodes social capital and cohesion. Social capital and social cohesion help communities cope and adapt to shocks—in the case of complex crises, the shock is violent conflict. Complex crises attack these very factors that help communities rebound. When relationships within and between communities, and linkages between communities and government deteriorate, people do not have the networks and access to assets that help them survive in the midst of a crisis. This degradation of relationships impedes and prolongs our emergency responses, even when responding to a natural disaster in the midst of a conflict. For example, the drought in the Horn of Africa was more severe for Somalis than Kenyans and Ethiopians because they had fewer of the networks and assets that help them cope in the midst of a crisis.

Resilience exists at a community level even in the most chaotic and violent environments

Even in the most extreme environments, there are opportunities for action. For example, local truces and agreements build confidence between conflicting groups. In Iraq in 2014, mediators affiliated with the Mercy Corps-established Iraqi Center for Negotiation Skills and Conflict Management negotiated an agreement with the Provincial Councils of Najaf and Karbala to allow settlement of IDPs and improve humanitarian access.⁷ In South Sudan, also in 2014, after months of conflict, local Nuer chiefs brokered a peace deal with Dinka chiefs from neighboring state, Jonglie, to stimulate trade. Through these local peace agreements, communities witness cooperation, and benefit from it, opportunities to repair relationships and enhance resilience exist.

Addressing root causes of complex crises is an area where Mercy Corps can and should lead **Mercy Corps' 'fit for purpose' in fragile states depends on having relevant impact in these crises.** If we fail to systematically understand and address the root causes of violent conflict driving these crises we will not have the transformative impact we seek. While we alleviate suffering by addressing the effects, we must simultaneously seek ways to address the root causes of conflict, which are largely tied to grievances and weak/poor governance.

Mercy Corps is a recognized leader in integrated conflict-related programming globally. More than our colleague agencies, we take an integrated approach to address the root causes of conflict and fragility—recognizing that conflict affects economic, political and social systems, and disruptions in those systems create conflict. As a result, Mercy Corps' conflict management approach states that in addition to peacefully managing conflict, we must also address the drivers of conflict—whether weak governance, scarce resources, and lack of economic and political opportunities—and rebuild fragile relationships in order to prevent violent conflict from reoccurring.

- **Donors are looking for new approaches:** While there are still some hurdles to clear in using humanitarian

⁶ Instead of viewing recovery as a continuum, Mercy Corps applies adaptive management to adjust to fluid and rapidly changing circumstances. Building resilience in neighboring areas, delivering immediate aid to affected communities, and exploiting opportunities to gain ground as they appear. This approach requires excellent, and constantly updated context and conflict analysis, and the nimbleness to adjust and push towards recovery.

⁷ ['Hungry for Peace: positives and pitfalls of local truces and ceasefires in Syria'](#). In this paper, the authors examine how local truces alleviate suffering and increase humanitarian access.

funding for addressing the root causes of conflict and fragility and vice versa, many donors recognize that these silos are preventing effective action. We recently participated in a pre-event for the World Humanitarian Summit where the conversation focused on “Exploring the Nexus of Peacebuilding and Humanitarian Action.” Recently, OFDA was more explicit that in South Sudan, where addressing the conflict was central to the humanitarian response. To influence donors, Mercy Corps published a policy brief on Iraq arguing the importance of combining approaches.⁸

- ***While in many ways Mercy Corps has led in creative responses to complex crises, our colleague agencies are not standing still on this issue.*** World Vision is currently working on publishing their ‘Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts’ macro level analysis tool as a resource for other agencies at the same time as they are producing an internal ‘Good Enough Conflict Analysis for Rapid Response’ tool. CRS is currently re-positioning themselves with ‘Governance, Gender, and Peace-building’ as their strategic focus for emergencies. IRC led a panel discussion on this topic at USIP in early June. *If we do not leverage our thought leadership and strong implementation of resilience, governance and conflict management programs to complex crises, other agencies will quickly catch up, and eventually eclipse our trailblazing work.*

