Dealing with Conflict

CAN BE USED FOR:

- ☐ Developing durable solutions to land and resource-based conflicts
- ☐ Preventing or mediating land disputes
- ☐ Improving inclusivity within conflict mediation processes
- ☐ Improving resilience of communities, women and marginalised groups to violent contexts

TOOL #1

Identify root causes & drivers of conflict

In order to effectively deal with conflict, it is vital to understand precisely how and why it emerges and what elements are likely to create, provoke or de-escalate potential conflict. This will vary depending on the specific context. A good start is to engage with local stakeholders in ways that help build trust and explore their perspectives on the problems at hand. Although certain issues such as water scarcity or historical boundary disputes may appear as the cause of the conflict on the surface, this process can help to reveal other factors such as miscommunication, lack of information and cultural barriers, which can be thought of as conflict 'hotspots'. It is important that all stakeholders in the conflict are able to participate in this process in a meaningful manner, including stakeholders that may not at first be visible in the dominant narrative of the conflict told by the central figures. For example, marginalised or silenced groups, minorities, women or youth may not initially appear as stakeholders, but they may nevertheless have unique, important and meaningful views or roles in the conflict and its resolution. Creating a conflict 'map' of all relevant stakeholders and their stake in the conflict is a helpful method to ensure that important insights are not missed. Ideally, this conflict map should be seen as a 'living document' that does not remain the same but can change as local circumstances change. Therefore, the mapping process should be seen as a continual process so that conflict hotspots are continually re-evaluated to reflect changing circumstances on the ground.

Collaboratively developed solutions

Once conflict hotspots have been identified, the focus can switch to how they can be addressed. Part of the reason that existing conflict resolution mechanisms may prove ineffective is that conflicting parties were not involved in deciding the 'rules' and procedure for resolving their conflict or the development of solutions. State-run dispute mechanisms, for example, tend to focus on financial penalties or compensation as opposed to developing contextually relevant and constructive solutions that benefit both parties and respond directly to their needs.

> **"Farmers and herders themselves were often not involved in formulating solutions. This meant they were not win-win, and would therefore never be long-lasting."**
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> SALI DJANGO (MBOSCUDA, CAMEROON)

In Cameroon, for example, the Mbororo Social and Cultural Association (**MBOSCUDA**) has facilitated several conflict resolution platforms that identified water scarcity as a key source of conflict between farmers and pastoralists. Together with the communities in question, they focused on how to develop water sources and protect the catchment area. A water management committee was set up consisting of representatives from both communities, and wider measures, such as minimising the felling of trees, were agreed upon. Other communities have come to ask for help having witnessed the success they have had, and the concept is starting to spread.

Inter-cultural dialogue

Cultural differences are often intertwined with land and resource conflicts and can create invisible barriers to reaching understanding and agreement. Overlooking these is likely to undermine long-term success in conflict prevention or resolution processes. Sensitising different groups to the reasons behind the perspectives, behaviours or cultural values held by others is therefore a crucial part of trying to understand, resolve or prevent conflicts. This is relevant not only for conflicting parties themselves to understand, but also for any potential mediator, be they traditional authorities, government officials or CSOs, as even mediators can bring a bundle of assumptions, values and experience that may colour their interpretation of a conflict.

Sensitisation can be worked into existing platforms such as community dialogues, local radio and other media, and ongoing development or capacity building activities. In its simplest form, it is about getting to know the other side - putting yourself in their situation and trying to understand their perspective and how it differs from yours. Engaging networks of actors that already hold trust or legitimacy from certain groups is an effective way to strengthen this communication. Examples can be CSOs that have worked with specific communities, or farmer cooperatives and unions active in the area and known to the relevant community.

Navigating violence

In certain contexts, it may not be possible to bring people together for dialogue due to safety or security risks. Where threats, criminalisation, or violence against Indigenous Peoples, local communities, community leaders and/or land, environment, or human rights defenders is a risk or is treated with impunity by authorities, ensuring safety for community members should be a priority and constant consideration. Building community resilience is crucial in circumstances of potential safety risks and security threats. A core component of community resilience is internal unity, something that can be weakened by the presence of external investors and security forces. Helping communities to strengthen and see the value in their shared values, cultural practices and traditional land management systems can help to bring them together. CSOs can assist in facilitating the process of affirming shared community values and aspirations, strengthening the integrity of shared cultural and traditional-knowledge institutions (especially, for example, celebrating the role of women within the community), and conceptualising inclusive community development plans that embody these shared values - a process which is key in minimising internal conflict.

These community plans can include components such as organising forest guards or community-based security protocols to help navigate violent contexts and address the safety risks identified by the community.

It is also important to remember that women, and Indigenous women in particular, are often disproportionately affected by conflict and violence. This violence can also come from within the community itself. Training Indigenous women in leadership skills and ways of how to carry out human rights defender work can start to challenge the patriarchal violence that they face.

> **"It is essential to work with women themselves to develop a shared vision and strategy. Empowerment should help them to advocate from their own perspectives."**
>
> ABBY DUPALE
> (LILAK, PHILIPPINES)

With this goal in mind, LILAK works with Indigenous women in five communities in the Philippines through the Indigenous Women Human Rights Defenders Program. Training is provided on documenting cases of domestic and gender-based violence, as well as patterns of economic and socio-cultural violence. It also aims to strengthen women's knowledge of their rights by providing legal information in an easily understandable manner. This has enabled women to feel able to stand up and actively participate in conflict mediation processes from which they are often excluded.

