International Conflict Sensitivity Partner Event Report

7-8 October 2019, Chateau de Bossey, Switzerland

Introduction

"These two days felt like a retreat!"

The PeaceNexus Foundation (PN) hosted its first International Conflict Sensitivity (CS) Partner Event to facilitate sharing among, and support for, CS champions within each of its current international partner organisations. It convened one to two key staff from Christian Aid Ireland (CAI), Conservation International (CI), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Oxfam and ZOA. The event was borne out of recognition that the opportunities and challenges for CS integration resonated across partners and that peer exchange between them would add value beyond the bilateral PN-partner relationships.

The event objectives were to:

- Facilitate a peer exchange around concrete experiences of how to support CS uptake across an international organisation;
- Support collective problem-solving on a few specific areas that several participants are grappling with and develop new ideas to address them.

The agenda was designed to enable reflection and exchange on both the organisational change dimensions of integrating CS or taking forward peacebuilding work, and the individual experiences of leading such processes. This approach recognises that staff responsible for leading the CS agenda tend to play multiple roles, combining internal advisory functions with direct management responsibilities, at different levels, and may end up challenging core ways of working within their institution. The starting point for PN in organising the workshop was to recognise this challenge and the personal commitment it takes to play such a role, which can at times feel overwhelming. Indeed, in pre-workshop feedback, participants expressed a desire for the event to:

- Provide a space for self-reflection;
- Help them feel less alone and more motivated;
- Provide specific examples of how to deal with challenges and take up opportunities;
- Share lessons learned from different CS and peacebuilding approaches with each other.

Participants also agreed to share honestly, under Chatham House Rule, in order to facilitate helpful discussions while still respecting their organisational integrity. A "Treasure Chest" of materials was compiled from CS tools, guidance notes, training materials and internal policies that participants were able to share, to further support peer exchange and spark ideas (see in background documents).

This report provides a synthesis of some of the key issues discussed, citing some of the examples and practical tips that emerged. It is meant to give participants a record of some of the key points emerging from discussions, and a document that can be shared with others in their organisations.

I. WHAT DOES A CONFLICT-SENSITIVE ORGANISATION LOOK LIKE?

"A CS organisation is like an octopus – it deploys multiple tentacles internally and externally to understand its context, adapt and learn."

Each partner organisation is on its own journey towards becoming a more conflict-sensitive organisation and/or to integrate peacebuilding work into its portfolio. Visioning what they are ultimately working towards, participants identified certain characteristics that would define a truly conflict-sensitive organisation.

A CS organisation is…

…able to reflect, adapt and learn

Like an octopus, a CS organisation engages in different feedback loops, does continuous monitoring, adapts practices and learns from them. It looks outwards to understand its impacts on the context; and inwards to question its own hidden biases and ensure its accountability. It has flexible organisational systems and processes to respond and adapt to the context, and build capacity along the way.

… willing to think about power and to challenge the status quo, including in its own relations to partners

A CS organisation thinks carefully about its own positioning in a context, and how its choice of partners and ways of working with them plays into larger power dynamics. It considers the question of who is empowered, to avoid cementing patterns of exclusion or recreating the same divisions. A CS organisation uses its own power to influence practices of peers and donors, and is ready to push back when donor agendas contradict key values and principles.

…willing to use a conflict lens as part of strategic decision-making

A CS organisation takes its commitment beyond individual projects to programmatic and strategic decision-making. It considers *how* to engage, but also when *not* to engage, in a particular context or on particular issues, based on its mandate and goals. It is ready to embrace a sort of "CS activism" that looks for linkages between projects and bigger programmatic or strategic peace and conflict impact. And it is willing to have frank discussions about the choices it makes and their implications.

…committed to grapple with the everyday challenges and dilemmas of working in conflict

A CS organisation acknowledges that working in conflict contexts entails risks and dilemmas. It is ready to open internal spaces to discuss these and look for constructive ways forward. It tries out different tools to ensure CS take-up across the organisation, considering the organisational culture and ways of working.

II.   WHO ARE WE?

To help get a sense of the different partner organisations – and how they engage on the CS and/or peacebuilding agenda – participants portrayed their organisations using toys (see the pictures below). This provided the foundation for deeper discussions about where each organisation currently is in relation to the CS and/or peacebuilding agenda, where it wants to go, and the role of the participants in supporting, leading or advising on different steps in that journey.