Beyond humanitarian aid - act on the root causes of complex crises

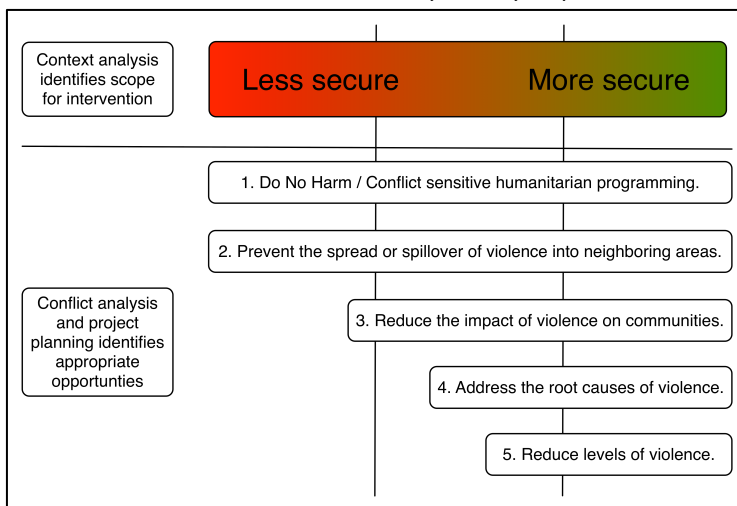
Mercy Corps has a long history of working both ‘in’ conflict (e.g., addressing the effects of conflict through humanitarian programming) and ‘on’ conflict (e.g., addressing the root causes of violence). In violent conflict Mercy Corps faces the challenge of positioning ourselves to deliver effective assistance while not endangering our staff or stakeholders. The principle of humanitarian neutrality has traditionally led aid agencies to distance themselves from anything that might be interpreted as ‘peacebuilding’, or cause combatants to see aid workers as, in any way, interested in the dynamics of conflict. Reconciling the humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence, and impartiality with the imperative to address causes of conflict and fragility has been a constant source of productive tension within the agency for decades. For example, in Sri Lanka, Mercy Corps responded to the tsunami in conflict-affected areas, and quickly recognized we not only needed to respond to the natural disaster, but also to address conflict issues, which were slowing down the response in Eastern Sri Lanka compared to other parts of the country. However, by our working on the conflict, the Tamil Tigers and the Government accused Mercy Corps of aiding the other side, and we continuously had to navigate that tension throughout our work there. In the end, we both helped both communities recover from the tsunami, while reducing conflict and preventing future humanitarian crises.⁹

As the humanitarian community strives to reinvent itself in the face of questions about its relevance in confronting complex crises, Mercy Corps’ unique mix of principled pragmatism and innovative bold action positions us well to contribute to best practice in the most challenging fragile environments. Therefore, we propose to more explicitly integrate conflict management, governance and resilience goals into traditional humanitarian programs to make programming more effective, and move beyond amelioration (i.e., band-aid) approaches to addressing root causes. Below we describe a number of ways as an agency we can integrate conflict management approaches into our humanitarian responses.

⁸ Mercy Corps’ 2015 paper ‘Beyond Humanitarian Relief’ focuses on this issue in Iraq, concluding that ‘Given the complex nature of the crisis in Iraq, humanitarian interventions alone will not build stability.’ And that ‘Even during the most violent episodes in Iraq’s recent history, Mercy Corps has seen examples of Iraqi civil society making positive inroads in improving local, district and provincial level governance in Iraq.’

⁹ Maintaining our ability to deliver aid to those suffering is of the utmost importance. During FY16, we will continue developing strategies for maintaining impartiality and neutrality while addressing root causes of complex crises.