Things to consider and anticipate

- ☐ **LIVELIHOOD NEEDS**. One of the key factors underlying land conflicts is competing livelihood needs of different land-users. CSOs must first educate themselves on the livelihood requirements of conflicting parties in order to be able to contribute towards meaningful solutions. Conflicts that may appear at first to be about competing claims to land may in fact be caused by livelihood needs that are very similar but are being pursued in inconsistent ways. Distinguishing between the positions of the parties to the conflict (what they want) vs the interests they are pursuing (why they want it) is an important first step.

- ☐ **CULTURAL EDUCATION**. Similarly, cultural differences and rivalries are also key factors that may not be visible if solutions are narrowly focused on land or resource-use. Ensuring that mediators, government officials and conflicting communities understand the cultural reasons behind the actions of certain groups can help to diffuse conflict before it escalates.

- ☐ **FAIR REPRESENTATION AND VOICE**. Perceived biases should be identified and addressed in order to help conflicting parties engage in solution-seeking processes. Working with a diverse network of organisations that are already known and trusted by parties to the conflict can help to overcome this challenge. Identifying social, cultural and gender barriers that may prevent the fair representation of important stakeholders, for example women, youth or minorities within a community, is an important step to ensuring that all interests in the conflict are taken into account and that all parties have a say in the resolution process and potential solution. Solutions that ignore the voices of those silenced in the resolution process are unlikely to resolve all aspects of the conflict and may therefore lead to superficial or short-term solutions and future conflict.

- ☐ **AVAILABLE PROCESSES**. It is easier to prevent and resolve conflict at an early stage when people are aware of the mediation options available to them, and feel empowered and able to access and participate meaningfully in these. Providing clear information about the range of choices available and their advantages and disadvantages is essential to helping local communities design a conflict resolution process that responds to their needs and concerns. CSOs can play an important role in ensuring that this discussion process is inclusive and that special needs or concerns of different groups or community members are identified and taken into account.

Community-led dialogue platforms

The formation of dialogue platforms consisting of elected volunteer representatives designed to facilitate conflict management at village level.

In the North West region of Cameroon, conflicts often trace back to the use and control of land and natural resources between different user groups, such as herders, farmers and fishermen. The Agropastoral Commission is the government institution charged with mediating these conflicts, but the mechanisms in place have proven ineffective and the law on conflict management is outdated. Given this context, MBOSCUDA, which works on developing long-term solutions to poverty and inequality for people in Cameroon's North West Region, sought to facilitate alternative forms of mediation.

This process started by identifying conflict hotspots together with diverse stakeholders, including representatives from the government administration. It became clear that there was a need for better communication and dialogue, and so communities experiencing land conflict were asked to put together committees called dialogue platforms[24]. These could take the structure and organisational form deemed appropriate by the community themselves, but with the basic premise that they were formed of volunteer representatives chosen by the communities to mediate conflicting parties and help them to reach an agreement.

The role of MBOSCUDA was to provide training and capacity building in conflict mediation, as well as maintaining a conflict database to assist with evaluation and learning. The idea is to prevent conflict from emerging in the first place, but if it does then to have an established and locally-recognised platform already in place to deal with it.

The organisational structures and internal processes of these dialogue platforms were not set in stone, but subject to constant re-evaluation, and were also context dependent. Some platforms hold regular meetings, whilst others only meet to preside over an emerging conflict. This approach started to achieve success, and other communities started to come and request assistance in setting up their own dialogue platforms. Representatives from existing platforms were invited to be part of the training process, and their enthusiasm and expertise rooted in lived experiences were key to the spread of the concept. Another key to their success has been their acceptance by background stakeholders such as the Agropastoral Commission and local authorities, achieved by emphasising that these structures were not there to replace their authority but rather to make their jobs easier and diffuse conflicts before they became real issues. Now more than 100 such platforms exist, with both herders and croppers involved and gender and ethnicity also taken into account to ensure fair representation.

These platforms could then be used as the basis for collaboration in building longer-term conflict resolution strategies as well as other development activities. For example it became clear that perceived encroachment was a major

source of conflict. Rather than deal with this by seeking to define borders, which would always be a contentious process, communities were encouraged to look at why this encroachment was happening. Scarcity and degradation of land and resources such as water were found to be central to this, and so water management committees were set up to protect catchment areas and the concept of alliance farming was developed. This promoted collaboration, for example allowing herders to graze their animals on farmland in certain periods of the year in return for the fertility building service provided by the animals' manure. The dialogue platforms also served as the basis for intercultural dialogues that helped to minimise conflict by understanding each other's cultural values and the reasons for certain behaviours that might appear offensive.

24   MBOSCUDA (2014). Mediation in the management of conflicts over agro-pastoral resources: Training guide for facilitators of community-based dialogue platforms of agro-pastoral resource stakeholders. [Online]. Available at: http://mboscuda.org/Joomlasite/attachments/article/73/Conflict%20Mediation%20Manual.pdf