

# 4 Gathering Information

*“Your sense of what you need to know may shift over time and as you start gathering information.”*



## Introduction

This section provides guidance on data collection techniques, including choices about what information to gather and whom to approach. It introduces a number of specific considerations for different phases of conflict.

### 4.1 How to determine what you need to know

Considering the purpose of the analysis, the availability of existing analyses performed by others, the level or boundaries of the analysis and any limitations imposed by time or budget, **what further information do you need?** Some/all team members will bring some understanding of the conflict already; what additional information will be helpful? How might the team be limited or even biased in its information or perspectives—and how can these be addressed through more information gathering? Are there significant gaps in the information already gathered in the preparatory phase?

Team members should discuss among themselves the quality and completeness of the information they already have. Imagine the following possible exchanges among team members:

*We have a lot of information from the capital. We have talked with intellectuals, government officials, the international community and journalists, but we don't know anything about the views in the countryside or refugee camps.*

*We did a whole series of interviews in villages in the province, but in every case, we were only able to talk with male elders, who viewed themselves as spokespersons for the communities. How can we get the perspectives of women and youth?*

*Our organisation has been working in North Province, but the conflict extends into East Province. It could look really different there—we had better send a team to talk with people in the East.*

*Everywhere we go, we hear about land conflicts, but we have not spoken yet with the national Land Commission or the Parliamentary Committee on Land and Natural Resources.*

Your sense of what you need to know may shift over time and as you start gathering information. As you look at existing analyses and start talking with people, new questions will arise, leading you to seek out specific individuals or groups to fill in the knowledge gaps—always with reference to the purpose of the analysis and remaining open to being surprised by what you hear.

It is not unusual for teams to enter a situation with one or more preconceived ideas about the nature of the conflict or about the role of a particular group. It will be important to work against such tendencies, which will be helped by maintaining a diverse team, in terms of gender, age and other important factors.

### Example 4:

#### Focus groups to complete conflict analysis in Burundi

An organisation was researching and writing a case study in Burundi, including an analysis of the nature of conflicts there. After interviewing a wide range of people in the capital, Bujumbura, the research team decided that they needed additional information from other locations in the country. They therefore organised a series of focus group discussions in provincial towns and in camps for internally displaced people. Many of the views expressed in these settings were quite different from those articulated in the capital.

**Caution: avoid information overload!** You can overwhelm yourselves with enormous amounts of information—with no capacity to process it all. Start with modest and focused efforts at gathering information, and then assess what you have and what more you need, before seeking more.

## 4.2 Methods of data/information collection

The way you collect information will depend on what information you are trying to find and where you can find it. By far the most common method is a series of interviews with a range of people. However, this is not the only approach. In fact, no single method of data collection can generate information sufficient for understanding a particular conflict. An objective conflict analysis relies on **triangulation**, using several methods to better derive credible information and data. In other words, if you have found the same information in an analysis produced by another organisation, through several interviews, and from a government document, you might have sufficient evidence to trust that it is valid.

Which methods you choose will depend on the information needed, the time and resources available, and the skills of the analysis team. Some methods of data collection include:

- **Desk studies:** Existing analyses, academic reports, media archives, histories, programme reports, NGO reports, etc.
- **Key informant interviews** of a range of well-informed people representing different perspectives and constituencies. This is discussed in full below.
- **'Person-on-the-street'** interviews with members of the general public (including those outside the capital city or major urban areas, if at all possible). This is similar to key informant interviews, but the people are chosen at random in public.
- **Analysis workshop.** In some circumstances, it is possible to organise a one- or two-day workshop in which the participants engage in a participatory conflict analysis process. This approach is particularly useful for generating dialogue among different kinds of people regarding the nature and causes of conflict. However, this can be risky if the groups are not prepared to talk with one another—in which case separate parallel workshops might work. *This approach requires skilled facilitation.*
- **Focus groups** with either cross-cutting groups or groups that bring a certain perspective (Internally Displaced People (IDPs), diaspora, opposition leaders, women, youth, religious leaders, etc.). Focus groups allow for interaction and discussion, often resulting in a deeper understanding, even where there is disagreement among participants. A lot has been written on how to organise and conduct focus groups. *This approach also requires skilled facilitation.*
- **Public opinion surveys.** In some circumstances, it will be important to determine the extent to which an attitude or perception is shared in the public—and the main tool for



For guidance on multi-stakeholder workshops, see the MSP Manual. Another resource is Michelle Garred and others, *Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts: Local Perspectives on Large-Scale Conflict* (World Vision, June 2015).



