By Isabella Jean

RECLAIMING CONFLICT SENSITIVITY: OPPORTUNITIES IN AN AGE OF POLYCRISES AND AID CUTS

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Conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm have long been buzzwords in humanitarian circles. They are widely endorsed in principle yet inconsistently applied in policy and practice. Despite numerous **public commitments**, many aid agencies and implementing organizations have struggled to move beyond the rhetoric, hindered by competing operational priorities, limited capacity, and deeply entrenched institutional silos. While the critique is not new, ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, among others, have revived the debate about a rigid and outdated understanding of neutrality, which is seen as hindering agencies from engaging meaningfully with conflict dynamics,

for fear of appearing partial or "political". The ambition of the **triple nexus** championed at the **World Humanitarian Summit** in 2016 has largely stalled in implementation. As aid budgets shrink, many implementing organizations continue to **defend their mandates** rather than align them to achieve more comprehensive long-term outcomes. Unbelievably, some organizations still lack the policies and institutional practices needed to systematically analyze the contexts in which they operate and identify factors that divide and connect people, including how the presence of aid affects local markets and communal resilience mechanisms.

Today, the stakes are higher than ever. In Gaza, Ukraine, Myanmar, the Congo, and beyond, conflict dynamics are rapidly evolving and the lines between humanitarian response, political strategy, and long-term recovery are increasingly blurred. Meanwhile, massive cuts to the foreign aid budget are forcing hard choices, often at the expense of nuanced, conflict-sensitive programming. But we have long known that conflict sensitivity cannot remain an afterthought or a footnote. It must be core to how all aid and development actors and national government counterparts operate. At its best, conflict sensitivity is not just about avoiding harm but about actively fostering social cohesion, strengthening local institutions and existing communal mechanisms, and laying the groundwork for resilience in fragile, fractured contexts.

DEFINING DO NO HARM (DNH)

The *Do No Harm* principle, often used synonymously with the concept of conflict sensitivity, calls on humanitarian and development actors to anticipate the ripple effects of their actions and to minimize the unintended negative consequences of their operational presence and their assistance. Resources delivered without sufficient sensitivity to existing inter-group or intra-group divisions can inadvertently fuel competition, deepen these divisions, and empower conflict actors. For example, when emergency aid is distributed in a way that disproportionately benefits one group over another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, it can increase resentment and deepen hostilities. In many instances, humanitarian aid becomes a contested resource, resulting in corruption, diversion, or even violence. Similarly, a lack of awareness and analysis of factors that historically or more recently connect people and communities leads to missed opportunities to reinforce cohesion, cooperation, and build more interdependencies during emergencies, recovery, and other phases.

At its core, a conflict-sensitive approach aims to prevent aid from exacerbating tensions or divisions within and between communities, while actively mitigating risks in fragile environments. A more comprehensive application of the Do No Harm principle goes beyond simply avoiding harm. It requires making intentional operational and programmatic choices that build trust in local institutions, rather than bypassing or undermining them. This approach strengthens the long-term resilience and self-reliance of individuals, communities, and local markets. Ultimately, a conflict-sensitive way of working means planning and delivering assistance in ways that reinforce social cohesion, invest in local capacities, and contribute to sustainable recovery. **This applies to how all aid actors operate, local, national, and international, as well as government aid agencies, civil society or informal communal efforts and mutual aid groups.**