This diagram illustrates how these different approaches apply depending on the levels of security.¹⁰ Typically environments with little latitude for conflict management and governance programming are characterized by high levels of violence, a highly politicized environment in which humanitarian neutrality is very important to NGO security, and low levels of understanding and operationalization of combatant humanitarian obligations.¹¹ In those cases, we may limit activities or limit publicity of activities where we bring people together directly across conflict lines. As violence subsides, or if conflict is largely at the state level and tensions are not high between communities, there are more opportunities to bring people together. Additionally, environments with greater potential for address root causes might be characterized by a consensus by all parties that humanitarian actors are not parties to the conflict, and some trust in their role as ‘honest broker’. In every case specific conflict analysis will be required to determine the type of activities that are appropriate.



1. Do No Harm – conflict-sensitive humanitarian programming.

Every program that is operating in conflict has the potential to have positive or negative effects on the dynamic. At a minimum we must understand the dynamics of the conflict and the actors well enough to be confident that we are not pouring fuel on the fire. Mercy Corps recommends our field teams use the Local Capacities for Peace ‘Do No Harm’ tool to facilitate community-level conflict analysis and program quality as well as understanding the impact of interventions on the context (i.e. project planning). It is not however, a macro conflict analysis tool, and does not replace a thorough conflict assessment.

2. Prevent the spread or spillover of violence into neighboring areas.

Complex crises often threaten to spill over into adjacent regions or countries. Flows of displaced people and combatants themselves can have destabilizing effects. Regrettably many donors begin to scale down conflict management, governance, development, and resilience programming in areas adjoining violent conflict and the complex crises.¹² We need to advocate for maintaining or increasing investment in these neighboring areas to reduce risk of spill-over. Investing in these areas by improving local governance, basic service provision and social cohesion may protect communities from being targets of violence, while helping the absorptive and adaptive capacities of host governments and communities take in displaced people can prevent violence from spreading. (For example, see text box on Jordan)

3. Reduce the impact of violence on communities.

Conflict and the related insecurity results in reduced trade due to limited movement, diminished ability to access school and hospitals, and decreased ability to produce or access food.¹³ Strengthening community-level resilience to the negative effects of violent conflict helps people better ride out the shocks of

¹⁰ We also recognize that there are interventions from the household, community, inter-community, national and regional levels that could be placed across these categories. For example, you could address root causes of violence at the community level by improving access to resources as well as working with government to address grievances.

¹¹ Principally knowledge of, and adherence to, obligations under the Geneva Conventions.

¹² For example, the USAID Iraq mission is currently on schedule to, in effect, shutter its doors in September 2015, maintaining only a bare-bones presence to respond to technical assistance requests made and paid for by the Iraqi government. In the absence of dedicated funding streams for conflict mitigation, reconciliation, civil society and good governance, efforts to stabilize Iraq through military interventions and humanitarian assistance alone will likely fall flat.

¹³ Humanitarian truces are an example of using existing humanitarian operations to bring belligerent factions together with communities to negotiate local ceasefires. When dealing with armed actors with weak command and control systems, local negotiations have proved effective ways to reduce violence and build trust and communication.

complex crises. Central to our approach is helping communities maintain the social ties that help people recover from shocks and stresses. For example, in Somalia, we found that inter-clan ties were correlated with increased household assets during the drought.¹⁴ During a conflict-related emergency in Maluku, we worked with both Christian and Muslim organizations to deliver aid, help rebuild trust between people, and demonstrate the power of cooperation.¹⁵ These approaches could be applied in complex crises.

4. Address the root causes of violence.

To reduce the risk that cycles of conflict and violence continue, we often aim to address the main drivers of conflict—scarce resources, unresponsiveness of government, grievances, and corruption. For example, as part of our analysis for a recent OFDA proposal in South Sudan, we identified lack of water for livestock as both a humanitarian problem and a driver of conflict. In our program design, we

looked to address the humanitarian and conflict needs simultaneously by identifying locations for new water points for livestock that would reduce competition between different tribes.

