

# The learning process of the Local Capacities for Peace Project

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## Where does the Local Capacities for Peace Project come from?

The changes in the world in the wake of the Cold War have altered the circumstances in which humanitarian and development agencies work. Violent conflicts surfaced in many countries – conflicts that the international powers did not or would not support or mediate. The roles of humanitarian agencies began to shift. Aid agencies either identified new roles for themselves or were asked by their donors to take on functions they had not previously filled.

The new circumstances propelled aid workers into situations of increasing danger that affected them, their projects, and the beneficiaries of aid. It became increasingly apparent that aid given in a context of conflict is itself a part of that context. This is simply unavoidable. Further, it was clear that the way in which aid is given can, under some circumstances, have exacerbating effects on the conflict.

The negative effects of aid are inadvertent and unintentional, but that does not diminish the need to avoid them. Rather, it sends a call to all our colleagues to be aware of these effects and to do our work in such a way as to minimise them – to ‘do no harm’. It is also possible in some cases to give aid in a way that can help mitigate violence and provide the people involved in the conflict with the space – the breathing room – to build their peace.

If aid is found to support a war effort, should aid agencies and practitioners continue to give it? The resounding answer given by aid workers all over the world is that the needs of suffering people are too important to ignore and, further, that there can be no justification for not assisting suffering people. Inevitably, the next question is: how can one provide aid in the context of conflict without exacerbating the conflict?

The Local Capacities for Peace Project (LCPP) was formed in 1994 to address this concern. If aid becomes a part of the context, how does this happen? The LCPP was created to learn how aid and conflict interact in order to help aid workers find a way to address human needs in conflict situations without feeding conflict.<sup>1</sup>

## **What does this paper do?**

This paper will not repeat the lessons learned through the LCPP in any depth. Those have been amply detailed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it will discuss the processes and approaches of the LCPP. It will show how the methodology of the LCPP was designed to address an issue of serious concern to aid practitioners and to generate lessons based on experience that could be translated into a practical and useable tool to improve the impacts of aid programming. The paper will also discuss how the learning process of the LCPP was designed and what results were gained at each step. Finally, it will show how the results were fed back to the participating organisations.

## **Inductive process of the LCPP**

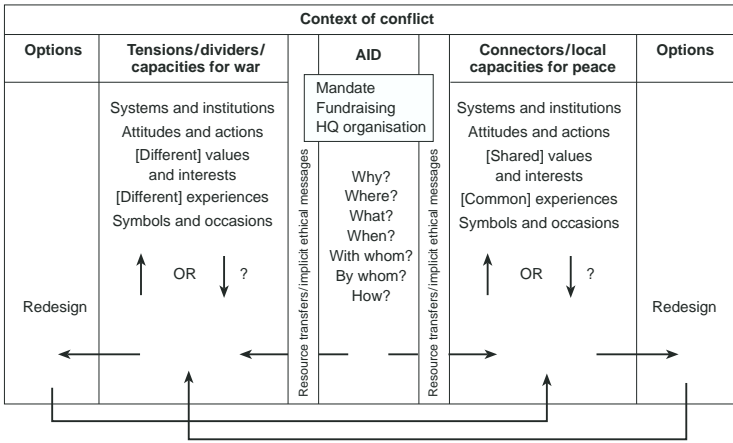
The LCPP was designed to gather its results inductively, working from the experience of people in the field towards a general application of the lessons. Why use an inductive process? What are its advantages and what can be learned by using this approach?

The inductive process is engaging. It starts where the people are, with their daily experiences, their dilemmas, and their observations. The inductive process is cumulative. It proceeds from the particular to the general by taking many individual experiences and comparing them in the search for patterns. The inductive process is wide ranging and realist. It accepts the validity of everyone's experiences and follows where these lead. The inductive process is pragmatic. As patterns are found, lessons can be drawn about options for action available in similar situations.