See, for instance, the 'Harvard Humanitarian Initiative' and 'Peacebuildingdata.org'

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doing that is a social science or public opinion survey. This process takes specific skills and funding, and is therefore rarely used for conflict analysis. However, it may be used to track trends and changes in a monitoring system, if the resources are available.

- **Mainstream and social media monitoring:** Monitoring the mainstream media content (such as newspapers, national radio and television) can offer valuable insights into different interpretations of the context or ongoing events, which can feed into the broader analysis. This requires an awareness of media bias and ownership. In the environment of limited media freedoms, social media monitoring is particularly useful in getting a better understanding of people's individual perceptions and responses.
- **Crowdsourcing** using mobile phone and internet technologies is emerging as a useful tool for generating information to be analysed along with other data sets. Various groups are experimenting with gathering information from cell phone users and social media. This may prove more useful for early warning of crises rather than for conflict analysis. It is also important to be aware of how the data is affected by which population groups are using and accessing these technologies.



See more on crowdsourcing in **Francesco Mancini** (ed.), *New Technology and the Prevention of Violence and Conflict* (New York: International Peace Institute, April 2013).

### BOX 8: CONFLICT SENSITIVITY/DO NO HARM CONSIDERATIONS — DATA COLLECTION:

- Are people in the area quite open and willing to talk about conflict—or is this a sensitive area, for political, cultural or security reasons?
- Are people able to talk, or will they feel constrained? Why?
- Are there specific issues or topics that are taboo or that should be approached in a specific way?
- Will you endanger people just by asking them questions?
- Will you endanger yourself or your team by asking questions?

## 4.3 Whom should you interview?

A range of people should be interviewed to get a complete story. People from relevant **sectors** at different levels (decision makers, middle-level leaders and local grassroots leaders) of society should be interviewed, including also people representative of the agencies doing development, relief or peacebuilding work, donor agencies supporting peacebuilding, governmental and intergovernmental agency representatives.

To the extent possible, the perspectives of people from the **key parties** in conflict should be included. This should also reflect the perspectives of those who are not immediately visible along the lines of the conflict, for example perspectives of women from all key parties. In any case, whom you interview will partly be determined by the **purpose and scope** of the analysis. Those interviewed for a focus on a particular local community would be entirely different from those interviewed for a country level analysis. Interviews in preparation for work in security sector reform would be different from those for peace education in elementary school curricula.

Consideration should be given to obtaining perspectives from:

1. Individuals of all relevant ages.
2. People in positions of authority, as well as those over whom authority is exercised.
3. Both women and men, as they may have different and complementary information and perspectives.

The following categories are suggestions; you will need to determine which groups are most important in a specific conflict context.

- **Civil society:** Local civil society organisations, religious leaders, traditional elders, and NGOs/INGOs, marginalised groups, powerful groups, women's groups, other international organisations.



The section 'Considering Stakeholder Groups' in the MSP Manual includes guidance on how to approach some of these groups.

- **Peace practitioners:** People who have organised peacebuilding programmes at different points in time in the area of interest, including both official and unofficial efforts. *It is important to find out what has already been tried, and with what results.*
- **Political leaders:** Representatives of all perspectives or tendencies, including those who were involved with any negotiation processes. In some contexts, it may also be relevant to approach specific factions of political parties, such as youth wings.
- **Civil service:** Local administration, national ministry representatives (e.g. foreign ministry, ministry of economic affairs, police, army, other ministries implicated with issues in conflict).
- **Business:** Local business leaders, business associations, chamber of commerce.
- **Media:** Radio, TV and print journalists, editors and other opinion-shapers and leaders relevant in the context, such as bloggers.
- **International community:** UN agencies and officials, bilateral embassies, donors, regional and other intergovernmental organisations.
- **Academia/educators:** Academics working on issues related to the conflict, teachers at the community level.
- **Hard to reach groups:** Groups that are difficult to reach, because they are physically isolated, constantly moving, hold themselves apart, or even represent criminal elements. Even if it is not possible to talk with them directly, it will be important to gather information on their perspectives. In some cases, this can be addressed by approaching CSOs or other stakeholders that are familiar with these groups due to their work in outreach, service delivery or humanitarian work.
- **Conflict-affected groups:** Groups that have been particularly affected by the violent conflict, such as Internally Displaced People (IDPs), victims of violence and their relatives (e.g. disappeared people, victims of gender-based violence).

