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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

USAID’s Violence and Conflict Assessment (VCA) is a tool to assist USAID Missions, U.S. Government (USG) counterparts, and local partners to better understand, address, and navigate the pervasive challenges of armed conflict and violence. USAID recognizes the critical role that fragility, conflict and violence play in compounding an array of already complex development challenges – from acute food insecurity and climate change to global health and migration. Effective development approaches to these challenges should be linked, sequenced, and conflict sensitive. The VCA applies a structured approach to 1) identify the dynamics of conflict, violence and peace in a given context and 2) deliver technically sound and actionable recommendations to help USAID’s decision-makers and partners meet their development objectives. This publication should be read in conjunction with its companion document, the VCA Application Guide, which provides concrete guidance on planning and logistics, field work, data collection, synthesis, writing, and reporting.

Assessments provide recommendations to help development practitioners to:

- Prevent, manage, and respond to a range of shocks and stresses;
- Address underlying drivers of fragility, conflict and violence;
- Improve the conflict sensitivity of their interventions and approaches;
- Integrate conflict considerations across development sectors;
- Strengthen the structures and institutions that help societies peacefully resolve their conflicts;
- Reduce populations’ vulnerability to fragility, conflict and violence; and
- Improve operational readiness to navigate the challenges of delivering foreign assistance in fragile, conflict and violence-affected environments.

The assessment framework is composed of two parts: Diagnosis & Response.

a. **Diagnosis** describes USAID’s analytical approach to identify the dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace, as well as their interactions with our development interventions and approaches.

b. **Response** highlights USAID’s approach to delivering technically sound and actionable, strategic, operational, and programmatic recommendations to VCA users. It also addresses how to employ Collaboration, Learning & Adaptation approaches to promote operational readiness in the face of fragility, conflict and violence.

The VCA identifies drivers and mitigating factors by examining the interactions between five key areas:

- **Context.** Refers to the natural, social, geographic, political and economic environment in which fragility, conflict and violence dynamics play out. VCAs place particular emphasis on past and current experiences of conflict and violence and histories of shocks, stresses, and transnational influence.

- **Identities.** Salient markers of similarity, affinity, or distinction among groups of people.
• **Institutions.** Formal or informal rules and practices governing human interaction. These include social and political structures, laws, policies, organizations and other mechanisms for shaping human behavior.

• **Interests & Incentives.** Motivations for engaging in violence or conflict for economic, political, or social gain. The decision to engage is often a calculus, with people assessing complex and overlapping risks and opportunities.

• **Narratives, Norms & Values.** These refer collectively to what information is sent and how it is received. **Narratives** are the stories that we tell and are offered to us (by institutions, media, etc.) to make meaning of our lives and condition or to influence others in pursuit of a variety of objectives, including conflict, violence, or peace. **Social norms** guide behavior and perceptions of others within societies. They dictate how we behave to fit in. **Values** represent social standards for what is considered good, important, or worthwhile.

The assessment framework then examines **key actors**, or those individuals or groups that have the potential to shape outcomes in conflict, violence, or peace. The VCA specifically seeks to identify:

• **Mobilizers, Perpetrators and Peace Actors.** Those who have the means and motivation to mobilize others or act themselves for sustained conflict, violence, or peace;

• **Enablers and Influencers.** Those whose actions help to shape an environment that is conducive to violence, conflict, or peace or shape people’s behavior in violence and conflict-affected contexts by encouraging others to behave peacefully or violently; and

• **Groups affected.** Those most likely to be impacted by the dynamics identified.

The assessment framework also focuses on identifying **trajectories**, or how these dynamics may evolve over time. Trajectories represent possible alternative futures and their potential impact on fragility, conflict and violence. Trajectories include possible **trends** and **triggers** which might shape patterns of future conflict or violence and **windows of opportunity** for advancing peace and security.

Recognizing that USAID works in distinct contexts with unique decision-making needs and constraints, the VCA is designed to support a **range of assessment needs**, including remote, rapid or light assessments or a focus on a targeted set of risks.

2) **RESPONSE**

Assessment teams review the entry points identified in the synthesis process, brainstorm response options, and evaluate those options against a series of **technical** and **operational** criteria to ensure that recommendations are targeted, prioritized, technically sound, and feasible. The final product specifies targeted, strategic, programmatic, and operational **recommendations**, as well as a roadmap for turning findings and recommendations into action via supported unit processes, programming, coordination, and initiatives. This process draws on principles of **collaborating, learning, and**
adapting to facilitate continued analysis and conflict sensitive adaptation beyond the conclusion of the assessment.

