

NOTE NO 2

Programming flexibly for situations of conflict and fragility

ADJUSTING, LEARNING, ADJUSTING

Topic overview

Situations of conflict and fragility are subject to unstable and rapidly changing circumstances. As a consequence, programming has to allow for a higher degree of flexibility. The information base in fragile states is usually very weak. Programming needs to deal with a high degree of uncertainty. Consequently, it must make use of iterative analysis and assessment and be sufficiently flexible to deal with new information that can radically change the assumptions upon which the original programming was developed.

The mid-term review process provides a formal mechanism for changing a programme's direction, and this provides sufficient flexibility for most situations. But in other situations, the degree of instability is too great to rely on a mid-term review for adjusting the programming. Adaptation to change must be built in right from the start. The new EU programming guidelines allow for a shorter two-year programming period, which has been used in some countries such as Yemen and Zimbabwe (Box 1).

This topic note looks at the case of post-tsunami reconstruction assistance to Sri Lanka, which represented one of those situations where it was clear from the onset that a highly flexible approach to programming would be needed. In response, an innovative scenario approach was developed.

Key issues

Issues and dilemmas that have arisen in trying to programme flexibly include the following.

- **Programming flexibly while keeping programmes simple.** Keeping programmes simple is key to their being flexible in practice, but it is not straightforward or easy to achieve this. Making programmes flexible often means leaving a number of options open — which usually tends to increase their complexity.
- **Seeking and making continual use of new information.** In areas that are fragile and affected by conflict, there is rarely enough time, information or insight to develop a full understanding of situations — or sometimes even to be confident about the choice of partners. The ideal of starting with a full assessment and then proceeding

SUMMARY

- Scenario planning can be used in programming and formulation documents to anticipate changes so the Delegation can respond more effectively in fluid conflict and fragile contexts.
- Programming should keep options open on the use and combination of different instruments — the swift use of the IfS (now the IcSP) can be particularly successful when facilitated by programming that foresees the potential need for combining various instruments.
- There is rarely enough information to make decisions and choices with full confidence. It is often necessary to engage in a more complex process whereby analysis and assessment is continuous to allow adjustment when circumstances change and/or new information and insight comes to light.
- Programming should set achievable targets and keep the level of ambition realistic.
- Programming under the Multiannual Financial Framework can facilitate EU support to established long-term objectives with the ability to change intervention strategies at short notice to best contribute to those objectives.

BOX 1 Short-term programming in Zimbabwe: combining long-term programming objectives with short-term flexibility on intervention strategies

Aid programming for Zimbabwe up to now has been done on the basis of annual short-term strategies. This has allowed some space and flexibility for the Delegation to be able to change the strategy or adapt priorities to maximise the impact of its interventions. However, it was recognised that the short-term strategy concept should go further than simply putting the normal programming process on a shorter cycle — i.e. going through the lengthy programming process every year, including project identification, formulation and approval. It was also recognised that EU activities in Zimbabwe in most areas of engagement pursue long-term objectives that are unlikely to change on a yearly basis, although the modalities of engagement and intervention strategies may need to change, given the volatile political context.

There has been a gradual acknowledgement that a mixed short-term strategy and long-term National Indicative Programme approach is best suited for EU engagement in Zimbabwe in the present situation, i.e.: a longer-term strategy, with the built-in possibility of reviewing priorities, financial allocations and modalities on a yearly basis, if needed, or when circumstances require. The new Multiannual Financial Framework recently adopted by the EU has a number of innovations that could improve flexibility in programming and accelerate decision-making in crisis or post-crisis situations as and when needed.

Source: EC, 'Enhancing the contribution of EU external assistance to addressing the security-fragility-development nexus', Zimbabwe Mission report, 2013.

confidently towards programming is seldom possible in practice. It is instead often necessary to engage in a more complex process whereby analysis and assessment are iterative. These analyses must also take into account balanced assessments of the risks of responding where not enough is known and the risks of not responding at all.

- **Balancing a high degree of responsiveness with the pursuit of long-term development objectives.** Programming must be flexible enough to offer a high degree of responsiveness. Yet simply reacting to conflicts and turmoil is not enough. Programming is meant to provide the means of engaging in longer-term development aims and, where possible, mitigating root causes of fragility and conflict. It is not easy to achieve a balance between short-term needs and long-term development aims.

Case study

Sri Lanka: planning flexibly with the use of scenarios

SOURCE



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CONTEXT

In the post-tsunami context and at the time of programming, Sri Lanka's 25-year internal conflict was still ongoing. The country had suffered sporadic civil war since the early 1980s. Various national attempts failed to resolve the problem. After the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987, conflict flared up again through the 1990s. A ceasefire agreement was signed in February 2002, but came under increasing duress from 2005 onwards.

A political settlement within a united Sri Lanka was the EU policy framework for all its aid, trade and political relations with the country. However, at the time of programming the ceasefire agreement looked unsustainable. There was an upsurge in violence, and the prospects for the peace process were gloomy. The years from 2002 to 2005 were known as the 'no peace — no war' period. The tsunami in late 2004 also had a devastating and destabilising impact on coastal communities. Full-scale war resumed in 2007 and ended with a violent government victory in 2009.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

One of the main challenges was how to programme support knowing that the situation of conflict was likely to vary considerably over the period. Conflict had been identified in earlier programmes as clearly the single most important obstacle to successful implementation of EC programmes and for the implementation of national development programmes. As a medium-income country, engagement in traditional development sectors was less relevant for Sri Lanka. The focus of EC assistance was on addressing conflict and conflict-affected communities from all three ethnic groups (Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim).