In many conflict zones, the population is polarised and fragmented. Some groups may hold unpopular or politically incorrect views; while others are deliberately quiet and reluctant to speak. These may represent particular challenges for data collection, but should not be ignored as they may represent important viewpoints.

**The fundamental principle is that conflict analysts should invite diverse views from multiple stakeholders, with particular attention to the groups perceived to be in conflict.** Areas experiencing conflict involve diverse actors, both individuals and groups. All the groups and their perceptions must be mapped so that a full picture of reality is captured. In some cases, failing to include all groups might lead to conflicts, as the conflict analyst might be blamed for favouritism or bias.

### Example 5:

#### A cautionary tale from Colombia

A conflict analysis on the violence resulting from drug dealing, use and abuse, and social disintegration in Colombia resulted in increased violence. A reviewer of these analyses stated that violence ensued simply because the views of the drug trafficking gangs were not represented in the analysis. Engaging the drug traffickers (perceived as spoilers) would pose a challenge to any conflict analyst. In some settings, direct contact with certain groups is illegal. However, it is usually possible to find people who can speak on behalf of those groups or interpret their view.

To determine the individuals or groups from whom the data shall be collected, the analysis team could conduct an initial quick round of interviews to identify which groups and individuals should be interviewed, especially if they are new to the area. Another approach is to start with a short but diverse list and ask each interviewee whom else to talk with.

### BOX 9: CONFLICT SENSITIVITY/DO NO HARM CONSIDERATIONS – TARGET GROUPS:

- Are there groups or individuals with whom you must talk?
- Are there groups or individuals that you should not approach? Why?
- What might be the consequences of including/excluding specific groups?
- Will there be potential negative effects simply from approaching people to talk about conflict? How sensitive is the topic?

## 4.4 Categories and techniques for data collection

Many of the formal conflict analysis frameworks concentrate on long lists of questions for conflict analysis, demonstrating a certain anxiety about missing important factors. On the other hand, people living in a conflict area are usually painfully aware of the conflict and its causes, and lists of questions or factors are not particularly useful. Nevertheless, such lists can be helpful as a check, in case you have forgotten an important area of inquiry.

The categories provided below should be considered in that light. The conflict analysis team should use these categories as a way to **develop your own set of questions for data collection**. It may also be useful to try out your questions with a few relatively safe sources, and then refine them as needed. You may also find that it is important to focus on different questions for different people or groups.

The following **categories** provide a basis for discussing specific **questions to use in interviews**:

- Positive factors for peace/resolution/transformation. These are elements that can be strengthened or built upon in peace work. Prominent individuals or groups, traditional institutions, mechanisms for conflict resolution?
- Negative factors producing conflict/tension/barriers to peace. These should lead you to the identification of key drivers of conflict—which will need to be addressed.
- Key actors/stakeholder analysis: roles, sources of power/influence, interests, positions, etc.
- Identification of long-term structural issues and short-term operational issues/triggers (latent conflicts, emergent, already manifest but not yet violent, violent).
- Effects of the conflict on different people/groups. Are there differences across groups, genders, age, geographic areas?
- Information in any of the above categories by sector, but focused on elements that contribute to conflict:
  - » Historical factors
  - » Economic factors
  - » Social/relational factors
  - » Political factors
  - » Security factors
  - » Justice/human rights factors
  - » Particular questions oriented to specific groups, such as women, youth, minority groups, religious leaders, business people, etc.
  - » Specialised questions for examining various layers/levels of conflict (local to province/state to national to regional, and so on.)
  - » Specialised questions related to issues of particular interest (land issues, ethnicity, religious tensions, youth, gender, etc.)
  - » Identification of existing peace efforts: who is doing what? What have been the results (positive and negative)? Are there significant gaps, issues not addressed, groups not involved, etc.?

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See the appendix for more guidance on interview questions.