I. USAID’S APPROACH TO ANALYZING ARMED CONFLICT, VIOLENCE & PEACE

I.1 BACKGROUND

Fragility, armed conflict and violence are pervasive in the contexts where USAID works. An estimated 80 percent of countries where USAID provides assistance have been at risk of or experienced a security, political, economic, or humanitarian crisis in the past decade. These dynamics directly impede USAID’s mission to save lives, reduce poverty, strengthen democratic governance and help people progress beyond assistance by:

● Threatening the lives and well-being of the people USAID’s development assistance is intended to support;
● Fueling an increasing number of the humanitarian disasters to which USAID responds. Conflict drives an estimated 80% of humanitarian needs. Over 100 million people were forcibly displaced as of May 2022, and an estimated 75% of those displaced remain so for at least five years. Displacement due to these crises not only affects civilian livelihoods but creates new strains on society and institutions;
● Compounding complex crises, including in health, climate insecurity, and acute food insecurity;
● Reversing development gains by destroying and damaging the institutions and systems which allow societies to thrive. The same dynamics that drive fragility, conflict and violence also underpin wider patterns of chronic underdevelopment;
● Generating lasting trauma and adverse mental health outcomes, creating barriers that prevent individuals from leading healthy, fulfilling, and productive lives;
● Creating operational challenges such as insecurity, lack of physical access to geographic regions, and uncertainty that limit USAID’s ability to plan, manage, and implement its interventions.

Preventing, mitigating, and adapting to the realities of armed conflict and violence is a development priority for USAID, as well as the driving force behind the creation of the Agency’s Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization. Prevention represents a central tenet of interagency policy initiatives to which USAID is committed, including the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, the

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3 Ibid.
Women, Peace & Security Act,⁶ and the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act.⁷ These efforts collectively represent an approach to promote individual well-being while also addressing institutional and structural barriers to peace and security.

1.2 APPLYING THE VCA

The assessment framework described in this document constitutes USAID’s primary analytical tool to help Missions and users – regardless of their conflict or violence context or operational constraints – identify how to navigate the challenges of fragility, conflict and violence in their environment for improved development effectiveness. USAID applies the framework via assessments that are tailored in scale and approach to the users’ operational and learning needs.

Regardless of the scale at which these assessments are conducted, VCAs apply a structured analytical approach to:

1. identify the dynamics of conflict, violence and peace in a context and their interactions with USAID’s interventions and
2. deliver technically sound and actionable recommendations to help USAID’s decision-makers operate more effectively in fragile, conflict and violence affected situations and build more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

More specifically, recommendations help users make strategic, programmatic, and operational decisions. These recommendations address the following challenges faced by USAID Missions and development practitioners:

- **Ensuring USAID employs Do No Harm approaches** across the spectrum of our development and humanitarian assistance approaches;
- **Helping USAID’s development and humanitarian interventions, regardless of sector, address underlying drivers of fragility, conflict and violence** to better meet their objectives;
- **Building peaceful, inclusive, and just societies through direct peacebuilding programming**;
- **Reducing vulnerability and improving resilience to fragility, conflict and violence among communities at-risk of armed conflict and violence**;
- **Improving the ability to prevent, manage, and respond to man-made shocks and stresses**;
- **Improving operational readiness** through conflict sensitive adaptation and an increased understanding of the conflict and violence context.

Assessments can be conducted for a variety of reasons and at different times. They may be conducted to inform strategic planning processes, such as the development of a Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS), to inform program and activity design, or to help a Mission understand significant

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changes in the context that have the potential to affect the ability to implement development or humanitarian interventions.

The scale and approaches of an assessment should be tailored to meet these needs, and assessments may include a desk study, rapid analysis, remote data collection, data science and geospatial approaches, participatory workshops, or may involve more intensive qualitative fieldwork at subnational, national, or even transnational levels depending on the focus of the assessment.

