

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CONFLICTED ENVIRONMENT – A Master Question Sheet to guide inquiry

15 March 2020 Koenraad Van Brabant

Following is a long list of questions – use them intelligently. Their purpose is to help you guide your attempt to gain some understanding of a conflict situation that you are or will be operating in. Mostly, that will be a society experiencing high levels of violence. But it may also be a family situation.

You can find yourself in a humanitarian, peace, security or development sector; you can be a political, business, military or civic actor. You can be a member of the conflict-affected society or come into it from outside. You can be staying there a longer time or come in for a consultancy mandate.

It can be useful for inquiry into the conflict dynamics at a very local, a subnational, national or regional and international level.

Use such question sheet intelligently and pragmatically: Trying to answer all questions confidently might become a huge undertaking and take you a long time. The question sheet can help you prioritise which insights are most important now. But it will also remind you of the aspects of the conflict dynamics that you currently don't have much insight in (your 'known unknowns'). Reframe the questions, add others if needed. Each question can be broken down into others, seeking further detail.

The (tentative) answers will come from a wide variety of sources: different people who can shed light on some questions, but who may have different views on the same issue; formal but also many informal conversations; confidential and publicly available reports; reports produced by operators and others by academics; sources in different places and in different languages.

Keep your mind, your eyes and ears open: Be observant to an event or a perspective that doesn't seem to fit your current understanding. It may not be significant; or it may be a signal that your current understanding is incomplete or that something important may be changing in the conflict dynamics, so that your understanding may need to be updated. Being attentive to what is happening in the environment we find ourselves in, is not a one off; it's part of our daily way of functioning.

PAST (longer and more recent)	PRESENT	FUTURE (medium-term)
<p>What were major events in the history of this open conflict? Where did the open confrontation start: at a local, a national, a regional or international level?</p> <p>Did the conflict dynamics resonate with pre-existing fault lines in this society? What connected different social groups in the past? How did that keep them together`?</p> <p>Who were major players in driving the conflict, in trying to reduce the conflict? Did they change over time? Why? Did players from outside this society get involved (as drivers of conflict, or conflict-reducers?) When and how; who provided them with the entry?</p> <p>What are the narratives about the reasons for the conflict of the main protagonists and affected groups? Where do they differ, what do they have in common? What was the conflict originally about? What was the conflict NOT about? What do people say it is now about?</p> <p>Is there one conflict or are there now multiple ones? If so, how are they interconnected?</p> <p>Has the conflict/have the conflicts mutated over time: significant changes in motivations, internal actors, strategies and tactics, increased involvement of external actors? How has this conflict sustained itself economically over time?</p>	<p>Current dynamics analysis: What are the current conflict/violence and tension-reduction/ conflict-reduction/peace dynamics (in different areas, for different social groups, around what issues...)?</p> <p>Factor analysis: What are the current <i>core drivers of conflict</i>? What are the current, <i>tangible and intangible, contributing factors</i> to conflict? What still connects people here? What are current drivers or contributing factors for tension and conflict reduction?</p> <p>Actor/stakeholder analysis: Who are the key protagonists driving the conflict today? What do we know about their internal group dynamics? What strategies and tactics do they tend to use to exercise influence, power and control? What do we know about their motivations and calculations? What do we not understand about them? How do they benefit from conflict?</p> <p>Who are the key protagonists for violence reduction and peace today? What do we know about their internal group dynamics? What strategies and tactics do they tend to use to exercise influence, power and control? What do we know about their motivations and calculations? What do we not understand about them?</p> <p>Who are ambiguous stakeholders (social groups) i.e. not firm/systematic about supporting forces of confrontation and violence or supporting forces for violence reduction and conflict resolution? What do we know about their internal group dynamics? What strategies and tactics do they tend to use to exercise influence? What do we know about their motivations and calculations? What do we not understand about them?</p> <p>Who are stakeholders significantly disempowered by the conflict(s)? What do we know about their social group dynamics?</p>	<p>What would the medium-term look like if you extrapolated existing trends? What significant events are coming up, that may act as triggers and/or alter the dynamics of the conflict? How do local stakeholders see the medium-term future; what shapes their perception?</p> <p>What are the most important factors that may influence future developments? Who are influential actors that may influence future developments? What possible scenarios could occur (include also a disruptive scenario!) – What are key assumptions underpinning each scenario?</p> <p>What role can you play to increase the possibility that the most desirable scenario happens?</p>

<p>Who has benefited from this conflict, who has lost – in what ways? What new fault lines have arisen because of the violence?</p> <p>What has already been tried, to reduce and/or resolve this conflict? Why was it not decisively successful? What are the different narratives about this?</p>	<p>What strategies and tactics do they tend to use to regain some control over the lives? What do we know about their motivations, priorities, preferences and calculations? What do we not understand about them?</p> <p>What is the political economy here? Who benefits from the continued confrontation? What is their social and economic support base, how do they sustain this?</p> <p>Where do we fit in this picture? What perception do other stakeholders have of us? How are our presence and actions conflicting to the conflict and conflict-reduction dynamics? How are we part of the political economy?</p> <p><u>Intervention impact analysis:</u> What connections between divided social groups can be strengthened? What initiatives and processes, strategies and programmes are currently pursued to reduce violence and resolve the conflict(s)? How well do they address the key factors and actors? Are they drawing on lessons from past attempts?</p> <p>How are tangible assistance programmes influencing the conflict- and peace dynamics: at local, national, regional/international level? Who is included, who benefits, who not?</p> <p><u>Information and insight review:</u> What do we not know or understand about various conflict-relevant aspects of this conflicted environment? What are critical information and -understanding gaps that need to be addressed on a priority basis?</p>	
---	--	--

A core driver of conflict: a factor that, if no longer present or significantly diminished in influence, would significantly change the level and dynamics of conflict. **A contributing factor to conflict** influences the level of conflict or violence but is not what people fight about (e.g. use of drugs, poverty, the presence of guns, trauma). An **actor** is an individual or social group actively seeking to exercise influence; a **stakeholder** is affected by the conflict but is not -currently- actively seeking to exercise influence. A distinction can usefully be made between **conflict and violence**, so we include also high levels of criminal/social violence.

Koenraad Van Brabant is a director of Global Mentoring Initiative (GMI). Navigation360 is a unit of GMI, specializing on conflict, peace and security, and operating in volatile environments. kvanbrabant@gmentor.org / kvbconsult@navigation360.org www.navigation360.org www.gmentor.org