Furthermore, for humanitarian professionals there is an additional reason to use an inductive learning process. Humanitarian work has a direct impact on the quality of people's lives. It is, therefore, essential to base a learning process that is intended to improve humanitarian work on people's actual lives and actual experiences.

How did the LCPP use an inductive process? The LCPP involved four phases. The first gathered information about the relationships between aid programmes and conflict and the experiences were written up as case

**Figure 1: Framework for considering the impact of aid on conflict**



studies. The second phase added to the learning through ‘feedback workshops’ where these earlier experiences were shared with aid practitioners in a variety of venues. In these workshops, participants added their experiences and insights through their confirmations of, and challenges to, the lessons drawn from the case studies. In the course of the second phase a practical tool in the form of a framework for understanding and predicting the relations between aid and conflict was developed. The third phase focused on implementing the lessons learned and the application of the framework at the field level in ongoing projects in situations of conflict. Field staff used the framework tool to analyse the impact of their project in situations of conflict (see Figure 1). Twice-yearly consultations with representatives from all of the project sites supported the generalisation of lessons learned by specific projects. The fourth and current phase is that of mainstreaming the lessons and approaches of the LCPP in a number of participating organisations. Each of the four stages has contributed to understanding the issues and to learning how to improve humanitarian work. The following sections describe each phase in more detail.

### **Experience-based learning Phase I: case studies (1994–1996)**

In order to learn about the interaction of aid in conflict, it was necessary to gather an initial set of information and to see if there were

common experiences among aid practitioners. The LCPP began by looking at the activities and projects of 15 agencies in 14 conflict zones and by writing up these stories as case studies. The studies covered a wide range of agencies and types of intervention, as well as a number of different regions of the world and types of conflict in the expectation that breadth of coverage is necessary for generalisable learning.<sup>3</sup>

The case study writers were people in the aid community who had expressed concerns about aid in the context of conflict and wanted to learn more about how the two interact. Some wrote about their own experiences or those of their organisation; others were 'outsiders' to the project they examined. Writers were charged with a straightforward task. They were asked, first, to describe the context of the conflict; second, to describe the aid intervention; and, third, to describe the interactions between the conflict and the aid. Finally, they were asked to discuss the reasons for what had happened from their perspective, as well as from the points of view of people in the field (aid workers, beneficiaries, and others).

The case study writers made site visits and had extensive conversations with practitioners on the ground, both expatriate and local staff. They talked with people who were beneficiaries of the project and with people who did not benefit directly. The writers did not work with pre-set interview protocols or questionnaires but engaged people to tell their own stories in their own way.

The organisations about whom the case studies were written were involved in the LCPP in a number of different ways. Some had been asked by their donors to participate. In other cases, the headquarters either suggested a field site or their field staff lobbied to be included. All were motivated by the shared concern about the interactions of aid with conflict. They were willing to risk 'exposure' in the expectation that the learning gathered would be of practical use. Encouraging as many organisations as possible to join the project ensured that the ownership was broadly spread and that the learning was representative.

Case studies take a snapshot of experience. Putting a series of snapshots side by side allows common themes and patterns to appear. It also makes it possible to identify contextual differences. Distilling the commonalities and the particularities is the challenge to learning from case studies. The LCPP convened groups to read and analyse the cases. These groups consisted of the case writers, people from the war zones where the studies had been written, and other aid practitioners. They began the process of sorting the information for its practical application.

The process identified enough patterns about the impact of aid on situations of conflict to agree to the production of a booklet for broader consideration. This booklet, *Do No Harm: Supporting Local Capacities for Peace through Aid*, was conceived as a work-in-progress and invited readers to contact the LCPP 'with your own ideas and insights so these can be incorporated into the lessons learned to be widely shared among the assistance community at work in conflict settings' (Anderson 1996:i).<sup>4</sup> It was recognised that the case studies were not sufficient in and of themselves to provide much more than a starting point, identifying some common themes. While the cases had amply confirmed the fact that aid and conflict interact with each other, they had barely begun to chart the mechanisms involved in how these interactions take place.