### Scalable Approaches to Violence & Conflict Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPROACH</th>
<th>USE CASES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full</strong></td>
<td>Examines interactions between multiple forms of conflict and violence at national and subnational levels. Informs CDCS planning, new policy priorities, understanding major context changes, and informing large-scale program design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Light</strong></td>
<td>Focused on selected key conflict dynamics and limited geographical areas. Informing upcoming program design, programming in new areas, or updating findings of a full VCA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participatory</strong></td>
<td>In-person or virtual participatory methods focused on developing common understandings of conflict dynamics and response opportunities. Varies according to level of participation, ranging from gathering and packaging knowledge to creating common understandings to strategic partnership building, identifying local peace and security priorities, &amp; co-creating recommendations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Remote</strong></td>
<td>A combination of remote and third-party data collection (e.g., key informant interviews, surveys) with virtual analytical exercises. Suitable for NPEs, when there are other restrictions/access issues, or there is a limited research budget available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rapid</strong></td>
<td>Remote, third party, or in person assessment primarily focused on understanding drastic changes to the operating environment and their implications for programming. In advance of or following emergent crises to inform conflict sensitive adaptation.</td>
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</table>

*Figure 1. Scalable Approaches to Violence and Conflict Assessment*

Regardless of the geographic scope or approaches employed, all assessments adhere to a series of core principles:

- Adhering to **conflict sensitive research methods** to avoid unintended harms associated with conducting data collection in fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings;
- Employing **multiple methods approaches** to strengthen the quality and utility of the analysis and leverage the strengths between qualitative, quantitative, and geospatial methods;
- Employing data collection approaches **inclusive of gender and social identities** to ensure analysis is grounded in the varying experiences and perspectives of diverse groups;
- Meaningfully **incorporating local expertise and data sources** to ensure findings reflect local experiences of and priorities related to conflict, violence, & peace; and
● Maintaining a focus on delivering actionable recommendations and informing decision-making.

To ensure assessments respond to the operational needs of the supported Mission or OU, all assessments seek to answer tailored lines of inquiry (LOI). These LOI reflect those questions that will directly equip decision-makers and program managers to make more informed operational decisions. LOI may explore technical themes such as intersections between natural resource management and conflict or atrocity risk factors, or they may focus on operational considerations, such as barriers faced by local peacebuilding civil society partners.

1.3 KEY CONCEPTS BEHIND USAID’S ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Traditionally, USAID and other donors have addressed different types of conflict and violence in silos (e.g., armed conflict, violent extremism, organized crime, gang violence, hate crimes against marginalized communities, domestic violence, and atrocity prevention). However, these forms of conflict and violence, as well as their root causes, intersect and influence each other. While the number of conflicts globally continues to rise, the vast majority of violent deaths today occur outside of conflict zones, most often in urban settings.

The VCA employs a systems approach to analyzing dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace. This approach highlights five basic tenets that apply across contexts to help assessment teams make sense of their environments and organize their efforts:

1. Take a political economy approach to violence
2. Understand your role in the system
3. Unpack the relationships between levels of violence
4. Focus on the right levels of analysis for your operational needs
5. Break down silos between approaches

TAKE A POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH TO CONFLICT & VIOLENCE

Unpacking the dynamics of conflict, violence and peace requires us to examine the power structures, incentives and disincentives, and relationships between individuals and groups that shape decision-making processes. The factors which influence mobilization for or against violence reflect the formal and informal “rules of the game” in violence and conflict-affected contexts. This politically informed approach is known as “thinking and working politically” and the basis for political economy analysis (PEA).

The underlying interests and incentives that shape these outcomes may be ideological, financial, social, political or economic. A simple way to begin to explore these relationships is to ask, “Who stands to gain or lose from conflict, violence, or peace?”

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UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE IN THE SYSTEM

Just as every development intervention becomes part of the context, so too does USAID’s – and the USG’s – strategic presence. The politics around donor efforts, relationships with state, international, private sector, and civil society partners, and perceptions of the USG are part of a fragility, conflict and violence-affected system that impacts where and how we can, and should, engage. This is equally true for the larger diplomatic and military engagement of the USG.

Proactively identifying potentially harmful interactions between our efforts and the context can improve decision-making about how and where our collective approaches can better promote inclusive, peaceful, and just societies. This requires us to apply principles of conflict sensitivity9 to the strategic decisions we make through intentional self-assessment.10 This concept of strategic conflict sensitivity takes place over longer time horizons than the lifecycle of any individual development or humanitarian intervention.

UNPACK THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LEVELS OF VIOLENCE

Prevention requires understanding the factors that influence fragility, conflict and violence at multiple levels. USAID Missions regularly grapple with conflict dynamics at societal levels as well as forms of interpersonal violence such as gender based violence (GBV), citizen security, and preventing / countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Research suggests complex connections exist between these levels of violence. For example, patterns of GBV and hate crimes against groups and individuals can also correlate with the risk of violent extremism or the onset of mass killings.11

The Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) Social-Ecological Model (SEM)12 of Violence offers a way to visualize the different relationship factors that shape experiences of violence from the individual to societal level and how these factors interact with each other to shape individual decision-making. The SEM allows us to examine connections between levels of violence to inform both direct and structural prevention approaches, as well as how our interventions can strategically link these approaches.