There was a difficult relationship with the government. Ceasefire violations by the government were documented by the international Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission as frequently exceeding that of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) insurgents. Suicide bombing attacks by LTTE and government aerial bombardments ensured heavy civilian losses. Human rights violations soared. The murder by government forces of 16 aid workers of ACF — an international NGO — went unresolved. Criticism of the government was silenced by assassination, 'white-van' abductions and disappearances. Death squads reigned. In general, there was a lack of trust and it was difficult to work through official government agencies in much of the country. The use of the Rapid Reaction Mechanism and later the IfS (now IcSP) was significant, as it allowed the Delegation to provide swift support to actors outside government institutions.

The conflict changed in 2006–07 as there was heavy fighting, particularly in the east while it was relatively calmer in insurgent-controlled areas in the north. But it was an uneasy calm, because all knew that if there was victory in the east, the conflict would turn to the north. From 2008, that is exactly what happened. The east became calmer and conflict became intense in the north. A geographic flexibility for delivery was thus needed to take advantages of periods of calm.

The listing of the LTTE by the EU as a terrorist group in 2007 made field-level implementation in LTTE-controlled areas more difficult. Subsequently, Sri Lanka's withdrawal from 'GSP+' — the enhanced generalised scheme of tariff preferences due to non-compliance with international conventions relating to human rights — deepened the animosity within the government towards the EU. The government believed that humanitarian, reconstruction and development aid resources had strengthened the LTTE. This had a further adverse impact on cooperation and added to the necessity of a flexible approach.

It was also considered important not to programme too pessimistically and find a means of responding to the opportunities offered by periods of relative peace where development work could be continued that might serve to mitigate if not address the root causes of the conflict. Close coordination with the ongoing work of ECHO was vigorously pursued for ensuring continuity of support throughout the cycle linking humanitarian, relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction and through to development.

ACTIONS TAKEN

- We first understood and took stock of lessons learned from earlier phases of cooperation.
 - Focusing support on stabilisation, peace and poverty reduction in the conflict-affected parts (north/east) — based on learning from earlier phases, it was decided to concentrate geographically instead of spreading too thinly.
 - Recognising that conflict moves over time — when one area is inaccessible due to conflict, another that might earlier have been under conflict may be relatively calm.
 - Being aware in the programming of how expensive and inefficient it can be to operate in a conflict zone — thus tempering the degree of ambition and the time scale for achievements.
 - Taking a flexible conflict-sensitive approach to delivery — recognising that ambitious integrated district development plans would not be feasible in all target districts and that the focus should be more on conflict-affected communities (see the [Sri Lanka case study](#) in Note No 5).
 - Recognising the particularly chronic needs of internally displaced persons — not only through short-term aid but also through medium-term aid to livelihoods, reconstruction and education across all three ethnic communities.
- We developed three scenarios to support flexible response:
 - Scenario 1: Positive Climate Towards Peace/Uneasy Peace
 - Scenario 2: Low-Intensity Conflict
 - Scenario 3: High-Intensity Conflict

Throughout 2005–09, all scenarios materialised — with low-intensity conflict intensifying during 2006 and 2007 — escalating to full-scale war over 2008 and 2009. We worked out in advance potential responses for our focal and non-focal area support for each of the identified scenarios.

- We worked with a realistic assessment of what could be achieved with three main objectives:
 - conflict-sensitive balance in post-tsunami assistance to all affected areas of the country — south and east and north;
 - reconstruction and stabilisation of the conflict-affected north and east;
 - support to good governance and conflict mitigation.

At the Delegation and among implementation partners, there was a fundamental recognition of the importance of conflict mitigation.

- We navigated and took full advantage of the available flexibility and the close operational relationship with ECHO — sharing a clear linking relief, rehabilitation and development (LRRD) approach — and by combining and sequencing all instruments — ECHO, IfS (now IcSP) and DCI. It was possible to use more flexibility in procurement procedures, as granted to Delegations operating in a conflict country in crisis. The LRRD approach was put into practice in several sectors, such as in mine action (from mine/unexploded ordnance clearance of areas linked to productive assets and mine risk education) and housing (from shelters to permanent houses).
- We teamed up and coordinated closely with other actors — in particular, the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and UN Agencies, including the United Nations Office for Project Services. We developed other cooperation partnerships with other donors and Sri Lankan bodies with proven implementation capacity. All actions were accompanied with ensuring that the chosen partner had the capacity for implementation.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Scenario planning may be under-utilised for programming in conflict-affected areas. Scenario planning at the programming and formulation stages allows all to anticipate changes and be ready for them in advance.
- Keeping the use of different instruments open — the swift use of the IfS (now IcSP) was successful and supported by programming whereby the scenario planning foresaw the need.
- Building in geographic flexibility in the programming was useful so support could take advantage of periods of calm.
- Setting achievable targets and keeping the level of ambition realistic was helpful, as well as ensuring a concentration of resources for impact.
- Teaming up with other actors such as the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the United Nations Office for Project Services ensured much greater co-ordination, coherence and impact.
- Flexible interpretation and application of processes, templates and regulations were used as and when possible (e.g. suspension clauses in calls for proposals launched prior to the adoption of a financing decision, flexibility regarding the number of days for submission of proposals/offers, etc.).