Oxfam
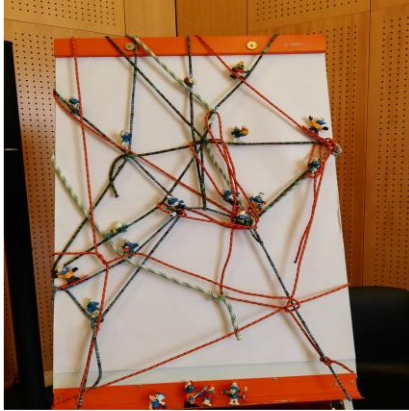
IOM

ZOA

Conservation International

Christian Aid

III.   WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OUR SUCCESSES?

Participants shared many examples of breakthroughs or successes on the CS and peacebuilding agenda in their organisations. The reasons for why this happened were also shared, to get a sense of what type of actions, pressures or motivations supported change in each case.

"Infiltrating" the organisational narrative and strategy

Using the vocabulary of CS or peacebuilding within an organisation, and making the case for how it is relevant to programming issues has proven useful to get leadership attention for CS concepts and to promote understanding for why CS is relevant to the organisations' work. Inserting CS and/or peacebuilding language into organisational strategies (e.g. as a cross-cutting principle) has contributed to opening up space for internal dialogue, securing internal resources (including staff time) to carry forward the agenda, and providing an incentive for the organisation to monitor progress and sustain its

investment over time. The support from PN has been used by some partners specifically to raise the profile of the agenda to senior leadership, for example through meetings with a CEO or Head of operations to update them on progress and get their direct views regarding how to deepen CS uptake in their organisation.

Linking up with other cross-cutting initiatives that have momentum

Some partners made progress on the CS and peacebuilding agenda by integrating it with ongoing initiatives that had a lot of energy and resources behind them (e.g. on stakeholder engagement, the Core Humanitarian Standard, gender or protection). Others cross-referenced those dimensions within their CS efforts. Making connections between cross-cutting agendas, while recognising their particular rationale and added value, can help reduce internal "competition" and enable practical uptake, particularly for country programmes. Practical approaches have included developing integrated internal guidance, induction and training programmes, and holding regular meetings to exchange between staff leading different cross-cutting agendas.

Creating opportunities for critical reflection

Reviews of particular programmes have proven helpful to spark reflection. The legitimacy of such a "critical voice" function is important – an external person, somebody from headquarters, a partner, or somebody in a field programme may all be appropriate, depending on the specific team and organisational dynamics. Some partners found that getting trusted outsiders to scrutinise their work was more successful and accepted (particularly by leadership) than doing the same with internal colleagues. Other partners have successfully used external crises or programming failures – some 'pain' that shone a spotlight onto the issues – to motivate people to think and work more conflict sensitively.

Targeting specific policies or sectors

Developing guidance and integrating CS into sector-specific projects, e.g. on water, is a good opportunity to obtain resources for CS integration, build capacity and motivation for staff and generate practical experiences that can be shared among peers and across the organisation.

Other areas of work present inherent conflict-sensitivity risks, such as the Preventing / Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) agenda. Whereas some organisations refuse all P/CVE funding, others try to change the narrative from within. One partner successfully framed their organisational PVE policy to focus on peace rather than security, thereby reducing the CS risks without calling it CS. The policy is accompanied by check-lists for decision-making on whether or under which conditions to accept PVE funding. This change came about because of close collaboration between policy and programming teams, and reference to the ways in which similar organisations handle the issue, to create a peer pressure effect.

Putting in place strategic resources

Appointing conflict advisers in key country offices – particularly where country managers saw this as useful – has proven effective in supporting the practical implementation of the agenda. Some country managers even used this opportunity to generate more funding for their work. Having an "institutional home" for CS was also seen as important, i.e. being clear about who will lead on taking forward the

agenda and monitoring progress. Full-time positions are not always possible or the most effective option. Progress has also been achieved by making CS responsibilities more explicit as part of job descriptions for particular functions, considering what is realistic and relevant for them to take on (e.g. for quality advisors in regional offices, programme design and fundraising staff, or country directors and heads of programmes).