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10 While self-assessment approaches vary, Lisa Schirch offers helpful considerations and resources as part of Conflict Assessment & Peacebuilding Planning, 2018.
A Closer Look at Each Level of the SEM

SOCIETAL. Looks at the broad societal factors—such as health, educational, and social policies—that help create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited and that help maintain economic or social inequalities among groups in society.

COMMUNITY. Explores the settings—such as schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods—in which social relationships occur and seeks to identify the characteristics of these settings that are associated with risk of becoming a perpetrator of violence.

RELATIONAL. Examines close relationships that may increase the risk of experiencing violence as a victim or perpetrator. A person’s closest social circle—peers, partners, and family members— influences their behavior and contributes to their range of experiences.

INDIVIDUAL. Identifies biological and personal history factors—such as age, education, income, substance use, or history of abuse—that increase the likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence.

Figure 2. The Social-Ecological Model (SEM)

FOCUS ON THE RIGHT LEVELS OF ANALYSIS FOR YOUR OPERATIONAL NEEDS

The focus of the assessment and Mission priorities will inform where most data will be collected. For example, data collected for an assessment prioritizing urban youth violence will differ from the data collected to understand intra-state violent conflict. Understanding the outcomes and actions taking place in an environment requires assessment teams to examine the systemic incentives and disincentives that shape how decisions are made by institutions, individuals, and communities at different levels, often including regional, national, and subnational.

The VCA allows for collecting data at the right levels by:

- Including flexible and complementary lines of inquiry that can be applied across levels;
- Intentionally considering risk factors for participating in and falling victim to violence to better target resources and promote protection strategies;
- Identifying entry points to disrupt violence where it is most likely to occur, as well as to strengthen the enabling environment for peace at more structural levels.

Figure 3. VCA Levels of Analysis
BREAK DOWN SILOS BETWEEN APPROACHES

Professionals in multiple technical areas related to conflict, violence, and peace employ distinct, but complementary approaches to analysis and designing programmatic responses. As USAID looks to understand the relationships between forms of violence, these approaches hold relevant insights for how we can take a more comprehensive approach to fragility, conflict and violence analysis.

The VCA incorporates elements from a number of these fields, including:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atrocity prevention</td>
<td>Examine populations at risk of experiencing violence, consider enabling factors and actors, and look at how monitoring of risk can improve operational readiness to prevent mass killings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen security &amp; youth violence</td>
<td>Examine individual and interpersonal risk factors, employ place-based data collection and analytical approaches, and examine the incentives and disincentives at play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>Look at those capacities which help improve protection outcomes, strengthen sources of resilience, and bolster coping strategies. Identify the groups most at risk of shocks and explore people-centered approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized crime &amp; corruption</td>
<td>Examine systemic incentives, levels of corruption, trust in institutions, and connections between corruption, organized violent crime, and wider patterns of violence. Look at how these incentives shape narratives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender &amp; inclusive development</td>
<td>Identities are central components of the analysis. Consult marginalized voices, examine differential experiences of conflict and risk, and seek out opportunities to advance systemic inclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health, &amp; psychosocial support (MH/PSS)</td>
<td>Consider past histories of conflict and levels of trauma as part of the context. Employ trauma-sensitive data collection approaches. Consider MH/PSS as a critical component of response options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital development</td>
<td>Highlight narratives and those disseminating impactful narratives as key actors. Explore digital patterns of exclusion and harm as potential drivers and impacts of conflict and violence. Consider how disinformation drives conflict and violence and actors influencing those narratives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate change and natural resource management</td>
<td>Examine the long- and short-term impacts of climate change on how societies manage their resources, and the potential risks and opportunities</td>
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</table>
these dynamics hold for conflict and violence prevention. Facilitate a systems approach for understanding the economic, political, environmental, and cultural factors that interact and influence a given place to better understand where development needs and opportunities are concentrated, where development programs are implemented, and the effectiveness of those programs.13

13 USAID Geospatial Strategy, 2022
2. THE VIOLENCE & CONFLICT ASSESSMENT

The VCA is a structured analytical approach to examining the dynamics of fragility, conflict, violence, and peace in a given context, their interactions with the development landscape, and opportunities for development practitioners to respond and adapt to these dynamics and interactions to better meet their objectives. The assessment framework is broken down into two parts: Diagnosis & Response.