5. Do More Good—Reduce levels of violence.

Interrupting cycles of violence and reducing the amount and severity of violence diminishes both the direct casualties and the indirect effects of violence and insecurity. Humanitarian truces, like the ones negotiated in Iraq, which are described above, are good examples of this in practice. Local ceasefires negotiated for humanitarian purposes can simultaneously meet the goals of reducing conflict intensity and building trust between factions.

Example: Preventing spill-over in Jordan

A key aspect of our strategy in Jordan is to maintain stability. When tensions began to rise between local residents and Syrian refugees in Jordan in 2013, Mercy Corps' humanitarian programs in Mafraq and Ramtha began to integrate conflict management activities into their humanitarian programs. These included negotiation training for community and refugee leaders, a host-refugee community forum, and grants for Jordanians and Syrians to work together to develop joint community projects to address sources of local instability and resource challenges. Projects included upgrading water systems and medical facilities to relieve pressure on shared resources.

A major difference between conflict management and governance approaches, which typically fall under development programming, and humanitarian programming is in timescales. For example, much of our funding in Jordan, Lebanon and CAR is for a year or less, yet we are expected to significantly impact factors that typically take a longer period of time to change, such as social cohesion, trust and violence. In designing these initiatives, we need to recognize that there will likely be multiple cycles of funding given the length of these crises, and design milestones and targets appropriately (i.e., think through what would be achievable in 3 years, and adjust down accordingly). While resilience is a long-term strategy, there are concrete steps we can begin to take, during earlier phases of a complex crisis, to move towards that vision.

Implementing Mercy Corps' strategy to address root causes of complex crises

As Mercy Corps adapts to the 'new normal' of large, complex crises, the Conflict Management, Resilience, and Governance and Partnership Teams need to be involved more than ever in supporting country teams in these environments. We recognize the primacy of humanitarian need and security considerations, and highlight opportunities for systemic change even in the world's toughest places. Key areas of future investment include:

a) Viewing complex crises with a systems lens

Fragile nations are characterized by weak governance, instability, and poverty, with climate and demographic issues often exacerbating these problems. These same places are frequently either in the midst of a complex crisis or vulnerable to one. It is the interconnection between these factors that makes it so difficult to move from crisis to opportunity. We need to be taking a systems approach even earlier in our interventions to help get these

¹⁴ Mercy Corps (2014) What Matters For Resilience.

¹⁵ [Maluku \(see Mercy Corps' case study\)](#)



situations “unstuck”. In addition this lens helps us to foresee where potential disruptions in economic, political and social systems may create future conflict and potentially spark future crises. Adapting our analytic tools to help teams both understand the systemic causes of complex crises and appropriate responses is critical in moving forward. Additionally, to prevent the onset of a complex crises in already fragile environments, we need to look at how these tools can provide an “early warning” so we can take preventive action.

b) Develop longer-term strategy at the onset of complex crisis intervention

Mercy Corps’ first priority in any complex crisis is saving lives, but to be effective we must rapidly create a longer-term vision for building resilience, improving governance, and addressing conflict. Our plan to help people and communities absorb, adapt and transform in the face of reoccurring crises (or prevent future crises) needs to be developed alongside, and integrated with, our humanitarian strategy. This will help us better align shorter-term funding with overall strategy and work towards this systemic vision.

c) Influencing donors and policy makers through thoughtful research and advocacy

The international community is looking for new approaches to manage complex crises. As an agency, we have the thinking and the information to shape practice. Building on our current successes, we need to continue to present our learning, thinking and approaches in a more systematic and deliberate way. The PA team is currently focused on three priority policy changes around complex crises: (1) increasing investments in conflict prevention, mitigation/peacebuilding and protection; (2) normalizing multi-year, multi-sector assistance programs that address the structural drivers of violence and fragility; and (3) improving targeting tools and M&E frameworks to support better youth programming. A steady and progressively evolving evidence-base will be needed to win these policy campaigns.



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