## **Experience-based learning Phase II: feedback workshops (1996–1998)**

Accepting its own challenge as presented in the booklet, the LCPP set out to involve many more people in testing and adding to what had been learned through the case studies. 'Feedback workshops' were used to introduce more people and all of their experiences into the mix. These workshops were arranged in collaboration with aid agency personnel in the field and at headquarters. Over an 18-month period, over 25 feedback workshops were run in 20 settings. Most of these were in regions of conflict, including some in the locations where case studies had been written. Others were held in agency headquarters in European and North American cities.

The LCPP recruited and trained a cadre of workshop facilitators. Some of these were aid agency staff whose time was donated to this effort. All the facilitators had had experience in humanitarian or development assistance and, along with LCPP staff, put together a manual for trainers. This manual was designed for use by aid agencies in their own training programmes so that the process could continue beyond the availability of the cadre of LCPP trainers.

Feedback workshops usually lasted three days and included a series of sessions designed to elicit participants' own experiences of working with aid in conflict situations. Participants were asked to challenge, support, add to, and amend the learning from the case studies. The facilitators led the sessions and gathered the results of discussions, feeding them back into the LCPP learning process.

This phase of the LCPP's inductive process directly involved over 750 additional practitioners from about 100 agencies in generating ideas

and insights. One or two organisations hosted each workshop, but all agencies in the area were invited to participate and to send someone to share their own and the agency's experiences. People in the workshops often told the LCPP that these events gave them a rare opportunity to step away from their daily work and, with colleagues from other agencies, to consider the impacts that their aid programmes were having. They often found that the sharing of these ideas led to creative responses to some of the difficulties they were encountering.

Engaging this wide range of people with their broad variety of experience ensured that the learning was both grounded in the complexity of real life and relevant across many circumstances. Introducing additional people into the LCPP through the feedback workshops was equivalent in some ways to adding a further 750 case studies (or more, because many participants had experience of providing aid in more than one conflict area). This testing of and adding to the patterns and commonalities identified by the case studies focused and improved the quality of the learning.

Involving more people and agencies in the learning process also ensured that the ownership of ideas would be more widely disseminated. It was never anticipated that the findings of the LCPP would 'belong' solely to the project. It was intended from the beginning that aid agencies and practitioners would take up whatever information was generated by the project. The feedback workshops were a part of the process of spreading and increasing ownership through the dissemination of ideas and also the challenging of those ideas. At the end of every workshop, the learning of the project was greater than before.

At the end of the feedback-workshop phase, the LCPP was able to produce a workable and generalisable tool for analysing the impacts of aid on conflict. The 'Do No Harm Framework' came from the people participating in the workshops, as together they applied their wide range of experiences to the issue. In order to further the spread of the knowledge gained by the project, the LCPP produced a book detailing this tool.<sup>5</sup>

The feedback workshops transformed the patterns emerging from the information in the case studies into a general and common framework of knowledge for understanding the impacts that aid projects can have on conflict. Useful and necessary as this was, the challenge remained to take these general lessons and apply them to particular situations. If the patterns identified and confirmed during the first two phases of the LCPP were, in fact, relevant for aid

practitioners, they needed to be translatable into a form that was practical for use in the daily activities of aid workers.

### **Experience-based learning Phase III: implementation (1998–2000)**

The LCPP is about aid agencies doing their work better. The third phase of the project set out to apply the knowledge gained through the first two phases and the LCPP proposed implementing the ‘Do No Harm Framework’ in actual field sites. The purpose of this effort was to demonstrate the usefulness of the framework to inform and improve the day-to-day decisions made by project staff in difficult situations around the world.

Fourteen agencies collaborated directly with the LCPP in testing the usefulness and practicality of the framework. They used it in their project design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and redesign. In order to ensure that everybody involved in a project was working from a common understanding, training sessions in the material and the use of the framework were held. Many agencies included local staff and the staff of local partner organisations in this training.