Meeting colleagues where they are – and generating demand for CS/PB support

Several partners have successfully created buy-in from colleagues – especially in the field – and their advice and support on CS and peacebuilding is now requested regularly. This success was due to a combination of factors, including: awareness-raising over a long time; pressure from some donors to integrate the CS agenda; crisis situations sparking a need to reflect and adapt; building long-term supportive relationships, especially with country colleagues, that enable honest communication and reflection; having colleagues championing the agenda locally; and having a trusted outsider (from outside the organisation or from another part of the organisation, including via the PeaceNexus' support) to facilitate and accompany the process.

Undertaking and institutionalising a context analysis with a country team lead was a useful starting point for an accompanied process. In one case, the energy for starting such a process came from the need to improve risk strategies; while in another, the team adopted a CS approach as a way to proactively manage heavy donor compliance requirements.

Another lesson was to get a range of colleagues involved and excited about the CS and peacebuilding agenda – broadening the focus beyond the "usual suspects" who have an explicit mandate for this work, for example holding short sessions on CS tailored to their needs and interests.

## Allowing for sufficient time – and getting the timing right

A process of CS uptake relies on building relationships and understanding of CS over time – key to the successes of many partners. In addition, a long-term investment can suddenly deliver an opportune moment that needs to be exploited, e.g. the start of a new project, or a new staff member in a pivotal position who is interested in CS issues.

IV. EXPLORING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES: WHAT HOLDS BACK OUR ORGANISATIONS ON CS? WHERE ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES?

A short role play exercise provided an opportunity to "step into the shoes" of colleagues with other roles[1] to talk about their fears, hopes and ideas in relation to the CS agenda. This generated some useful insights about why those with different responsibilities and mandates in different parts of the organisation may support this agenda or show resistance. Some key take-aways from the exercise included:

---

[1] Gender adviser, field project officer, executive director, country manager, M&E adviser
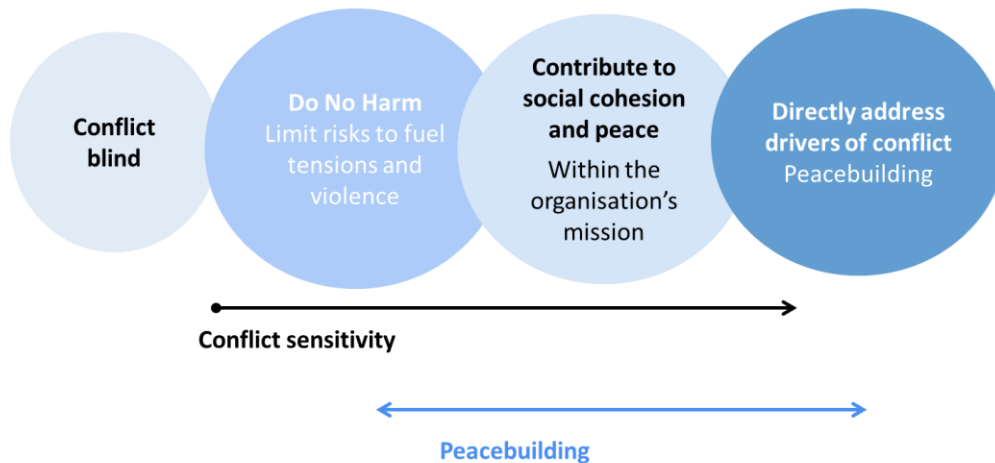
- **The concrete value of listening to the concerns of others and taking these into account in** the internal CS and peacebuilding work: understanding people's positions, interests and needs helps to move beyond defensive positioning and find solutions that address their genuine needs. One group defined this dynamic as a "Conflict Sensitivity Iceberg", where their conversation started with the bulk of the iceberg being about fears and concerns, and hopes and opportunities only being revealed progressively in the course of the exchange. For them, this illustrated the value of entering into an open dialogue with colleagues who sit in different parts of the organisation.
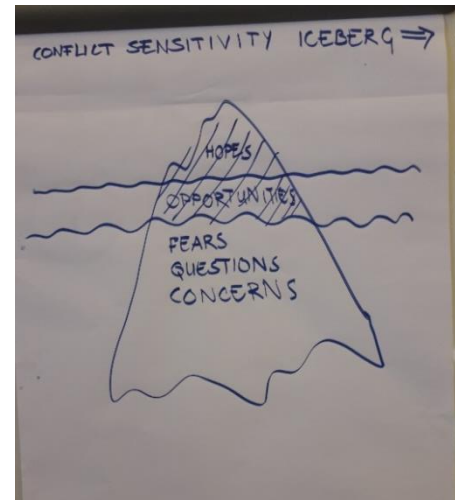
- **Some common fears or concerns** that came up were that CS may:
  - be an additional "burden", especially if it is unfunded;
  - compete with other mainstreaming agendas;
  - put people off because of the words used (e.g. conflict, peace).
- **Some opportunities and options** to address concerns and progress the agenda included**:**
  - **Clarify the vision/ambition for CS** (see the CS "Spectrum of ambition" below) and how far the organisation, or specific departments and programmes within it, wants to go in terms of CS and/or peacebuilding.
  - **Capitalise on what teams are already doing, and use practical ideas to make small changes**, e.g. capturing intuitive CS practices that teams may already be doing; using stories to influence behaviours and practices; making CS funding available that teams can apply for; drawing on what is already in place for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and include new options such as WhatsApp messages and Skype transcripts.