DÉJÀ VU: THE FAMILIAR CHALLENGES OF APPLYING DO NO HARM AND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

Since the late 1990s, many bilateral donors, the UN, and humanitarian, development and peacebuilding organizations have recognized the importance of adopting conflict-sensitive approaches and proceeded to embed commitments to Do No Harm into **Good Donorship principles** and the **Sphere Standards**, among other industry wide initiatives. There has also been a notable proliferation of conflict analysis and context assessment tools. However, in reality (both operational and institutional), there have been many structural, operational, and contextual challenges that have impeded the effective application of the Do No Harm principle in

humanitarian settings. One major constraint documented in **multiple evaluations** and **critiques** is the pressure for rapid response in emergencies, where the urgency to deliver aid often prioritizes speed over careful conflict analysis, leading to "interventions" that overlook or misunderstand local dynamics. Limited engagement with affected communities has been another persistent issue long recognized as one of the 'rhetoric to practice gaps'. The team at Ground Truth has documented in multiple contexts that, without **meaningful consultation and participation**, aid strategies risk missing the nuances of the local context and may unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities and power dynamics. Fragmented coordination among humanitarian actors and with local authorities has also further complicated an often "**congested aid landscape**", resulting in overlapping efforts, inefficiencies and competition over aid resources. Even before the more recent budget cuts, organizations often referenced budgetary constraints when justifying severely condensed project development processes, which did not allow for time for inclusive stakeholder conversations, meaningful conflict analysis, and more nuanced assessments of local capacities and needs. In addition, **access constraints in conflict zones** often force agencies to rely on intermediaries, whose actions may not align with conflict-sensitive approaches, jeopardizing the very principle and undermining trust.

FROM DÉJÀ VU TO DISRUPTION: EMERGING DILEMMAS IN CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

While the core principles of conflict sensitivity remain relevant, the contexts in which they are applied have changed dramatically. Humanitarian actors are increasingly confronted with dilemmas that were once peripheral but are now central, ranging from digital risks and safeguards to new forms of politicization of neutrality. These are not exhaustive of the current challenges facing the sector, but they highlight some of the most urgent and debated issues in the past year. These challenges demand not only technical adaptation but a deeper rethink of what it means to "do no harm" in today's polycrises[1] and conflict settings.

Technology as a new frontier of harm: revisiting conflict sensitivity in the digital age

The growing use of digital technologies – such as drones, biometric registration, and data systems – in humanitarian response has introduced a new set of risks that challenge the practical application of conflict sensitivity principles. While these tools are often adopted to improve efficiency, accountability, and access, they can cause harm when implemented without a proper understanding of operational, political and cultural context or adequate safeguards. Some of the "new tech" tested in controlled environments may perform poorly in real-life conditions and lead to operational failures that directly impact aid recipients. Moreover, technologies like biometric registration create


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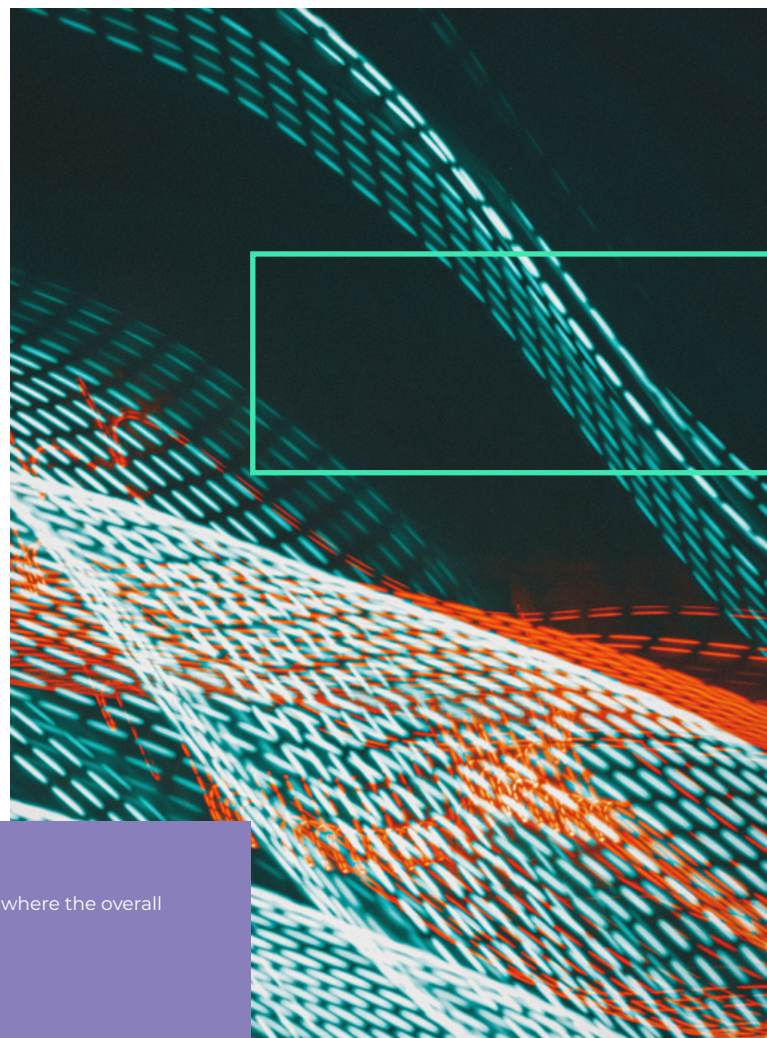
[1] Polycrisis refers to multiple, interconnected crises occurring simultaneously, where the overall impact is greater than the sum of the parts.