2.1 DIAGNOSIS

The VCA Diagnosis identifies dynamics of fragility, conflict, violence, and peace in a context and how they interact with USAID’s development interventions. These dynamics, or patterns, are systematic and repetitive interactions and transactions between individuals, groups, and institutions that either mitigate or drive conflict and violence over time. The diagnosis is focused on identifying dynamics that are most prevalent and salient in a context. The findings of the diagnosis reflect a snapshot in time that represents the current system in which USAID is operating.

These dynamics are impacted by many interrelated factors. To make understanding these dynamics manageable, the VCA examines the drivers and mitigating factors shaping violence, conflict, and peace, and those actors that play influential roles in these dynamics (key actors). Building on these dynamics, the VCA also examines future projections (trajectories).

This section examines the respective components of the VCA diagnostic framework in detail, as well as how these concepts come together in practice.

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**Figure 4. Violence & Conflict Assessment**
Step 1: Identify Drivers and Mitigating Factors of Conflict and Violence

Drivers of fragility, conflict and violence are those factors contributing to the outbreak, escalation, or recurrence of conflict and violence. Mitigating factors dampen the risk of violence and/or help a society peacefully manage their conflicts.

The VCA first looks at what drivers of fragility, conflict and violence, as well as mitigating factors, contribute to wider dynamics.

- **Drivers** of fragility, conflict and violence are the root causes and relationships in a system that reinforce and perpetuate fragility, violence and conflict.

- **Mitigating factors**\(^{14}\) are things that keep violence and conflict in check. They may include resilient institutions able to absorb shocks and stresses without devolving into violence or a national identity that unites people. However, mitigating factors may also include highly repressive governments, heavy-handed security responses to protest, or fear of retaliation by organized criminal actors. Some mitigating factors may prevent violence in the short term, but may even exacerbate the potential for future violence and conflict.

Both drivers and mitigating factors are identified by examining interactions between the following five diagnostic lenses of the VCA:

- Context
- Identities
- Institutions
- Interests & Incentives
- Narratives, Social Norms & Values

The assessment framework explores these lenses and factors in depth over the following pages and describes how they come together to inform our analysis.

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\(^{14}\) The VCA uses the term “mitigating factors” to describe elements that prevent conflict from escalating. In the broader peacebuilding community, the term “resilience” is often used synonymously with mitigating factors. The VCA uses the term mitigating factor to avoid confusion with the USAID definition of resilience. Refer to USAID’s Resilience Policy (2022) for a deeper discussion of how USAID approaches resilience.
**Context**

*Context refers to the natural, social, geographic, political and economic environment in which conflict and violence dynamics play out. It includes both slow-to-change “foundational factors” as well as past experiences that serve as reference points. The VCA places particular emphasis on several particularly relevant considerations.*

Contextual factors are not causes of conflict, violence, or peace, however; they shape the evolution of conflict and violence systems. Context includes both the “foundational factors” described in USAID’s PEA framework as “deeply embedded, longer-term national, sub-national, and international structures that shape the character and legitimacy of the state, the political system, and socio-economic structures. These tend to be fixed or slow to change, such as geography, borders with conflict-affected countries, natural resource endowments, or class structures.”

Some contextual factors are local, such as a customary land tenure system or a history of deep factionalization between particular groups, while others may apply to national and transnational levels.

**Key factors for consideration:**

- **Demographic, Historic, Natural, & Human Development Factors** such as systems of governance, presence or absence of natural resources, and key geographic features. Teams may also examine basic human development indicators, such as maternal mortality rates, and levels of access to basic social services such as healthcare and education.

- **History of Conflict and Violence.** This includes past conflicts, parties to those conflicts, presence of armed actors, levels of violent crime, GBV and intimate partner violence, levels of trauma, and geographic distributions of these patterns and histories.

- **Shocks, Stresses & Transnational Influences.** Local systems are dynamic and susceptible to change due to a variety of factors such as shocks, stresses, and patterns of transnational influence. **Shocks** are external, short-term deviations from long term trends that have substantial negative effects on people’s wellbeing, assets, livelihoods, safety, or their ability to withstand future shocks. **Stresses** are long-term trends or pressures that undermine the stability of a system and increase vulnerability within it.

