

2025



Western Balkans Call

Support Area 1 - Conflict Sensitivity (CS)

Concept note & Frequently Asked Questions

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WHY WE SUPPORT CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

What is conflict sensitivity....

Conflict sensitivity is typically defined as the ability of an organisation to:

- Understand the context in which it operates
- Understand the interactions between its actions and the context
- Act upon this understanding to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts on conflict*

The notion of conflict sensitivity emerged in the early 2000s as a way to prevent humanitarian actors from inadvertently causing harm through their programmes – as unfortunately happened in Rwanda when genocidaires used aid to consolidate their power. After emerging in the humanitarian sector, the concept then spread and has been applied across a range of other sectors and in a variety contexts, including in societies that have moved away from violent conflict but remain affected by underlying lines of tension and polarisation.

It is based on the idea that any organisation operating in a divided environment has an impact on the context. Beyond intended goals, there can be unintended effects – both negative and positive – on conflict dynamics. Contrary to some misconceptions, working in a conflict sensitive manner is not about avoiding conflict. In fact, it is about acknowledging that conflict is an inherent part of human and social interactions. The challenge is how to manage conflict peacefully and constructively rather than resort to divisiveness and violence. Conflict sensitivity helps recognise the risks, dilemmas and opportunities that arise in complex contexts and make informed choices on how to respond.

... and why it is relevant in the Western Balkans?

We believe that Western Balkans civil society organisations often face conflict sensitivity challenges. Indeed, without being very attentive to the dynamics of tensions and division, it is unfortunately easy to accidentally contribute to entrenching ethnic and political divides. Actors that are not conflict sensitive can end up:

- Reinforcing existing prejudices between different groups or being perceived as reinforcing them
- Endorsing one-sided/denialist narratives about the region's past
- Entrenching existing power relationships (i.e. maintaining the status quo)
- Perpetuating the exclusion (e.g. from project design and activities) of marginalized individuals and groups
- Having internal conflict in their own team, particularly when tensions get high in the external context

*In this concept note, the word "conflict" is used having the following definition in mind. "Conflict is the pursuit of contrary or seemingly incompatible interests –whether between individuals, groups or countries. Conflict exists in all societies at all times and need not necessarily be negative or destructive". *DFID, Preventing Violent Conflict, 2008*

At the same time, Western Balkans civil society organisations also have huge untapped potential for contributing to greater social cohesion, regardless of whether they work on reconciliation directly, or have a different mandate focused, for example, on environmental protection, journalism, democratic engagement, education or cultural heritage. Actors who are able to constructively engage communities across ethnic lines despite growing polarization, can advance social cohesion in their communities through their work in pursuit of other priority goals. In essence, being conflict sensitive refers to HOW you work in a given context, not WHAT you do. For example, in the past years, environmental protection has emerged as a significant unifying force in diverse communities. Media organisations that report in an accurate manner, shy away from inflammatory coverage and showcase stories of positive collaboration also have a positive effect on social cohesion. Youth organisations that engage young people across divides and enable them to interact positively and meaningfully similarly contribute to a more solid social fabric. We aim to help organisations avoid unintentionally reinforcing divisions and maximise their contributions to greater social cohesion through conflict sensitivity support.

WHAT OUR CONFLICT SENSITIVITY SUPPORT CAN HELP WITH

The integration of conflict sensitivity principles can be relevant both for organisations that focus on reconciliation and peacebuilding and for organisations which don't focus on these themes but want to contribute to greater social cohesion through their existing mission, for example the protection of environment. In brief, conflict sensitivity ambitions can be located on different points of the spectrum below, and an organisation can even have different levels of ambition depending on each programme or strategic objective.



Our support is geared towards:

- Helping an organisation adapt how it works so as to minimise the risks of its actions doing harm. For example, a nature protection organisation may decide to focus on conflict sensitivity to ensure its mobilization efforts are more sustainable and strengthen the social fabric of communities marked by violent inter-ethnic conflict.
- Helping enable an organisation to boost its contribution to social cohesion within its current mandate. For example, a grant-making organisation may decide to review its selection procedures to ensure its portfolio is balanced and will support actors able to make a positive change in their community.
- Helping an organisation scale up the portion of their work directly focused on social cohesion. For example, an organisation previously focused on activism or education of one part of the local community may want to develop social cohesion goals and adapt their approaches accordingly.

