

Do No Harm: How Aid Can Contribute to Peace and War

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Mogadishu 1994



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Somalia - civil war since 1991

- Widespread famine and death - large international humanitarian presence
- United States-led UN presence fails spectacularly, precipitating US withdrawal
- Greatly weakened UN remains.
- Reveals greatly dysfunctional system of international aid.

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As Acting UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Mogadishu in 1994, I quickly realized that...

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...Much of the aid provided by the international community *exacerbated* the existing conflict by escalating the level of competition for the resources brought in by the UN and NGO community.

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In my dismay I went to see Mary B. Anderson. For years she had listened to aid workers asking:

"How can we provide assistance in a conflict setting without exacerbating the conflict?"

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In collaboration with NGOs, and the donor community, she had designed and tested a project she called Do No Harm

What is Do No Harm?

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DNH seeks to reduce the negative effects of aid, which are largely inadvertent, Inevitable, and unintentional. It states that:

"When you operate in a conflict area, you become a part of the conflict"

"Every choice we make has consequences, intended or not"

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DNH helps us better understand the:

- Relationships among the groups in the conflict area
- Consequences of your project decision

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Then it asks:

What is the relationship between a project and the conflict context?

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DNH further says that conflict is characterized by two fundamental building blocks it calls:

1. Connectors
2. Dividers

We must understand both in order to grasp the relationship between aid and conflict.

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1. Connectors:

- Connectors bring people together and reduce tension.
- Connectors usually include stuff we have in common: Trade, social structures, health, welfare and education, common religion, national icons, childhood bonds, etc.
- You want your project to strengthen the Connectors.

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2. Dividers:

- Dividers is stuff that people fight about. They include militias, violence, destruction of property, a failing economy, poverty, land use, discrimination, etc
- Not all Dividers are bad, but might represent healthy pluralism.
- Some Dividers can also be Connectors

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Projects typically influence Connectors and Dividers through something we call:

1. Resource Transfers
2. Implicit Ethical Messages

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1. Resource Transfers include:

- Theft (food stolen to feed fighters)
- Market effects (aid affects prices, wages)
- Distributional effects (aid reaches some groups, but not others)
- Substitution effects (free up local resources for the war effort)

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2. Implicit Ethical Messages include...

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...Hiring of armed guards, and...



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...Aid workers and impunity (staff using goods for private pleasure)



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Additional Implicit Messages

- Different value for different life (i.e. evacuation)
- Powerlessness (when field staff disclaim responsibility for impact of their aid program)
- Belligerence, tension, suspicion ("These people cannot be trusted." Reinforces the tension and warfare)
- Publicity (using publicity pictures demonstrating the victims and thus demonizing one party in a war)
- Disrespect and competition among agencies (signals that it is not necessary to cooperate)

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How do we use the information we collect on Connectors and Dividers to analyze the impact of the project on the surrounding conflict?

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...By estimating how the following elements either strengthen or weaken the Connectors or Dividers in the conflict context. We ask:

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Why (have we chosen to focus on this particular project?)

Where (is the project located?)

What (is the aim of the project?)

How (do we implement the project?)

For whom (who is our target group?)

By whom (who is our partners and employees?)

When (are we implementing the project?)

Do our answers indicate a weakening or strengthening of the Connectors and Dividers?

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Our answers help us to identify programming options.

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Finally, what does DNH say about programming options?

- To be useful, the analysis must lead to action.
- What limits our scope of action? Mandate, HQ, Donors
- It is always possible to make changes along the way
- Minor changes might have a great effect. Level of ambition: Do no harm? Do less harm? Do nothing?

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**For more information, please
go to:**

www.cdainc.com/dnh/www.

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