While not all shocks and stresses can be predicted, assessment teams should identify which shocks, stresses, and patterns of transnational influence are recurrent and may shape – or be shaped by – future trajectories. Examples include climate change, vulnerability to natural disasters, food insecurity, refugee flows, or presence and activities of geopolitical actors. **Transnational influences** refer to factors originating beyond the geographic parameters of a

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partner country that nevertheless shape outcomes within those borders. These influences may be physical, such as a cross-border flow of refugees, resources, or criminal activity, or less tangible, such as disinformation or diplomatic pressure.

The World Food Program’s 2022 Global Report on Food Crises notes that while food crises continue to be driven by multiple, mutually reinforcing drivers, including COVID-19 and changing weather patterns, conflict/insecurity remains the main driver. 17

- **Perceptions of the USG, USAID, Partners, and Legacy Involvement in the Context.**
  External actors’ interventions in a context become part of that context. A deeper understanding of local perceptions can help shape recommendations to mitigate against unintended harms related to development or humanitarian interventions and provide insight into how assistance can be directed without fueling narratives that undermine wider objectives. Examples of things to consider include past USG support to administrations or political parties, involvement in military interventions in the country, or social or cultural ties through diaspora.

**Identities**

*Identities are salient markers of similarity, affinity, or distinction among groups of people. While identity differences do not cause conflict, they may form a basis for recruitment into conflict, violence, or peace and shape how people are impacted by conflict, violence, and peace.*

In conflict-affected contexts, tensions may occur along lines of group identity, including ethnic, racial, religious, political, economic, or geographic differences, among other identities. In contexts affected by criminal and interpersonal violence, identities may play a role in driving violence, especially when they provide a sense of belonging, power, relevance or agency for members of a criminal organization, gang, militia, or other group. Identity frequently influences who perpetrates violence and who is victimized by it, for example, when people of particular ethnicities, religions, ages, disabilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC), or political groups are targeted for harm. It also may form the basis for group mobilization to engage in conflict behavior.

- **Identities can shift.** While identities often feel subjectively “natural” and immutable to those who hold them, they are often shaped by social, political, and economic factors, and can shift and transform over time. For example, during conflict, experiences or perceptions of inequality, deprivation, entitlement, or victimization may lead to identities hardening into rigid “us versus them” binaries, or to groups splintering or re-forming along new lines. Perceptions of marginalization or discrimination may intensify identity-based grievances and provide motivations for engaging in conflict. Influential actors, or narratives spread by social media, may strengthen or

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manipulate identities by promoting a sense of shared grievance or allegiance. In this way, power is central to the formation and intensification of identity.

- **New identities may emerge in conflict and violence-affected contexts.** This often occurs as identity groups take on new roles they may have been barred from holding in times of relative peace. Conversely, peacebuilding interventions may create new identities that cross-cut other divisions, for example, when they bring people together around shared commitments as youth peace champions, as mothers who have lost children to violence, or as communities working to mitigate the harms of climate change.

- **Overlapping identities.** While identity is often described by people in conflict as being fixed, shared and timeless, identities are in fact multiple and dynamic. Any one individual has multiple identities (e.g., national, gender, ethnic, religious, regional, socioeconomic or political identities). These identities may become more or less salient or important depending upon the context. Examples include:
  - During a conflict in which people are called to mobilize along ethnic lines, ethnic identity is likely to become extraordinarily salient, while economic identity may become less important for people deciding how to organize themselves socially and politically.
  - Religious identity may have little to do with someone’s motivation to join a gang, but in some parts of Latin America, evangelical churches may provide one of the few exit pathways for people to leave gangs.
  - International tensions or rising expressions of nationalism can increase the importance of national identity even among communities where it normally has little salience.

The presence of multiple, overlapping identities means that it is important for assessment teams to focus on how identities overlap and interact. The use of a cross-sectoral lens helps the assessment team to recognize differences within groups and avoid assuming that, for example, all women, or all rural people, or all supporters of a political party have the same relationship to conflict.

- **Power, decision-making, and inclusive development.** Because power and access to resources and decision-making are often distributed along lines of identity, assessment teams need to understand how different groups of people perceive their own power and agency within the violence and conflict-affected context.

  Assessment teams should intentionally examine power dynamics related to social, cultural, or political identity including along the lines of age, race, religion, ethnicity, disability, SOGIESC, and indigeneity, as well as others that are highly context specific. Teams should also consider which identity groups are at highest risk of experiencing violence and other conflict-related harms, as well as which groups may be at risk of being targeted for atrocities. This analysis can help to direct and inform protection efforts.
Going beyond protection, VCAs can play a critical role in paving the way for more inclusive approaches to peacebuilding. Assessment teams should explore how patterns of exclusion and inclusion shape opportunities for building positive peace and addressing underlying grievances, while response recommendations can help identify where barriers to inclusive peacebuilding may exist and how to address them.