What you can do with our support

Our support always entails giving organisations the space to figure out their ambition on the spectrum above and think through HOW they work in an environment that has underlying lines of tension.

With greater conflict sensitivity, an organisation can ...	Our support can help an organisation...
<p>Increase their ability to make sense of a complex context and determine where to position their organisation within that context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop conflict-sensitive strategies that outline how the organisation will adapt to the context and with what level of ambition regarding social cohesion • Develop their grant-making in a way that ensures inclusive outreach, solid criteria and due diligence and that leads to the selection of a diverse and impactful portfolio of actors • Support development of new programmes and partnerships to support direct work for social cohesion
<p>Build greater trust and more effective collaboration with stakeholders across ethnic and ideological lines, including at the regional level.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify with which actors they could work more closely or more effectively, and develop new strategies of collaboration • Update their programming, outreach and feedback mechanisms to reach a more inclusive group of participants in divided communities
<p>Consult better those they serve and thereby operate with higher legitimacy and higher quality projects.</p>	
<p>Put in place internal practices that support conflict sensitivity inside the team and with participants.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop plans to increase the diversity of governing bodies • Facilitate conversations that help diverse teams a) debrief safely about incidents in their environment that they may see differently and b) agree on joint values and behaviours to mitigate tensions • Identify resources that they will need to be more conflict sensitive (for example, taking care of language barriers or perception issues around certain locations) and then develop corresponding funding strategies
<p>Put in place more inclusive and effective outreach and communication strategies.</p>	<p>Develop a well-thought-out external communication approach given the risks of instrumentalization and polarization in their environment.</p>

Regardless of the shape that our support takes, there is one common denominator that will be required if you choose to embark on this process. Namely, while the process will look outward at the external environment shaping your work, it will also look inward and put you in a position of reflecting about your own ambitions, blind spots and areas of improvement regarding conflict sensitivity.

PIPS' experience with PeaceNexus has been a refreshing, insightful and intensive journey — challenging us in all the right ways. Their support has truly been helpful for us, offering a partner-like experience where they are always there when needed. Working with them is putting us on track to enhance our organisational capacity in ways we deeply appreciate.”

Leonora Kryeziu, Executive Director, Prishtina Institute for Political Studies PIPS

OUR PRINCIPLES WHEN SUPPORTING CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

PN recognizes that working on conflict sensitivity is demanding since it requires organisations to carefully examine HOW they work and to adapt accordingly. Therefore, we approach all CS partnerships in line with the following **core principles**:

- **Recognise the risks and dilemmas inherent to working in conflict-affected contexts.** Conflict sensitivity is not about conflict avoidance, so we work to ensure that conflict sensitivity enables work in highly polarised contexts. Being conflict sensitive does not mean avoiding, simplifying or putting under the carpet all conflict-related/contested issues in pursuit of future collective goals. Conflict sensitivity requires taking into account the real risks and questions that come with working in polarized communities where past grievances are not addressed and finding ways to work which do not perpetuate them. This, for example, means that if your organisation stumbles upon an issue that is very divisive internally, you will be able to count on us to find ways to discuss it safely and constructively.
- **Starting from where our partners are at:** Our support approach is tailored to our partners' starting point on the journey with us, and includes recognising what helpful practices may already be in place, where key challenges lie, and their vision of success and level of ambition. All these elements will be specific to each actor in view of their specific role and positioning in the context. Through our support we do not seek to influence the degree to which organisations will set out to adopt goals related to social cohesion. We only summarise the ambition that emerges from the participatory conversations we facilitate in your organisation and then apply a pragmatic and gradual approach to improving systems and practices for conflict sensitivity and greater contributions to social cohesion, based on your own goals.
- **Using an organisational development approach to conflict sensitivity:** our intention is to provide our partners with longer-term support that integrates organisational change tools and approaches. This means offering support that takes into account both the links between operations and their context (programmatic level) as well as the organisational policies, systems and processes shaping these operations (organisational level). In practice, this means the support doesn't only focus on what and how you do things in your work, but also how you are set up and function internally, which is a conflict sensitive element of its own.
- **Honesty and confidentiality:** We commit to always acting with strict confidentiality and maintaining open and transparent communication throughout our partnership. Since we see our role as one of a “critical friend”, we may at times hold you accountable to your objectives and share frank feedback. On your side, you should feel free to approach us at any time with your own feedback about our accompaniment

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are the eligibility and selection criteria that you use to select conflict sensitivity partners?

Please consult the Call Overview to find this information.

We are not very familiar with conflict sensitivity. Where can we find more information about the concept?

If you want to learn more about conflict sensitivity, you may find the following resources useful:

- [Conflict sensitivity topic guide](#) (GSDRC)
- [How to guide to conflict sensitivity](#) (conflict sensitivity consortium)
- [Online course on Conflict sensitivity and conservation \(developed by PeaceNexus in collaboration with the IUCN Academy\).](#)
- [CS conservation manual](#) (IISD)

In addition, if you face any difficulties to understand the requirements of our expression of interest form, feel free to approach our Western Balkans team (vladica.jovanovic@peacenexus.org) preferably by 30th January.

We work in post-conflict societies, where decades have passed since the last violent conflict. Can conflict sensitivity still apply to us?

Yes. As mentioned in this concept note, conflict sensitivity is not limited to environments where there are physical outbreaks of violence. It applies to all contexts where underlying lines of tension are present. For example, if you notice strong trends to polarisation in your context (or even hate speech) and want to make sure that your work does not unintentionally reinforce division and prejudice between different groups, conflict sensitivity can be a very relevant support area for you.

We are new to the concept of conflict sensitivity but in our practice, we apply this approach and consider that we are navigating well. How would conflict sensitivity support benefit us concretely?


Even if you already apply elements of conflict sensitivity intuitively, structured support helps make these practices consistent across your organisation, not just something you do intuitively or in isolated moments. Conflict sensitivity can also help you identify blind spots that are hard to see from the inside and support you in being intentional about the level of ambition and effort you want to invest. Rather than prescribing what you “should” do, conflict sensitivity offers tools and perspectives you can choose from, so your organisation can decide what makes sense for its context and capacity.

Can we apply if we do not want to do peacebuilding work?

Yes, our conflict sensitivity support is suitable for organisations that aim to better understand and adapt to their context and minimise negative effects of their work. We believe that different actors have different roles to play and can contribute to social cohesion through work on their primary mission, and our conflict sensitivity support does not mean that an organisation should start doing peacebuilding work. However, you do need to have an interest in contributing to greater social cohesion through your existing work, even indirectly, for us to be able to consider your expression of interest.

 **We are not sure what is our exact level of ambition when it comes to conflict sensitivity. How should we describe our vision in the application form?**

Our support will always start with a participatory assessment, precisely to help you define your objectives in terms of conflict sensitivity integration. In that sense it is fine if you are not yet clear on the exact vision of what you want to achieve with our support and how. What is most important for us is that you explain the concrete challenges you face in relation to conflict sensitivity and why you currently think it might be beneficial.

 **We are the country/regional office of an international organisation or network. Can we apply?**

As long as you are working in the Western Balkans, you can apply. If this is your case, we will need to understand the broader organisational set-up that you are a part of, and the voice of your headquarters or central/international office would also need to feature in the selection process. In case you are selected, while the partnership will focus on your needs and will have to be fully driven by your country/regional team, your headquarter or central office would also need to be involved at key points, to ensure sufficient alignment and sustainability of the whole process.

In case you are interested in CS support but are ineligible under this call, please kindly get in touch with our Conflict Sensitivity Lead & International Partnerships Manager (heloise.heyer@peacenexus.org).

Please note that conflict sensitivity calls for proposals targeted at international and West/Central Africa based environmental organisations will open around 19.12.2025.