digital identities that can persist beyond the humanitarian context, exposing refugees, displaced human rights activists, and other vulnerable groups to surveillance, political targeting, or violations of privacy. This can jeopardize both individual and communal safety and undermine prospects for voluntary return. Several examples detailing the use of iris recognition in the Afghan-Pakistan borderland and among Syrian refugees have raised concerns about the lack of safeguards in humanitarian data collection and sharing.

A **Humanitarian Practice Network article** from a decade ago aptly summarized the risks with a reminder that "Most notably, humanitarians need to be mindful that agencies collect sensitive biometric data that in certain contexts will be considered highly relevant by various political actors – be they donors, host governments or the very regimes refugees are fleeing from." In the last decade, more examples of ICT and digital technology application have highlighted the need to consider how technology is deployed and the political and social effects it has in fragile settings. This serves as another reminder that conflict sensitivity is not merely about programmatic decisions and should encompass a close review of all operational choices and tools, including policies that guide the use of all forms of technology and artificial intelligence. As with other operational choices, such as procurement or hiring, aid organizations must move beyond good intentions to adopt clear policies and robust safeguards, minimizing both short and long-term negative consequences on local communities and individuals. Yet, most programme support staff across the sector do not receive training in Do No Harm or any type of conflict sensitivity. To do this effectively, the training should involve staff from various departments, including procurement, logistics, finance, and security at international NGOs, UN agencies, and UN peacekeeping and political missions. In the author's experience, who has facilitated more than twenty-five DNH workshops around the world, only once, in Kyiv, Ukraine, in March 2016, was a conflict sensitivity workshop held that included both operational and programme staff in the same session. This continues to be an exception to the norm.