The projects were selected in a variety of ways. In some organisations, the headquarters picked a project to implement the framework and requested that the team in the field make themselves available to participate in the LCPP. Some of the projects were picked by people who were themselves running projects and had heard about or been exposed to the LCPP and found it interesting and worthwhile to attempt to apply it to their own work.

The LCPP’s role was to provide a ‘liaison’ person for each project. The role of this person was, first, to run training sessions on the lessons learned for the people at the project site. Second, s/he served as an adviser on how to use the framework and to help focus the discussions. Third, the liaison person was responsible for returning to the project site every three months to perform additional facilitating or training as needed, and to keep the approach in the forefront of the project team’s minds. And, fourth, s/he was responsible for documenting the learning and feeding the experience gathered back into the project.

In addition to supporting the liaison work at the project sites, the LCPP convened biannual consultations. These consultations gathered the liaison people together with people participating in the projects from the field, as well as with people from the headquarters of the agencies involved, and even some donors. Participants shared their

experiences of using the framework. The most interesting discussions involved using the whole group to generate ideas and options to deal with the difficulties faced by a particular project.

The implementation phase covered a full three years. It was felt that this was the minimum time needed to be able to assess the impacts of the use of the tool. Three years were sufficient to establish some indications about aid's impacts on conflict and to identify the *significant* impacts on conflict of six major types of decisions made by aid projects.<sup>6</sup> A manual was produced discussing the impact of these decisions and offering several options for aid projects.

Implementation served to test the framework produced from the two preceding phases and also generated a new set of experiences that added to and tested the learning. Furthermore, it provided a way to check on the knowledge gained and the lessons learned in the previous two phases of the project.

The implementation incorporated the general and common lessons and provided the opportunity to use those lessons in a particular place to achieve a particular result. The learning process, in some sense, came full circle, though it did not cease. Several hundred more aid practitioners were involved in the implementation phase of the LCPP. They too challenged, tested, and added to the learning. The continuing addition of people exposed to the LCPP and involved in refining the framework, as well as adding to its basis, further spread the ownership of these ideas among the aid community.

## **The power of the learning process of the LCPP as embodied in the Framework**

The Do No Harm Framework is an evolving tool. While its overall structure has remained the same since it was first developed out of the feedback workshops, using it in practice has further refined the details which the framework can emphasise. Also, several agencies have adapted it to better integrate it into their own procedures. This constant testing under practical conditions goes on and so continues to push the development and usefulness of the tool.

The experience of using this framework has allowed agencies to map the interactions of their aid within contexts of conflict. It has also offered three interrelated benefits. First, it has helped aid workers develop specific criteria for making decisions and be able to articulate clearly the reasons for those decisions in a manner that can be shared easily. Field staff are responsible for making good decisions and they often need to be



able to explain these decisions to their headquarters and donors, as well as to the local communities. In situations of uncertainty, where levels of fear and distrust are high, being able to communicate clearly and transparently can greatly improve the ability to do the work well.

Second, the framework has encouraged a rigorous emphasis on facts. This leads agencies to make their implicit decisions explicit and helps prevent misguided assumptions. It also encourages agencies to rely on the knowledge of their local staff. Several agencies have commented that involving local staff in the LCPP sessions has led to greater understanding of the context for all involved as well as steering the programming in clearer directions.

Third, the framework has supported a continuous critical inquiry into the way in which agencies do their work. Agencies have reported that in using the Do No Harm Framework they can see their actual impacts more clearly and therefore can make informed decisions, rather than decisions based on an assumed impact. Organisations want to do their work well and the framework has encouraged an honest appraisal of good work. Many agencies have reported uncovering ‘honest mistakes’ on their part, which has led them to change their programming procedures to avoid such pitfalls in the future.

## **Experience-based learning Phase IV: mainstreaming (2001)**

Three related issues raised in the consultations encouraged the continuation of the LCPP into a fourth phase. All three concerned the interactions of work in the field with responses of headquarters and donors.

