

Local Knowledge at the Centre

Overview

Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts: Local Perspectives on Large-Scale Conflict

Local voices matter. World Vision offers this book, *Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts*, to address a problematic gap within the field of conflict analysis: local knowledge. The ambitious claim is that analysing large-scale conflict in an inclusive, participatory way will increase the effectiveness of aid in turbulent settings.

Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts identifies the current participation gap and presents the alternative concepts on which the participatory Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts (MSTC) framework is grounded. Included are concrete, step-by-step tools and seven case studies demonstrating specific MSTC results. The book concludes with a clear vision for the future of participatory macro-level conflict analysis.

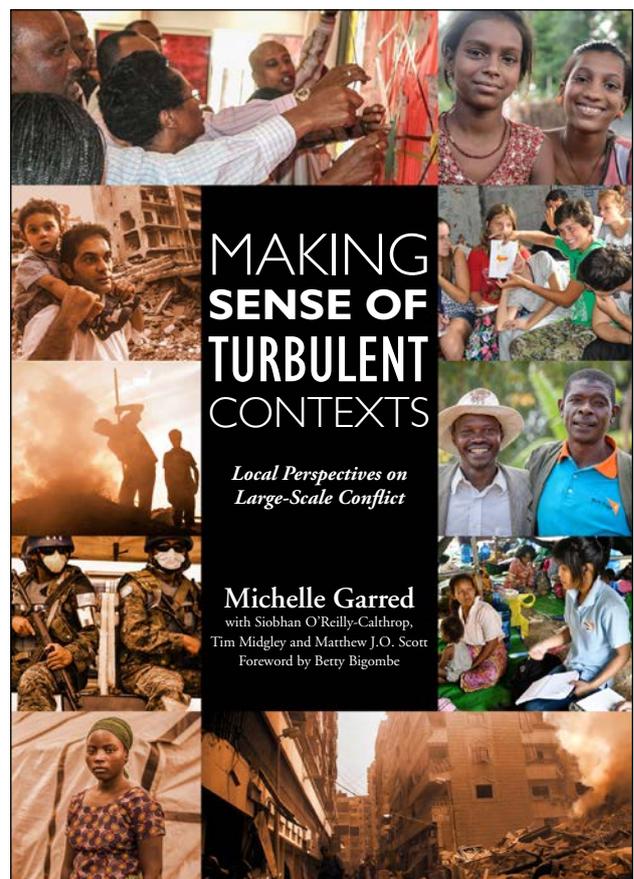
The Participation Gap

Understanding conflict is essential for planning aid, including humanitarian, development and peacebuilding assistance. Failure to analyse the context often results in poorly planned interventions that can worsen existing tensions or violence. Well-designed interventions can help to mitigate or even prevent conflict by addressing its underlying causes.

Local-level projects often use participatory methods to assess conflict. However, on a larger national scale, macro-analyses rely all too often on external 'experts'. In some cases aid planners

appear to intentionally bypass the wealth of knowledge held by local actors. In many cases aid personnel simply lack the appropriate tools and relational networks to engage local actors effectively.

This absence of local perspectives limits how aid can address the multiple drivers and competing narratives of conflict. Analysis that lacks local and marginalised voices can reinforce the patterns of exclusion typical of many violent conflicts. Local knowledge must inform the policies and strategies that define how aid agencies work in conflict-affected settings.



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Participatory Approaches

Participatory approaches have a crucial role to play in macro-conflict analysis. They bring together diverse local actors to unlock their own knowledge, identify the drivers of conflict and develop realistic solutions.

In this way, participatory approaches can:

- **improve the overall quality of conflict analysis** by including a wide range of actors in the analysis and challenging 'standard' narratives about a conflict
- **increase application of findings** by ensuring that conflict analysis recommendations are 'owned' by local implementers and that action steps are relevant to their work
- **model political inclusion** by bringing groups together across conflict fault lines in an atmosphere of positive and equitable cooperation
- **advance inter-agency coordination** by uniting agencies in a common understanding of conflict and shared action plans
- **strengthen the capacity of civil society**, empowering networks and organisations to become more resilient agents of change.

Participation brings nuance and on-the-ground relevance to macro-conflict analysis. Both local

actors and external experts are needed for the unique forms of knowledge that they bring. Participatory approaches should consistently complement – not replace – the traditional methods of macro-conflict analysis that emphasise foreign expertise.

The MSTC Process

MSTC engages local actors – including local aid workers and a diverse range of other civil society actors – as both the sources of data and the primary analysts. Amongst six influential macro-frameworks recently recognised by the OECD-DAC,¹ MSTC is unique in emphasising local participation by design and demonstrating it in practice.

MSTC offers a structured set of tools for use in four-day workshops of approximately 25 people each. A team of facilitators guides the workshops as participants identify the context's strategic needs and likely future scenarios. The outcomes emphasise practical recommendations for aid strategy and positioning within a turbulent context.

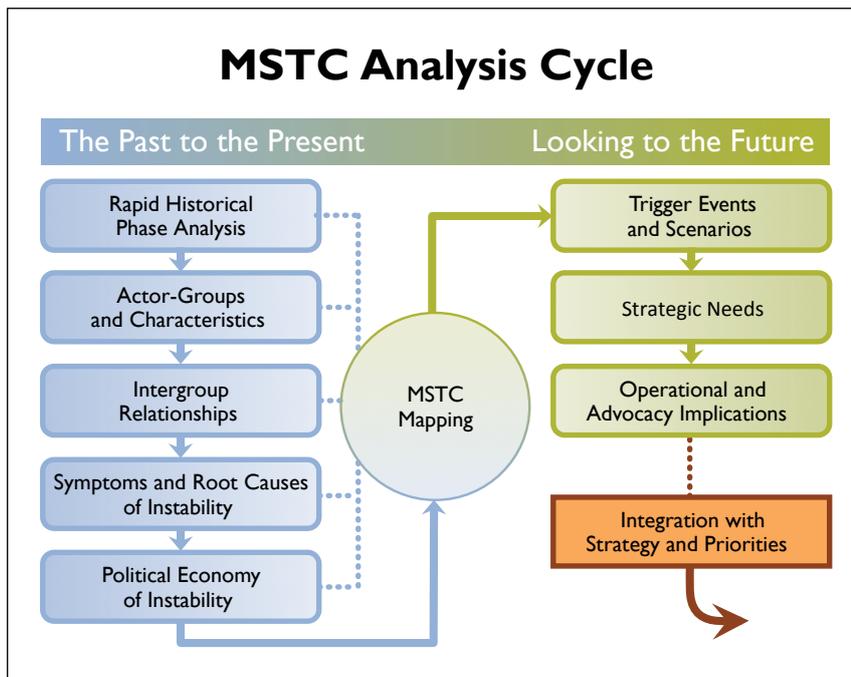
MSTC has been collaboratively tested and refined for more than a decade, through 58 analyses in 23 countries in every major region of the world. Continuous learning and improvement

¹ Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), *Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility: Improving Learning for Results* (2012), 79.

MSTC is a dynamic, collaborative process that creates a shared analysis of a turbulent context. (Ethiopia, 2008)



MSTC Analysis Cycle



MSTC participants analyse turbulence from past to present, and identify future scenarios and context needs to inform action strategies.

are hallmarks of MSTC practice. World Vision convened most early workshops, and both Oxfam and CARE now use MSTC in certain Asian contexts. Multi-agency workshops are gaining momentum as promising vehicles for collaboration.

Successes and Challenges

MSTC experience to date demonstrates multiple benefits. This approach pushes busy aid practitioners to put context first and to develop strategy in response to the context, rather than resorting to harmful 'one-size-fits-all' approaches. MSTC puts local knowledge at the centre of the macro-analysis process. From a uniquely citizen-centred perspective, MSTC participants emphasise themes that are relevant in the wider conflict analysis field – good governance, civic participation, equitable distribution of resources, and peacebuilding and reconciliation. Finally, MSTC is designed for action, so that agencies can readily apply the findings to improve their strategy and operations.

There are risks. Discussions about macro conflict are sensitive, requiring special safeguards. MSTC organisers triangulate information by including participants from across the lines of politics, ethnicity, gender, religion and other contested

identities. MSTC facilitators honour strongly differing opinions by brokering firm agreements on respect, confidentiality and trust. World Vision strongly recommends using a certified MSTC lead facilitator for every workshop, because the skills of certified lead facilitators have been honed precisely for this purpose. Workshop participants must have confidence that their contributions will be used as intended and that their reputations and physical safety will be protected.

The key ingredients of MSTC success also include a strong commitment from the convening host organisation. MSTC requires significant time and resources, so senior leadership engagement is necessary for properly scheduling the analysis, providing funding and ensuring that MSTC recommendations are implemented. Strong follow-up includes formation of a context-monitoring team to provide continuing input after an MSTC workshop is completed. Conflict zones are not static. Ongoing context monitoring helps aid agencies stay in tune with, or even anticipate, important changes.

Future Vision

Single-agency MSTC workshops continue to be practised, particularly when an agency needs a fine-tuned focus on its own mandate. World