Rethinking neutrality: navigating politics while upholding conflict sensitivity

Applying conflict sensitivity principles is becoming increasingly complex in contexts like Ukraine and Gaza, where the act of upholding core humanitarian principles such as neutrality is profoundly challenging and is tested daily. Neutrality, intended to ensure aid is provided without taking sides or engaging in political controversies, is frequently contested or misinterpreted by both warring parties and affected populations. In such polarized environments, **humanitarian actors often face accusations of bias or complicity** simply for delivering aid or being present in certain areas, threatening operational access, the trust and safety of local communities, and the safety of local and international aid workers.
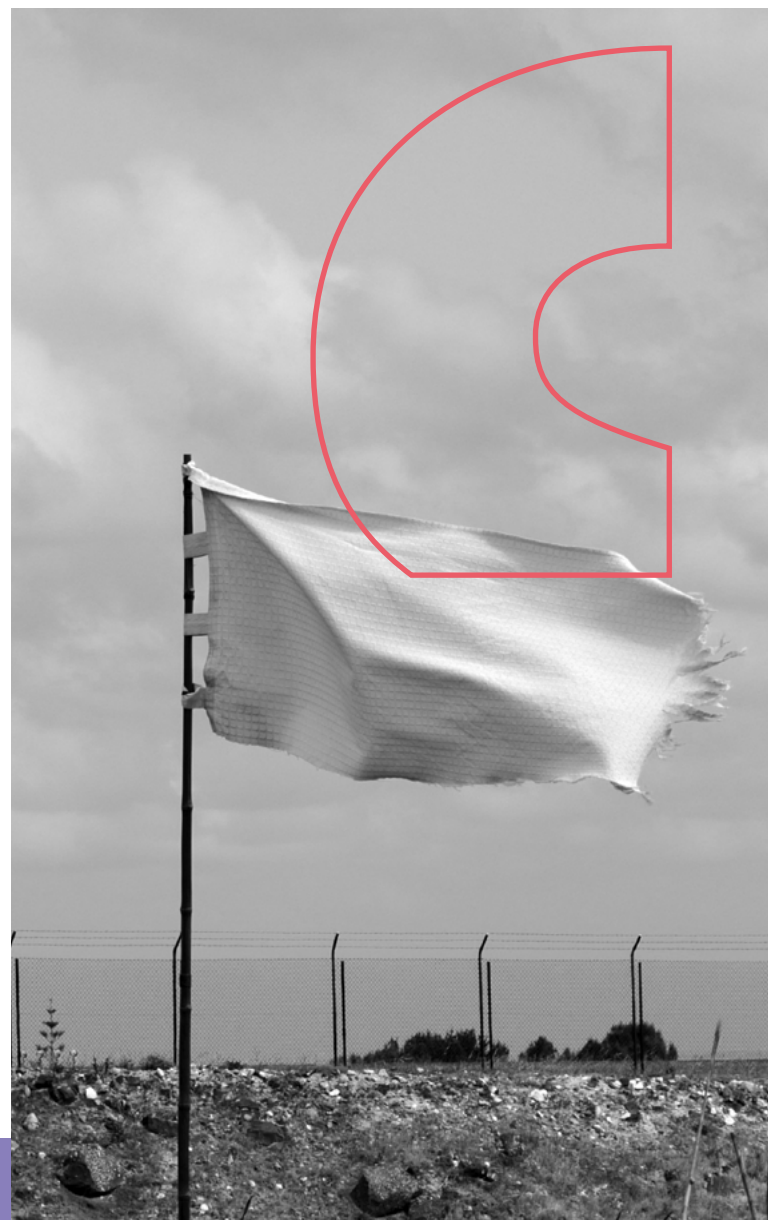
- In Ukraine, the conflict's geopolitical implications and the military assistance provided to Ukraine by multiple donor governments have placed additional pressure on agencies to balance neutrality with conflict sensitivity. Since the start of the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, delivering aid to Russian-controlled territories or separatist regions, for example, was often perceived as legitimizing those areas' authorities. Agencies have tried to navigate these perceptions carefully to avoid exacerbating existing tensions or losing credibility with either side. This operational reality has become increasingly challenging since the 2022 full-scale invasion and the subsequent shifting lines of control.

- In Gaza, aid provided by the same countries that provide military and financial support to the war effort is at the heart of the **critique of neutrality**. Blockade of aid and ongoing aerial bombardments of Gaza, as well as longstanding power asymmetries in this context, further complicate not only the logistics of aid delivery but also the perception of neutrality and **impartiality of new private humanitarian entities set up through Israeli channels**. The immense humanitarian needs and the politicized nature of any engagement with local authorities make equitable aid distribution particularly fraught.