**Institutions**

**Institutions are the formal or informal rules and practices governing human interaction. These include social and political structures, laws, policies, organizations and other mechanisms for shaping human behavior.**

Institutions play a powerful role in shaping the dynamics of violence, conflict, and peace. They provide the formal and informal social “rules of the game,” dictating how power is wielded and who has access to resources. Institutions create and disseminate narratives and play an important role in molding social norms (see “Narratives, Social Norms and Values” below). They determine the breadth and scope of peoples’ choices by expanding or limiting options for civic participation or the ability to petition for change. For example, when institutions constrain people’s ability to peacefully advocate for their aspirations and needs by excluding them from decision-making or restricting their freedom of association, people may feel that violence is the only means available to effect change.

- **Formal and Informal Institutions.** The VCA focuses attention on both formal and informal institutions and their relationships to fragility, conflict and violence dynamics. Institutions may be codified (e.g. laws, constitution), take the form of formal governance structures (e.g. a Ministry of Finance, an Office of the Mayor), or exist as informal social arrangements (e.g. clan elders, religious communities). Social networks that provide people with protection, economic opportunities, a sense of belonging, or social capital are powerful informal institutions that may drive fragility, conflict and violence or strengthen local capacities for peace.

**Social Capital Networks**

Social capital represents the formal and informal networks that allow people to rely on each other in times of need, e.g. a shock. Social capital can exist within a group or community (bonding), between groups or communities (bridging), and vertically, across lines of institutional power (linking).


Both formal and informal institutions play powerful roles in socializing people into, or away from, violence, conflict, and peace. For example, at the community level, people may join gangs (an informal institution) for physical or economic security that the state (a formal institution) has failed to provide. In such contexts, a gang or another informal institution may step into the void
left by the state, effectively competing with the government for legitimacy by providing security, livelihoods, or even support for public health initiatives.

Criminal Penetration of Formal and Informal Institutions

“Where institutions are already weak, criminal networks further erode state authority, legitimacy, and effectiveness by fueling corruption, distorting state functions, depriving the government of tax revenues, challenging the state’s monopoly of violence, and competing with the state in the provision of services.”


- Co-opted Institutions. Organized criminal networks often thrive in contexts where institutions are corrupt. They may penetrate and even control institutions to further their economic and political interests. Understanding the extent to which institutions have been co-opted by criminal networks, gangs, violent extremists, or other malign actors is critical for understanding the local system and identifying the most impactful points of entry to program for sustainable change. For example, if criminal networks have infiltrated local government but not national government, there may be an opportunity to work at the national level to combat corruption and crime or promote accountable decentralization.

When institutions are corrupt or controlled by malign actors, there may also be opportunities to work with citizens and informal institutions to advocate for change. Assessment teams must understand the risks that change agents may face, including threats of violence by malign actors, in order to ensure that recommendations adhere to Do No Harm principles.

- Institutional Performance. Institutional performance and perceptions of legitimacy and effectiveness play a major role in shaping patterns of fragility, armed conflict and violence or peace. This includes assessing a range of formal national institutions and informal community institutions in order to understand how perceptions impact violence and conflict dynamics. When conducting a VCA, analysts should examine the extent to which formal institutions provide effective, inclusive and citizen-responsive services, particularly with respect to public safety, security and justice. Institutions may also be key elements in embedded patterns of structural violence, which are forms of harm that occur when social, economic, or political institutions, policies, and frameworks prevent people from having their basic needs fulfilled and reaching their potential.

- Institutional Gaps. Often, institutions lack the capacity or commitment to resolve grievances, provide public safety or prevent violence. For example, is there a dearth of local institutions (either formal or informal) equipped to resolve disputes before they escalate? Do communities have the ability to effectively address violence in their midst? Are perceptions of poor
in institutional performance causing people to disengage from civic life, or possibly look for alternative providers of basic services or security?

**Interests & Incentives**

*Motivations for engaging in violence or conflict for economic, political, or social gain or need.*

Individual and group interests reflect their underlying core needs, wants, fears, or concerns. Incentives refer to the real or perceived rewards or costs attached to decision-making. Interests and incentives are often constructed through thoughtful (rational or intuitive) calculations of risk and rewards. They can be complex and overlapping across a range of economic, financial, political, and psychosocial factors. In fragile, conflict and violence-affected contexts, people may engage in violence to amass wealth or political power, or to support or protect the basic needs of their family and community. Taken together, interests and incentives inform individual or group motivations for engaging in violence or conflict or supporting non-violent change. When interests or incentives shift, through direct or indirect influences, such as diplomacy, or events, such as natural disasters, prospects for peace and security can improve.