At a deeper level, the discussions also highlighted the hesitance of aid organisations to question their internal biases, assumptions and attitudes that could hamper progress on the CS agenda. These include that sometimes headquarters staff assume country staff are not doing what they should instead of trusting them; and that it can be difficult and painful for people across the organisation to **talk about failure** and admit when it was them, not the context, that caused the problem.

SPECTRUM OF AMBITION: WHERE ARE WE?

Conflict blind

Do No Harm
Limit risks to fuel tensions and violence

Contribute to social cohesion and peace
Within the organisation's mission

Directly address drivers of conflict
Peacebuilding

Conflict sensitivity

Peacebuilding

V.   ZOOMING IN ON SPECIFIC CHANGE AND PRACTICE AREAS

Drawing on pre-workshop input and discussions on the day, four questions were used to analyse and share experiences on particular and interconnected areas that are important for CS uptake.

How to ensure leadership buy-in and use of CS at the strategic level?

The common challenge here is how to get leadership's attention for CS when there are so many other competing priorities; but also how to make sure CS is not seen as just a "technical" issue and is instead integrated more strategically.

Many proposals were made for how this could be addressed, looking at:

- **"Hooks"** that provide entry points for strategic CS conversations, such as the Humanitarian, Development, Peacebuilding Nexus (HDPN) process; external CS/other audits; the Core Humanitarian Standard certification process; the UN Sustaining Peace agenda; and supportive donors. The hooks could also be issues with high attention such as climate change or migration.
- **External pressures**, e.g. from donors requesting compliance with this agenda.
- **Positive competition and peer pressure**, "comparative shaming", showing how other organisations / senior leadership were positively engaging on the CS / Peacebuilding agenda; sending managers to speak on the topic at external events; or creating networks of country managers or a cross-section of staff around this agenda so they generate internal pressure.
- **Planting CS seeds in the organisational strategy and policies**, integrating CS language in some key documents that will help provide incentives for action, and resources for the agenda.

This type of change at strategic level can have a large impact but involves challenging existing ways of working. It requires a lot of work and energy, may be slow to show results, and is not an explicit part of job descriptions! CS champions therefore need to actively look for ways to stay inspired, including via internal and external alliances and peer support.

How do we communicate about the CS / peacebuilding agenda?

An overarching challenge that was highlighted throughout the event was that CS is not a very user-friendly concept: it is often difficult to communicate what it is concretely about. However, when people have been able to show how integrating CS has made a tangible difference to the success of their work, this played a big part in overcoming some internal resistance.

Practical ideas were shared for how to frame and promote CS within internal and external communications, which included:

- **Tailoring** the words and examples to the audience and context to identify people's key interests and demonstrate how **CS is relevant** to their particular areas of work, e.g. in programming (throughout the programme cycle), HR or fundraising;
- Presenting CS as a **strategic tool** at different levels, to make sure CS goes beyond being a "buzzword" and becomes a lens or kaleidoscope instead through which people can envision a different way of working;
- Making clear the links and differences between CS and **risk management;**
- Showing the **added value of CS** in practice - using it as a tool for M&E and communicating results and stories in writing, video and/or in person. Finding space to communicate good and bad practice to stimulate reflection; and make visible the efforts and results of particular teams to higher levels in the organisation;

- Drawing on and reaching out to **peers** who do the same work to reinforce each other's messages and generate pressure for internal change.

How do we support CS / peacebuilding in practice?