- Overall, the sector-wide commitments to localization and shifting power to local humanitarian actors have run into a persistent challenge: while aid agencies

often express support for local humanitarian leadership, they simultaneously question the neutrality of local actors, viewing them as too embedded in local dynamics, politics, and loyalties. This tension reflects a deeper discomfort with relinquishing control and reveals a double standard. After all, Western and/or Northern aid actors, too, are rarely neutral, having taken sides in various conflicts, whether implicitly or explicitly. The invocation of neutrality is thus selectively applied, often undermining genuine efforts at localization and conflict sensitivity. Yet, local organizations and communities possess a more nuanced understanding of conflict dynamics and are better positioned to navigate them effectively. Recognizing their capacity and leadership is not just a matter of principle, but also of pragmatism because it strengthens long-term sustainability, relevance, and the resilience of national and local disaster preparedness and management systems and institutions.

In all these cases, the principle of conflict sensitivity offers a useful framework for mitigating the risks associated with the politicization of aid. In Ukraine, the **Partnership Fund for Resilient Ukraine** has documented multiple case studies showing how strengthening relationships with local authorities, informal community groups, and local civil society can help navigate highly sensitive environments during early recovery and in social cohesion programmes. Similarly, transparency in aid delivery and consistent communication about impartiality are vital

to maintaining credibility, especially in areas where misinformation is prevalent. At the same time, agencies must ensure that their interventions do not reinforce structural inequalities that contribute to the conflict, for example, by supporting displaced populations in Ukraine while also addressing the needs of host communities.

In these high-stakes contexts, neutrality and DNH are frequently tested, and difficult trade-offs are inevitable. Political and military actors may attempt to co-opt aid, and humanitarians are often forced to make hard decisions about resource allocation. Still, by remaining context-aware and deeply engaged in the planning and implementation process with affected populations, aid organizations, both international and local, can strive to minimize harm even in the most contested settings.

Humanitarian resistance: redefining "Do No Harm" in the face of injustice

The concept of **humanitarian resistance** challenges traditional understandings of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, particularly in contexts where strict adherence to these principles may conflict with the ethical imperative to resist systemic harm or injustice. As a lens on the evolving application of conflict sensitivity principles, including Do No Harm, humanitarian resistance raises critical questions about whether neutrality is always possible or desirable, when silence or inaction risks perpetuating suffering. Rather than discarding or simplifying neutrality, this approach reframes it as an active moral stance that refuses to be complicit in the structures or policies that cause harm.

Central to humanitarian resistance is the recognition that Do No Harm is not just about avoiding unintended consequences, but also preventing harm caused by omission. It broadens the principle's scope to address root causes of suffering, moving beyond the traditional focus

on short-term relief to confront systemic drivers of conflict and inequality. In contexts like Gaza or Ukraine, this could mean publicly condemning blockades, occupations, or state violence that deepen humanitarian crises. While such actions may be perceived as political by some, they reflect a principled effort to uphold human dignity and mitigate long-term harm. In recent months, given the deteriorating situation in Gaza, we have seen a **growing number of calls** that condemn Israeli government actions as both contravening international humanitarian law and human rights law but also calling for a moral and political action in the form of pressure and cutting of ties by foreign governments that continue to trade and partner with Israel.