- **Interest and incentive-based motivations.** Understanding the full range of actors’ motivations to engage in conflict, violence, or peace requires *thinking and working politically* - a wider lens that accounts for a range of socio-economic and political interests. It also requires an understanding of how the broader system incentivizes or restricts opportunities for political and economic gain from acts of violence or peaceful dispute resolution.

- **The violence calculus.** Before engaging in violent behaviors, motivated offenders assess risks and opportunities (negative and positive incentives). Many criminal enterprises avoid violence or use it sparingly to protect their business interests. Individuals who have sufficient motivation and resources to commit a crime or to engage in violence may refrain because the right opportunity never arises, or because someone in their immediate context prevents them, e.g. a family member, police officer, or a friend. Evidence demonstrates that the majority of violent crime is committed by a small number of people concentrated in a limited number of high-risk places, sometimes referred to as “hot spots.” Hot spots may be broad, or contained to a few city blocks.

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• **Opportunity, ideology, or necessity?** Vigilante groups, for example, may conclude that justice will only be served by taking violent actions on their own because they believe that formal systems of justice are not functioning. Similarly, some individuals and organizations use violence to advance an ideology, although their stated ideological motivations for using violence may not be the same as their underlying motivations.

• **Motivations for, and against, participating in violence.** When conducting an assessment, it is important to collect data not only on those who do commit acts of violence, but also on the majority of people in the same community or area who do not. Motivations for engaging in violence and conflict held by leadership may not represent the interests and motivations of the “foot soldiers.” In situations where leaders or elites promote violence to amass wealth and political power, they typically mobilize less powerful individuals who engage in violent or criminal behavior for different motives. Elites may invoke very real grievances against the state, such as people’s precarious economic conditions or identity-based dynamics of exclusion, in order to motivate followers. Teams should identify protective factors that keep people from joining insurgent groups, criminal networks, or violent extremist organizations.

• **Violent political marketplaces.** Beyond individual and organizational levels, entire systems can be dominated by interests and incentives. Extreme examples are countries like Somalia and Yemen, which have been called “violent political marketplaces.” These are systems where the supply of and demand for resources, rather than formal institutions, shape politics and public authority in ways that are transactional, exclusionary, and violent. 19 While few countries fall on this extreme end of the spectrum, the same principles may govern subnational systems and institutions.

Licit and illicit markets, including trade in weapons, drugs, wildlife, and other commodities, along with human trafficking and natural resource extraction, create significant economic incentives, fueling violence and conflict dynamics. As violence and conflict economies become increasingly entrenched, the willingness and ability of states, international actors, and individuals to reverse the status quo, or even opt out of the system diminishes. 20

• **Privilege Violence.** Many states play a key role in perpetrating or enabling violence or conflict. In some contexts, weak states that lack the capacity to govern are simply unable to control violent actors. Frequently however, states employ targeted violence and criminality as a governing strategy. More often, the reality falls somewhere in between. This concept of violence as a governance strategy, sometimes referred to as “privilege violence,” generally benefits the political and economic elite at the expense of marginalized segments of the population. These

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deeply entrenched interests lead those in positions of power to resist change. Violence may also be “outsourced” by state and non-state actors to increase their power and control. In corrupt and violent systems, military, police, gang members, aggrieved identity groups, private militias and others may be deployed to foment acts of violence on behalf of political elites.

- **The risk of repression.** While state violence may temporarily quell violence, it risks escalating conflict and violence dynamics in the future. Despite the frequency with which “iron fist” measures continue to be employed, evidence shows that violent repression is not effective at controlling gang and other criminal violence, and may even backfire if security forces have impunity for their violent acts. Significant evidence points to government repression and security force abuse as a turning point for citizens with moderate grievances to engage in acts of violence or terrorism."^{23}

*The VCA is an opportunity to explore which incentives and interests can be addressed through development interventions to change this calculus.*

**Narratives, Social Norms, & Values**

*Narratives, social norms, and values describe the messages being sent and the social and cultural lenses through which individuals and groups process information and attribute meaning.*

Narratives are the stories that we tell and are offered to us (by institutions, media, etc.) to make meaning of our lives and condition or to influence others in pursuit of a variety of objectives. Narratives are crucial in shaping how people make meaning, see themselves or others reflected in identity groups. