INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE

# Understanding Local Context: The Use of Assessment Tools for Conflict-Affected and Fragile States

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The Understanding Local Context project is undertaken within IPI's program on Peacebuilding and State Fragility. This program provides policy analysis to enhance understanding of state fragility among international actors and improve engagement with fragile states. It builds on past IPI work on the role of the state in consolidating peace, and international efforts to build capable and legitimate states in the wake of conflict.

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On June 11 and 12, 2009, the International Peace Institute (IPI) convened an experts' workshop as part of an ongoing project called *Understanding Local Context*. The project aims to improve understanding of how international actors grapple with local context and dynamics in the countries where they work. It asks two basic questions:

1. What tools or other means do international actors use to assess and understand the local context in the countries where they work?
2. How do the information and analysis produced by these instruments influence international actors' decisions, policies, and programs?

The first phase of the project is focused on the many formal tools that have been designed by international actors in recent years to assess governance, conflict, and state fragility. However, these categories are somewhat blurry, and many assessment frameworks—whether they are labeled conflict assessments, governance assessments, or fragility/stability assessments—seek to understand several of these dimensions simultaneously.

This workshop brought together twenty-four experts from donor governments, the United Nations, and independent research organizations with experience in designing and/or using assessment tools, as well as those who have been involved in using the analysis generated by these tools for decision making. It offered a forum for the fruitful exchange of insights and a space in which to foster new ideas about ways to improve analysis and the use of analysis in decision-making processes.

This note is a summary of the main points that emerged from the discussion. It is intended for use as a reference document and will serve to inform a forthcoming policy report on the initial findings from the first phase of the *Understanding Local Context* project.

## Same term, different meanings

"Assessment" means different things to different people, and the term is used by various actors to refer to several **different types of exercises**. Many formal governance, conflict, and fragility tools were originally developed to be used by a single entity (e.g., a bilateral development agency such as the UK's Department for International Development [DFID] or a multilateral development agency such as the UN Development Program [UNDP]) to inform internal decisions related to the development of a new program or country strategy, the adjustment of an existing program or strategy, or to help make aid-allocation decisions.

However, "assessment" has also come to refer to interagency exercises, either across ministries or departments of a government (whole of government), across entities within the UN system (whole of system), or among several types of actors (governments, NGOs, international organizations, etc.) on the ground within a given country. These exercises aim to promote a common understanding of the country context as a basis for joint or integrated decision making. They are perhaps more accurately termed planning or assessment *processes* (although they often have "assessment" in their name, as in the UN-World Bank Post-Conflict Needs Assessment, or the US government's Inter-Agency Conflict Assessment Framework), whereby the analysis of context is one part of a larger consensus-building and planning exercise.

Discussions at the workshop made clear that, in recent years, many of the assessment tools that were originally developed to feed into single-entity decision making are now sometimes used for the interagency purpose described above. This seems to be driven by two factors. First, thinking on international engagement in conflict-affected and fragile states has evolved toward an understanding that a joined-up political, security, and development strategy is required to respond effectively in these situations. Second, there is the realization that one of the major challenges of interagency planning is that political, security, and development actors have different institutional cultures and languages and each brings their own perspective and understanding of the context to the table. Rather than bringing these actors together at the planning stage—when their perspectives are fully formed—the conducting of joint assessments aims to get everyone on the same page by breaking down actors' preconceptions thereby providing a basis for integrated decision making. This is perhaps most common within the UN system where the political, security, humanitarian, and development pillars of the organization have been working to promote an integrated UN response in postconflict countries for several years. However, it has also taken place where bilateral donors have begun to adopt "whole of government" approaches in their engagement with fragile and conflict-affected countries. Therefore, in addition to their analytical function, assessments are increasingly being used to foster whole-of-government and whole-of-system engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

Nevertheless, understanding country context and forging a consensus among different actors on that understanding are two very different objectives, even if pursued simultaneously. The workshop generated valuable points for each, which are described below.

The many governance, conflict, and fragility assessment tools that have been developed also focus on different **levels of analysis**. At the global level there are several organizations that examine cross-country data to make comparisons and rank countries on a variety of indicators. At the national level, there is a variety of assessment tools that look at the overall country context to inform a general strategy or a specific program. Some of these can also be adapted to focus on a specific geographic area or sector within a country, while other tools have been specifically designed to assess needs and dynamics in a particular sector.

Irrespective of the type of assessment, the type of exercise, or even whether a formal tool is used, one of the strongest points of agreement among workshop participants was that assessments are not ends in themselves. What matters is **clarity of purpose** and ensuring that the assessment is shaped to deliver on that purpose.

## Purpose

As noted above, assessments can serve multiple purposes simultaneously and may be used by a single entity or as a basis for interagency planning or decision making. There are multiple, and often contradictory, objectives underlying the development and use of assessment tools. Different actors have been driven by different impulses; different entities within the same government (or even different departments of the same ministry) and different departments/agencies within multilateral organizations will have very different understandings of the purpose and objectives of assessments, who the audience should be, what assessments should cover, how they should be conducted, and how results should be used. IPI's preliminary research and discussions at the workshop produced the following list of purposes for which assessments have been designed and used:

- deciding whether or not to engage in a partner country, or to scale up (or down) existing levels of support;
- re-orienting or designing a country or sector strategy or program (or justifying an existing strategy or program);
- developing more-realistic expectations of what aid might accomplish given the political, economic, social, and cultural constraints of a particular country situation and the actor's own political and bureaucratic constraints;
- stimulating internal dialogue and fostering new ways of analyzing specific problems and modes of engagement;
- avoiding the unintended consequences of external action and guarding against the risks of elite capture and corruption;
- making existing or planned aid programs more sensitive to drivers of conflict;
- providing baseline analysis against which progress may be measured;
- modeling or predicting the likelihood of destabilization;
- informing decisions about aid allocation and funding modalities in light of fiduciary risk;
- ensuring accountability and transparency in the use of aid resources; and
- stimulating a discussion about reform with the partner country.

Each purpose or combination of purposes will demand different kinds of information and analysis. Thus, the content of assessments will often be shaped by the purpose. This is a double-edged sword because we risk missing important information if we are too heavily focused on responding to a specific purpose. However, assessments that do not respond to the immediate decision-making needs of an organization also risk being disregarded.

## Content

Discussions at the workshop emphasized that there is no methodological silver bullet for assessing local context. A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, as well as diverse sources of information, is essential to ensure as nuanced and rich an understanding of a situation as possible. In all instances, the methodology employed should be adaptable to contextual circumstances and should be carefully scrutinized to determine its underlying assumptions. The level of quantitative, as opposed to qualitative, analysis is frequently driven by the difficulties of obtaining reliable quantitative data in fragile environments. Local knowledge is considered especially valuable, but time and resource constraints, as well as concerns about confidentiality and bias, represent considerable obstacles.

Yet, the balance between a detailed and comprehensive assessment and one that produces usable analysis for decision making presents significant challenges. As donors have become increasingly aware of the complexities of state fragility, a more qualitative political-economy approach to assessments has emerged. While such analysis provides an in-depth understanding of local dynamics, some argue that it also risks producing information that is not easily digested by policymakers or operationalized through policy or programmatic decisions. Indeed, while high quality analysis is generally considered quite valuable, assessments are often modified because time and resource constraints demand a quick-and-dirty approach. Donors also struggle with the challenge of distilling complex analyses into concise, readable policy documents. Moreover, **the link to decision making needs to be clear; content cannot be divorced from process**. There are numerous cases of very detailed and rigorous analyses that ultimately sit on a shelf because they do not feed effectively into decision making.

Where interagency planning is the primary objective, practitioners tend to be agnostic about assessment methodology. In these cases, the emphasis is almost entirely on **process**—specifically, how to use the information and analysis produced through an assessment to help different actors agree on a basic understanding of the situation. Here the goal seems to be "good enough" analysis and a basic level of agreement among the key players in order to provide the basis for a common strategy.

## Process

Regardless of whether an assessment is a single-entity or interagency exercise, if and how analysis of country context feeds into decision making appear to be largely determined by process. Several critical process factors emerged through the workshop discussions:

*People and competencies*

- The skills and competencies of the people engaged in an assessment often have more bearing on the outcome than the tool itself.
- Among the most important competencies are (1) the ability to facilitate the assessment process, and (2) the ability to interpret the analysis and turn it into actionable recommendations.
- Staff who will use the results of the assessment should feel a sense of ownership of the assessment process. This could be achieved by engaging decision makers in the assessment through a team that can expand and contract without putting undue pressure on their day-to-day responsibilities.

*Timing*

- When an assessment is conducted, events in-country as well as bureaucratic needs at headquarters should be taken into account. If an assessment is triggered by donors' needs alone, it may risk being out of sync with important events that warrant a fresh look at the situation on the ground.
- In any decision-making process there is a window of influence. If assessments take too long or there is a lag between the assessment and the moment of decision, the analysis is much less likely to be used.

*Clarity*

- Clarity of purpose and a clear understanding of the timeline for decision making are essential to ensure that the assessment produces usable information and analysis.
- If scope for dissent from or change within a given policy, strategy, or program is limited, then receptivity to the results of an assessment will also be limited.
- Decision makers often have limited time to absorb information, which means that the results of an assessment have to be presented in an accessible and targeted format.

*Interests and incentives*

- Individual and institutional interests can often skew an assessment. For example, where considerable efforts have already gone into developing a large and costly aid program, there are strong incentives to use an assessment to justify that program, rather than trying to develop a more refined understanding of country context that could question underlying assumptions on which the program is based.

*Interagency assessments*

Where an assessment is used to forge interagency consensus, either as a primary or a secondary goal, process is arguably even more important. In addition to the factors listed above, several other specific points were raised regarding interagency processes:

- The quality of people remains critically important. In particular, their ability to facilitate relationships among actors with very different perspectives and to act as "translators" between them is essential.
- Individuals engaged in interagency assessments

need to have authority within the agency they represent to drive decisions forward and for agencies to feel that their interests are adequately represented in the process—especially important where there are concerns about institutional buy-in.

Several challenges and risks associated with interagency assessment processes were also raised:

- Whole-of-government and whole-of-system approaches are still in their infancy and continue to face basic problems of communication and information flow. Basic issues such as harmonized information technology (IT) systems and clear, efficient protocols for dealing with classified information need to be addressed.

- Using assessments as a vehicle to promote whole-of-government/system decision making risks privileging the mechanics of the tool rather than the quality of the information and analysis produced.

- Such processes may risk papering over differences through interagency negotiation, rather than promoting genuine debate and hard choices in terms of the prioritization or sequencing of interventions.

## Final Thoughts

Discussion of assessment tools needs to be put in perspective. Workshop participants agreed that assessments are only one ingredient for decision- and policymaking, which will always draw on multiple sources of information and analysis. The nature of the overall policymaking process also often influences how analysis is used. The danger of privileging assessment tools is that doing so risks diminishing other sources of information and diagnostics. Instead, working toward a culture of analysis that draws on multiple sources of information to assess local context on an ongoing basis may be an important complement to conducting assessments.

The **INTERNATIONAL PEACE INSTITUTE (IPI)** is an independent, international not-for-profit think tank with a staff representing more than twenty nationalities, located in New York across from United Nations headquarters. IPI is dedicated to promoting the prevention and settlement of conflicts between and within states by strengthening international peace and security institutions. To achieve its purpose, IPI employs a mix of policy research, convening, publishing and outreach.

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