Examples of humanitarian resistance in practice include advocacy campaigns that denounce violations of international humanitarian law, such as indiscriminate attacks on civilians or restrictions on aid delivery. Some organizations refuse to cooperate with authorities or armed
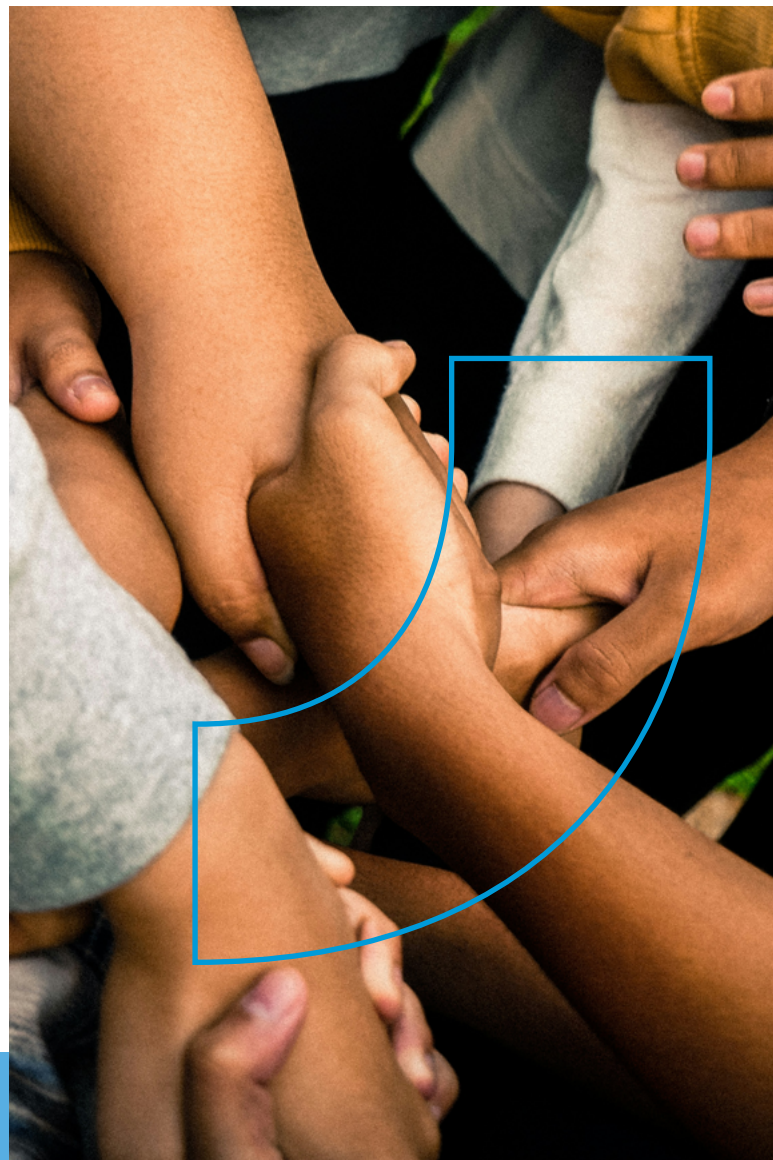
actors who attempt to manipulate aid for strategic or political gain. Others align with grassroots movements or local civil society to amplify the voices of affected populations and challenge power imbalances. These efforts embody a more profound commitment to conflict sensitivity, rooted in the recognition that neutrality should not shield injustice or allow harm to go unchallenged.

However, this approach is not without risks. Taking a public stand can lead to accusations of bias, threaten operational access, or provoke backlash from donors, host governments or parties to the conflict. It can also intensify polarization in already volatile settings. Balancing these tensions requires humanitarian actors to make difficult strategic and ethical decisions about when to speak, how to act, and how best to uphold the core aim of minimizing harm.

A veteran humanitarian ethicist, Hugo Slim, argues that ultimately **humanitarian resistance complements rather than contradicts the DNH principle**. It invites a more courageous and context-sensitive interpretation of what it means to prevent harm, urging agencies to reflect on whether maintaining access at all costs is always justifiable – or whether, in some cases, taking a principled stand is the most humane and responsible course of action.

RECOMMITTING TO CONFLICT SENSITIVITY: FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE (YET AGAIN)

To be conflict sensitive in today's complex and politicized humanitarian landscapes, aid organizations (and funders) must embed conflict sensitivity across all aspects of their work. This includes moving beyond technical delivery to deeply contextual and ethically grounded approaches that recognize the risks of exacerbating tensions or entrenching unequal power dynamics and grievances.