All of the participants engage actively in creating demand and providing practical support for CS. They have developed training materials, check lists, tip sheets, guidance documents and policies to take this forward. They play a variety of roles from direct technical advice, practical accompaniment, training,

facilitating, fundraising and quality assurance. They shared many examples and reflections on what approaches have worked for them and what some of the main issues are that need to be considered.

A few of the highlights from this discussion were:

- Make the **guidance and tools** targeted, short, branded with the organisational logo and easily accessible (e.g. an online library or platform)
- Create opportunities to **listen, discuss and learn**, e.g. running a network of CS champions who regularly exchange and present to each other (in webinars) on topics they voted on. This has created a space for sharing lessons with an element of peer pressure to participate.
- Create or support **simple feedback loops** that help capture case studies and learning to illustrate how CS improves the quality and impact of the work
- Considering people's **personal motivations** for getting involved (or not) with this agenda, e.g. assigning a "CS adviser" function to country / regional colleagues can give them increased status and career progression opportunities
- **Spread the knowledge** of CS and peacebuilding to other technical advisers and team members to scale up the network of those able to take forward the agenda and to create more capacity (beyond CS leads) for responding to increased demand for CS support from colleagues; or connect teams and partners to external experts who could support them.
- **Innovate with funding opportunities**, e.g. teams could apply to become "CS flagship countries" with associated funding; or new donors with a particular interest in CS could be approached with a CS-enhanced proposal; using the space and momentum provided by dedicated funding for peacebuilding, to help other programme staff in a particular country consider conflict and peace issues in their work .

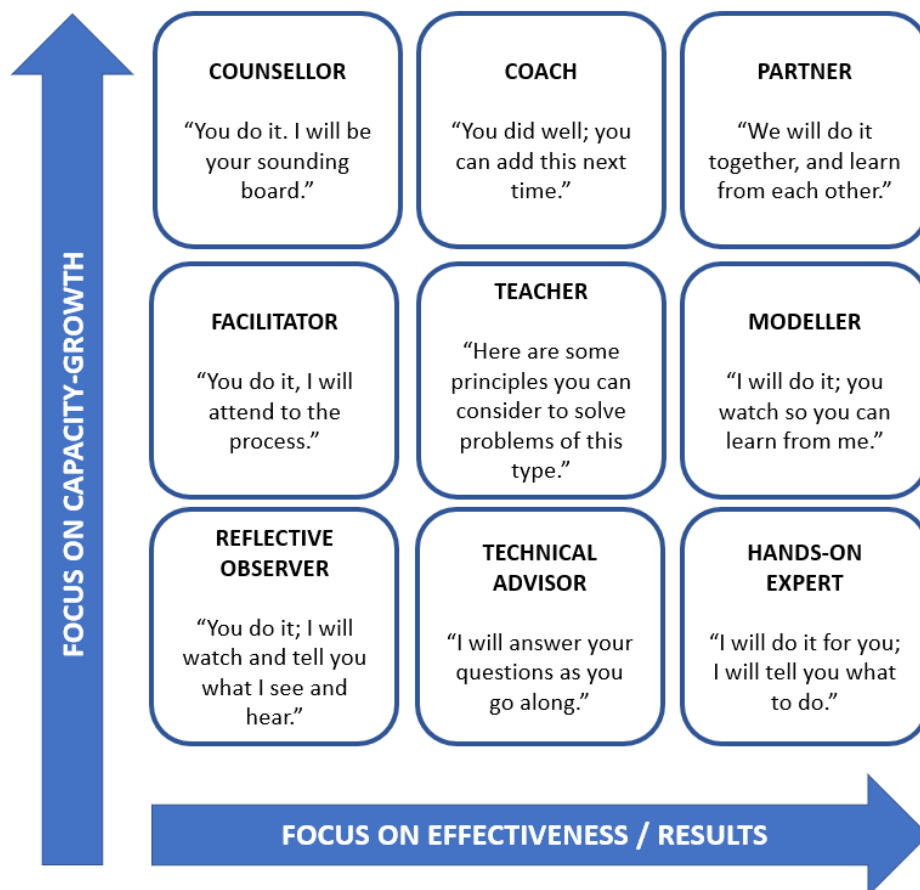## How do we support CS capacities and behaviour?
This issue is at the core of the overall CS uptake. Key points included:

- **Knowing how change happens and how decisions are made** in each organisation helps to navigate change processes and find the right entry points
- **Building internal and external alliances** – identifying people who are implicitly interested or positive about working on those issues and building a CS network of allies (internal or external)
- **Widening the CS support base** by making it part of people's job descriptions, providing induction on CS, getting more staff on board with why CS helps them in their work and supporting them to convene sessions on this with country teams
- **Trying to make CS more concrete** by sharing best practices, producing communications materials and creative tools like a CS Board Game, or hosting conflict-focused events with talks by external experts
- **Identifying people's motivations for change**, e.g. WASH messaging has learned that appealing to health considerations was less effective than appealing to status considerations. For example, "Wash your hands or you will get ill" is less effective than: "Girls don't like boys with dirty hands".

- **Developing clearer and simpler "marketing messages" for CS**, e.g. through developing story boards or working with communication professionals who know the sector and can help convey key messages without oversimplifying. This could include using concepts that are more familiar or easier to understand for the organisation, such as "social cohesion".

VI.   REFLECTING ON ADVISORY ROLES AND LIVE CHALLENGES

The second morning was dedicated to the different aspects of participants' individual roles within their organisations. The first exercise worked through the range of advisory roles that internal CS leads may come to play (see the diagram[2] below) and provided an opportunity for reflecting on questions such as: their default style, the role they are asked to play most / least often, and in which box they think they *should* be spending more of their time to progress the agenda and spread internal capacity.
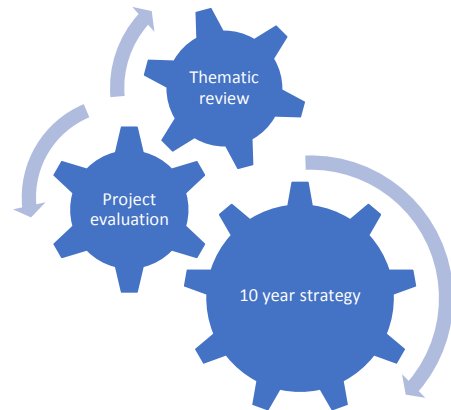
FOCUS ON CAPACITY-GROWTH			
	COUNSELLOR "You do it. I will be your sounding board."	**COACH** "You did well; you can add this next time."	**PARTNER** "We will do it together, and learn from each other."
	FACILITATOR "You do it, I will attend to the process."	**TEACHER** "Here are some principles you can consider to solve problems of this type."	**MODELLER** "I will do it; you watch so you can learn from me."
	REFLECTIVE OBSERVER "You do it; I will watch and tell you what I see and hear."	**TECHNICAL ADVISOR** "I will answer your questions as you go along."	**HANDS-ON EXPERT** "I will do it for you; I will tell you what to do."

FOCUS ON EFFECTIVENESS / RESULTS

---

[2] "Choosing a Consulting Role" by Douglas Champion, Davie Kiel, and Jean McLendon.

A key conclusion was that boxes towards the top/right ends require a certain degree of internal maturity, and that for organisations and programmes just starting to engage on CS, there were much higher demands on CS champions to play direct hands-on roles. As knowledge and experience build up, it becomes easier for internal champions to play more light-touch mentoring/coaching types of roles.

This was followed by a peer coaching session (see the methodology in background documents) where each person talked through a particular challenge they currently deal with in their work and received advice from other participants.