**Keep It Simple:** use open-ended questions. In most cases, it is not important to develop an elaborate set of questions for data collection. If people are willing and able to talk, all that is required are a few **open-ended questions** that invite people to share, such as:

*What do you see as the nature of conflicts in this area (community, province, country...)?*

*Where did these conflicts come from? What do you see as the causes of these issues?*

*[Follow-up question] You suggested that [X] is an important conflict issue? What aspects of that issue lead to conflict? [For instance: You said that poverty is an issue? In your view, how does poverty contribute to conflict?]*

*You have mentioned a number of causes of conflict? Do any of these stand out as more important than others? Why?*

*Among the issues and conflict factors that you mentioned, which might be more likely to lead to violence than others? How might that happen and in what timeframe?*

*What is your sense of how different groups view the conflict?*



Reflections on a human security methodology and analysis can be found on [www.storiesofhumansecurity.net](http://www.storiesofhumansecurity.net)

### Example 6:

#### Exploring human security perspectives

In preparing for the field research towards the GPPAC publication ‘Empowerment and Protection – Stories of Human Security’, local research teams in five widely different contexts prepared their interviews at community level and within their professional networks. Using open-ended questions, they sought to find responses to three key questions:

- What causes insecurity/ constitutes a threat to security (threat perceptions)
- What do people do to ensure they are protected against the perceived threats (patterns of coping with insecurities)
- Who are the preferred security providers that people rely upon in providing/ensuring their security (is it state, community, informal contacts with powerful individuals or entities, one’s own self, arms, private security companies or groups of “their own” people, based on different types of solidarities and identities)

The questions and interview techniques were adapted to the particular context and interview groups, who were given a brief on the purpose of the research and how the interview materials were going to be used.

Source Wall, Aulin and Vogelaar.

Open-ended questions give people a chance to talk about what is most important to them. They essentially invite people to share their perspective or story. On the other hand, **closed questions or leading questions** can feel like an interrogation, as they usually probe for a “yes” or “no” answer or a specific response. Note the difference between:

*What is your sense of how the violence erupted in your community?*  
[open-ended]

*Did government policies cause this problem?* [closed, yes/no answer]

*I am interested in what you said about ethnic groups living for many years in harmony. Tell me more about that...* [open-ended]

*Would you agree that the international community failed to put pressure on the government?*  
[leading, yes/no]

Interview questions should also seek out divergent perspectives and **variations** that may exist within some groups, and address potential gender gaps. That is, they should try to obtain the perspectives of groups within society (such as youth/elderly, women/men) which have not been specifically addressed but which may reveal an important dimension of the conflict and lead to enhanced possibilities for preventive action. An example of a probing question for revealing gender dimensions might be:

*You have talked about the increase of violence within your community (relevant area). Do you know if there is also an increase of violence in families within the community?*

### BOX 10: CONFLICT SENSITIVITY/DO NO HARM CONSIDERATIONS – INTERVIEWS:

- People are generally quite sensitive about conflicts in their communities or countries—and the way you ask questions can have an impact.
- Open-ended questions are safer, as they leave the initiative and control with the person responding—they can take the conversation in the direction they prefer. Follow-up questions can seek clarification or additional information.

## 4.5 Practical constraints in gender-sensitive conflict analysis

Following the working definition of gender used in Box 5, a gender analysis will look at issues of roles, rights, interests, resources (including access to resources) and power relations. A specific gender analysis **can expose inequalities** which are deeply rooted and which affect people at very personal levels, revealing additional information on other factors addressed in a conflict analysis. Examples include issues of inheritance rights for land; the personal safety of activists campaigning for rights and equality of different gender groups; and gender-based violence, including domestic violence.

Gathering gender-specific information on a conflict can be a **challenging** exercise. Conflict parties or those traditionally in power may feel that their position is or will be threatened, and may refuse to participate in information gathering; women human rights defenders and other gender groups may share information at great risk to their safety or not at all. Another example is the issue of domestic violence, often a key conflict contributor directly out of people's homes, which can reveal relevant information on relationships in society, and which has potential to transform into a key contributor to peace. Its intimate nature and close link to family structures require knowledge and skill to approach it as a topic.

Some of the **practical constraints** specific to a gender analysis can be addressed through principles highlighted in other parts of this guide: involving women's groups at the conflict analysis stage as a preparation for working with them as stakeholders or parties to the conflict; gathering information from "outsiders" to reveal gender-specific tensions in a conflict; composing a conflict analysis team based on the skills, motivation and positioning of team members to gather gender-specific information; and applying do no harm principles in particular when dealing with groups whose roles, rights and resources are affected by conflict in relation to their gender.

There are several examples of innovative practices which can help to overcome practical constraints in a gender analysis, and which can prepare the ground for actions to address the gender dimension of a conflict with different groups involved. A gender analysis is not an easy but an essential part of the conflict analysis process, and will contribute greatly to the potential of the conflict analysis to lead to sustainable steps toward a more peaceful society.



The section on Key Considerations and Challenges in the MSP Manual provides an overview of tools and approaches for dealing with power dynamics.



### BOX 11: ADDRESSING PRACTICAL CONSTRAINTS IN CONFLICT ANALYSIS ON GENDER

- When working with groups, develop gender-disaggregated surveys; gather responses separately from groups acting in different social circles while applying do-no-harm principles in approaching them
- Ask specific questions about conflict risk factors to representatives of different social groups to complement your analysis—men, women and other groups tend to highlight different risk factors based on the areas of society that they have access to (e.g. male youth unemployment; access to markets or gardens, marriage and domestic problems)
- Engage power holders at an early stage in information gathering and discussions on how to improve the situation of specific groups, e.g. local women—this can garner leadership support in the implementation of later steps (example: engaging local leaders to become women’s rights and victim advocates)
- Even if you cannot gather information on gender-based violence (GBV) directly, access publicly available information, such as local/national definitions of different types of violence and official statistics, to ensure that those challenges inform the next stage

## 4.6 Considerations for different phases of conflict

The information needed and the types of questions to be asked may vary, based on the phase of conflict in which the analysis process takes place.

The following are suggested lines of inquiry for the major phases. While this guidance is oriented primarily towards conflict prevention, the same tools can be used to analyse conflicts that are already in a period of open violence. In particular, this may be relevant in crisis situations where efforts are geared at stemming the violence and preventing further escalation.

### Early Intervention for Conflict Prevention

- What are the deeper, long-term structural and cultural causes of conflict? For example, these may be issues of political, social or economic exclusion based on ethnicity or religion that are present in society, but have not yet emerged in visible conflicts or violence.
- What issues, if left unaddressed, could lead eventually to violent conflict? Over what time period? Examples: sharp economic disparities; neglect of whole regions or groups/unequal distribution of government support for development; rampant corruption; lack of government services in education, health, transport; problematic governance structures/processes in terms of participation, decision making, representation.
- What policies or groups are attempting to address these issues? How? To what effect?

### Emerging Crises/Urgent Conflict Prevention

- What immediate issues or events could trigger widespread political violence? Examples: poorly organised or contested elections; sudden increases in costs for basic goods; sharp economic downturn/unemployment; poorly implemented demobilisation.
- What are the warning signs for any of the above examples or any other identified triggers? What forces are attempting to manage these issues?
- Is there an increase in violence against women, or any other silent warning signs?

### Period of Open Violence

- What are the underlying causes of conflict? Why did these factors lead to violence? Were any unsuccessful efforts made to avoid descent into war?
- How has the conflict shifted during the period of violence? Have new issues emerged?
- What efforts are being made to stop fighting? Are official negotiations planned or underway? If so, are there barriers to progress? What support is being provided for the negotiation process, and with what success? What issues are on/off the table?
- Are there opportunities for Track 2/unofficial dialogue or negotiation? Is anyone doing this already, and, if so, to what effect? What other initiatives would support movement towards peace?

### Cyclical Violence or Low Intensity Conflict

- In some situations, rather than a single significant period of violence, the conflict comes in waves or cycles. The violent conflict in central Nigeria is an example, in which contending groups engage in riots and mutual attacks periodically, with periods of relative calm in between.
- What are the underlying causes of cyclical violence? Why do these issues emerge when they do, and what allows for relative calm during other periods? Are certain members of society targeted by violence more often than others?
- Who is doing what to address the underlying causes and immediate triggers? To what effect?
- What can be done to prevent the recurrent cycles of violence, in terms of both short-term and long-term strategies?

### Post-Violence/Post-War/Post-Peace Agreement

- What were the underlying causes of the war/violence? How did these factors change during the war? What new factors emerged?
- Of the causes identified, which ones (if any) were addressed in any peace agreement? What is the important “unfinished business” or what are the persistent issues, which, if unaddressed, could threaten a relapse into violence?
- In post-conflict peacebuilding funding and programming, what drivers of conflict are being addressed and how? Are these efforts successful or effective? What issues are being ignored or actively avoided?
- What is the strategy for recovery? To what extent is it necessary—and are people willing—to address issues of trauma from the war or violence? Is there a need for some form of transitional justice or other forms of healing? Are their cultural factors, perceptions or gender roles that hinder peoples’ ability to address issues of recovery and healing?