The first issue was a difficulty raised by the field staff using the framework. They found that donor policies and agency headquarters policies could themselves have an exacerbating influence on conflict. This led to a paper produced by the LCPP about the responsibilities of donors and headquarters staff when dealing with projects in conflict situations (Anderson 1999b).

The second issue was also a concern raised by field staff. They found that donors and headquarters staff often had attitudes and policies that hampered the uptake of the Do No Harm Framework by field staff – even if the field staff were interested in doing so. This concern was also expressed in a broader fashion, encompassing a general concern by field staff about the influence of donors and headquarters on the uptake of any new idea or method.

The third issue sprang from the acknowledgement by agency headquarters of their influence on the uptake of ideas. Headquarters staff were interested in spreading the concepts of the LCPP throughout their organisations. The implementation efforts had succeeded in imparting the existing lessons learned by the LCPP to the staff directly involved in a particular field site. However, the organisations themselves had not been sufficiently exposed to the broad learning in a way that would ensure the framework could be adopted in other areas. This was also expressed in a broader fashion, concerning the ways in which humanitarian agencies as a whole learn and implement new ideas and methods.

A fourth phase of the LCPP was proposed to address these three concerns. It was decided to focus on the third of these issues, the issue of organisational learning, and to address the other two as adjunct to this process. This fourth phase of the LCPP was named the ‘mainstreaming’ phase to reflect its concern with bringing the LCPP to the mainstream of humanitarian practice.

The purpose of this phase was conceived of in two ways. By exposing more people to the Do No Harm Framework, the knowledge base of the LCPP could again be extended and expanded through involving more people from the aid community. In addition, the LCPP would use the framework as a test case to learn about organisational learning in humanitarian agencies.

The agencies involved looked upon this as an opportunity to increase the integration of the framework tool into their operational procedures. While the third phase of the LCPP had in large part limited the use of the framework to one field project, the mainstreaming phase would engage a wider range of staff, both in the field and at the headquarters. It was remarked that this process would put the field and the headquarters ‘on the same page’.

How an organisation establishes these linkages within itself to promote the uptake of an idea or a tool – and the incorporation of the tool into their operations – was also seen as a desired outcome by the agencies. A varied approach was taken to answer this question. The LCPP began a wide-ranging discussion with agencies about how to proceed. Agencies were encouraged to think about their own strategies for mainstreaming other ideas (e.g. gender, the environment, the use of computers). This prior experience informed the strategies that agencies could use in the course of the fourth phase of the LCPP.

Each participating agency identified its own way to proceed. These varied quite a bit, depending on a number of factors including agency

size, partnering strategies, and types of field activity. The LCPP offered support to the agencies through conversations about prior and current strategies. The LCPP also offered continuing training, but in this phase with an emphasis on integrating it into an organisation-wide strategy.

All of the strategies identified and used by agencies built upon existing linkages between people in the field and the headquarters staff. These relationships vary from agency to agency on a range of issues such as differing perspectives on autonomy and direction, policy and implementation, and impact of donor decisions.

The mainstreaming phase was scheduled to last only one year. It was understood by the LCPP and the agencies that such a short time is not sufficient to mainstream an idea. However, it was felt to be long enough to begin the mainstreaming process and to learn important lessons about how humanitarian organisations learn and implement their learning.

Again, two biannual consultations were scheduled to gather the experience of the agencies involved. The second of these was held at the end of November 2001, and will be followed by an LCPP publication outlining what was learned in this phase of the project, and ways in which people think about how their organisation can take up and implement any idea.<sup>7</sup>

## **An additional note on the consultations**

The consultations have been found to be among the most important parts of the process. They have provided a supportive setting in which to discuss issues that were being raised on the ground. The wide range of experiences of participants encouraged the flow of ideas and facilitated problem solving.

Agencies brought their problems of working in contexts of conflict to the consultations and the group was always able to generate some options. Agencies also brought their solutions, which would soon be tested at other project sites. The consultations always had an emphasis on the refinement of the learning and allowed for the constant practice of using the methodology. The consultations also provided a forum for developing and deepening professional relationships. Information and techniques continue to be disseminated among the people who participated in the consultations.