CS as part of organisational change

The focus then shifted back to the bigger organisational picture with an exercise to map out – in the form of 'cogs' in a system – what the most important processes were that represent opportunities for CS or peacebuilding integration in each partner organisation. The maps portrayed the timeframe of each element as well, so as to facilitate thinking about both the iterative nature of change processes and the different speeds at which things happen (e.g. developing a 10-year strategic plan vs a 3-year country strategy vs a one-off project evaluation). A **"cogs map"** was produced for each organisation, which enabled a snap shot of the big picture opportunities that existed to take forward the CS / Peacebuilding agenda.
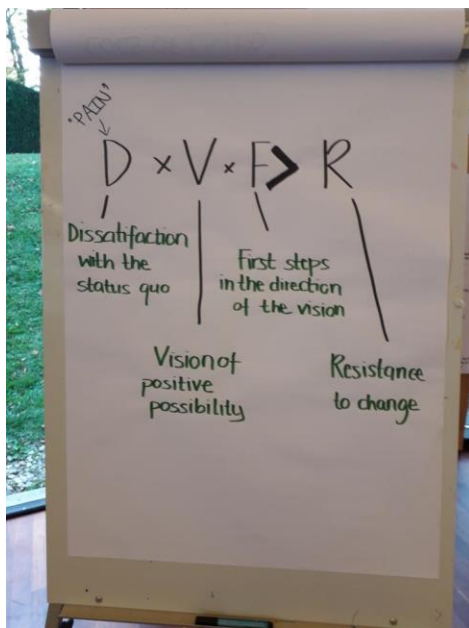
It was important to acknowledge at this stage that getting to the point where the entire organisation was conflict-sensitive is the vision, but also an immense task. Those championing the agenda have certain pathways available to support this change, but are not solely responsible for achieving it. In this sense, it is important to **define what "success" looks like**, and to aim for realistic *steps within a given timeframe* so as to set expectations at the right level, prevent risks of feeling overwhelmed and maintain motivation and momentum.

To help identify where to focus internal efforts, the **change energy equation** was introduced as a way to identify which processes on the cogs map seem to offer the most energy for change at the moment.

A few general observations about this exercise included:

- Often the change energy for CS or peacebuilding work is highest at the **field level or within specific projects**, because that is where the "dissatisfaction" or "pain" may be most acute, with staff facing daily conflict-related challenges and dilemmas and sometimes feeling that higher management expect them to handle these without much support;
- The **partnership with PN** can provide change energy by getting the attention of management on the agenda, securing a dedicated process with some resources attached to it, and strengthening accountability regarding the organisation's progress on the agenda;
- For some organisations it is important to think strategically at the **"regional" layer** of the organisation, between the headquarters and the field, where there can be an appetite to engage on these issues and natural entry points (e.g. through quality assurance and fundraising support staff);
- Even a **restructuring process** could yield opportunities, e.g. to demonstrate that it is possible to get funding for CS and peacebuilding work and position the organisation strategically on those issues, as part of a larger strategic rethink;
- For organisations who have already made significant progress on this agenda, the challenge is to **maintain the energy** and make sure that one-off changes feed into the more strategic level, into institutional processes, and into deepening and broadening practice across the organisation.

A few closing reflections

- "Focussing on evidence creation will help to make CS live"
- "Focussing more on strategic process than individual projects"
- "Being less tactical and more strategic, focussing on building alliances"
- "Trust the process – things emerge"
- "Defining more what success looks like"
- "Being conscious of when we gain energy and where do we lose it"
- "Being more vocal on the role you want to play and the value you want to add"
- "Focussing more on internal communication and being vocal about the things we have achieved. Showing that things are in place and that there is a safety net."
- "Focussing less on country demands and directing them more to existing resources that were produced by us"
- "Helping people see CS not just as another thing on their to-do list, but as an opportunity to exchange on dilemma with colleagues, find solutions and achieve more in their work"

Materials related to the event have been compiled in a Dropbox folder accessible for all participants. It includes documents from each organisation, as well as:

- Background papers on advisory roles and how to work with them;
- Instructions for the peer-coaching exercise (DenkModell);
- Links to additional resources mentioned across different sessions.

List of participants

Organisation	Name	Position
ZOA	Corita Corbijn	Peacebuilding Sector Specialist
	David Betge	Land Rights Sector Specialist
Christian Aid	Claire Devlin	Programme Advisor - From Violence to Peace (Christian Aid Ireland)
Oxfam	Annabel Morrissey	Conflict and Fragility Lead – Programme Strategy and Impact (Oxfam GB)
	Joanna Trevor	Global Programme Manager – Sustainable water and sanitation in fragile contexts
	Maria van Ruiten	Conflict Transformation Lead (Oxfam Novib)
Conservation International	Janet Edmond	Senior Director for Peace and Development
	Lydia Cardona	Manager, Conflict Resolution and Peace
International Organisation for Migration	Jason Aplon	Post Conflict / DDR Advisor – Transition and Recovery Division
PeaceNexus Foundation	Catriona Gourlay	Executive Director
	Carole Frampton de Tscharner	Organisational Development Lead
	Anina Uhlig	Programme Officer

Facilitators: Héloïse Heyer (PeaceNexus Conflict Sensitivity Lead) and Hesta Groenewald (PeaceNexus Associate Consultant)