We see in the daily news that, in highly polarized environments, the principle of neutrality is increasingly contested. In some cases where governments are funding the war, aid organizations are limited to proactive efforts to communicate their original intent to aid the most vulnerable, but often can't entirely avoid perceptions of bias given the broader geopolitical context and the provenance of their organizations, which can lead to loss of trust and operational access. Similarly, the growing discourse on humanitarian resistance challenges agencies to consider when silence or strict neutrality might actually do more harm. Conflict-

development. Capacity of local actors is equally essential, as they are often best positioned to navigate sensitive dynamics and foster community resilience. Coordination across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus also plays a vital role. When actors align their efforts and share insights, they can better address not only immediate needs but also the structural drivers of conflict. Adaptability is key, with 'context adaptability' featured in some job descriptions in recent years. There is still work to do on creating feedback loops and engaging in course correction to avoid unintended harm and respond effectively to shifting realities.

The humanitarian **reset** should not limit itself to structures and financing. There are core definitions at stake: humanitarian aid should aim not just to alleviate suffering, but to build connections rather than divisions while supporting people affected by disasters and wars. The aid sector has documented plenty of examples where aid that facilitated inter-group collaboration, such as joint infrastructure or livelihood projects, also helped to foster dialogue and interdependence. However, this doesn't happen automatically; it requires intentional choices that support such outcomes. In the age of disinformation and polarization, humanitarians who employ strategic communication that emphasize shared interests and human dignity can help shift divisive narratives. And where feasible, humanitarian aid should aim to challenge the structural inequalities, including gender inequalities, that fuel conflict, reinforcing a longer-term vision of peace and justice (the elusive triple nexus).

One thing that long-term Do No Harm practitioners know is that adhering to this principle is not a static or technocratic task. It is a continuous, context-driven practice that requires courage, reflection, and responsiveness. In today's increasingly volatile and politically charged humanitarian environments, recommitting to conflict sensitivity means acknowledging complexity, embracing ethical nuance, and utilizing every available tool (existing frameworks, digital platforms, or tools for joint planning and reflection) to minimize harm and support more just and resilient communities.

sensitive aid must therefore grapple with these ethical tensions and strike a balance between access, principled action, and accountability to affected populations. The integration of new technologies into humanitarian operations adds further complexity. As explored earlier, the use of digital tools like biometric registration can unintentionally produce new forms of vulnerability and harm, particularly when deployed without full consideration of local dynamics, data protection, or potential misuse by political actors. These risks must be anticipated and addressed in mitigation strategies from the outset.

Recommitting to conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm means ensuring that conflict sensitivity is not treated as a one-time assessment but a dynamic and ongoing process. It begins with nuanced and evolving conflict analysis and strives for inclusive engagement with a diverse set of actors, including **women** and **youth** organizations, and recognizing their contributions to peacebuilding and

Isabella Jean is a senior advisor and learning partner to international and local organizations, bilateral donors, private foundations, and UN agencies with over 20 years of experience. Her advisory work focuses on improving effectiveness and accountability in aid and philanthropy, as well as on equity and strategies supporting locally led action. She has extensive experience documenting promising institutional and programmatic practices and strengthening capacities for conflict sensitivity, peacebuilding, humanitarian effectiveness, and accountability to local communities. Isabella has expertise in applying systems thinking methodologies to enhance context analysis, programme design, and evaluation, and has helped to integrate systems thinking into the work of several multi-disciplinary teams. She facilitates collaborative learning and action research with partners in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Caucasus region and advises policymakers, executives, and programme teams at humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development organizations. While serving as Director of Collaborative Learning at CDA, Isabella co-authored a widely acclaimed critique of the externally driven aid model, published in 2012, Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of Aid.

Isabella taught graduate-level courses on strategic design and M&E of peacebuilding at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, where she served on the Alumni Board. She was a guest lecturer at the Rotary Peace Program hosted by Duke University and University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill for five years. Previously, Isabella directed training programmes at a Boston community organizing network and conducted evaluation and policy research for the Institute for Responsive Education, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Coexistence International. In 2001, she was named Thomas J. Watson Fellow and conducted independent research on "Building Bridges: Youth-Led Coexistence Initiatives" in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Cyprus.