## **Summary**

The learning process of the LCPP demonstrates four things. First, it demonstrates how a large amount of experience can be gathered in a

fairly short period of time. Second, it shows how that experience and data can be transformed into a useful and practical tool. Third, it shows how such a process can be designed to increase and refine learning over time, while also leading to actions that improve project impacts. And, fourth, it shows how a process can be organised to engage many people to increase ownership of the learning process, and, therefore, the use of the lessons once learned.

Case studies are limited – only so many can be written, and this limited set of information seldom leads to an acceptable platform for generating practical responses to the issues raised. They can serve to establish the existence of common, general themes across a range of specific experience. However, in order to develop practical responses to the lessons outlined in case studies, it is necessary to take further steps.

Once a series of experiences has been collected, in this instance through case studies, it is equally important to involve as many people as possible into the process of gathering the lessons from those experiences. There is a continuing responsibility to involve as much experience as possible in the project. Engaging people with an issue they have identified as important ensures that the project will benefit from this experience. It also ensures that the outcomes will be relevant to the experience of the people involved.

Implementing the findings tests their operational practicality. The process of putting something into practice reveals the limitations and the strengths of the prior learning. The practical application of the lessons highlights concerns and demonstrates where the project can have an immediate impact. It also highlights those places where more work needs to be done in the project. Furthermore, implementation involves another set of people in the process and the project continues to learn from their experience.

The aid field has a vast number of highly intelligent and thoughtful people who are involved in discussions about how to work better. Engaging these people can only improve the quality of all our work. The challenges that people bring to bear on an issue from their own experience open up great possibilities for learning and for acting.

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## Notes

- 1 The funding of the LCPP was a two-part process. Funds came from both existing donors and from participating agencies.

By design, the LCPP was funded by a large number of the donor governments and agencies. This encouraged the agencies from those countries to be involved, which also spread knowledge

around the world. Further, the information and lessons coming out of the LCPP could not be seen as belonging to one country or reflective of one country's experience. Spreading the funding over a wide number of donors encouraged a wide sense of ownership. It was also understood that donors give more than money. Their encouragement of a project can increase the involvement of NGOs. The LCPP encouraged donors to take an active part in the project through participation in the consultations and some work in the field. Some of the donors have done so in the course of the LCPP. These additional elements increase donor ownership of the project and its results, and provide valuable insights throughout the process.

The agencies involved in the LCPP were encouraged to offer some of the time of their staff as in-kind payments. The project estimates that 30 per cent of the LCPP budget has come from donations from agencies, both cash and in kind. For a list of donors please refer to the Collaborative for Development Action, Inc. (CDA) website at: [www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com).

- 2 Mary B. Anderson has written numerous pieces on the lessons learned by the LCPP. See the References for some examples, as well as CDA's website.
- 3 The case studies were written about 15 projects in 14 conflict zones, including Bosnia, Burundi, Guatemala, Lebanon, Somalia, and Tajikistan. For a complete list and the text of some of the cases, please refer to the CDA website.
- 4 This booklet, the first titled *Do No Harm*, has been superseded by the 1999 book. CDA does not 'stand behind' this booklet, as it was never intended to produce a final document. If you possess a copy, CDA requests that you recycle it. Do not use it as a reference. Quotations from this work-in-progress

have led to many misunderstandings about the nature of the LCPP.

- 5 See Anderson (1999a: Chapter 6) for an introduction to the 'Do No Harm Framework for Analysing the Impact of Aid on Conflict'.
- 6 The six major types of decisions faced by aid agencies are detailed in Anderson (2000: Sections 2–7). Briefly, they are decisions about who should receive aid; about staffing of field programmes; about local partners; about what to provide; about how to provide aid; and about working with local authorities.
- 7 Heinrich and Wallace (2000) have collected the experience of agencies in mainstreaming the 'Do No Harm Framework' into their organisational experience.

## References

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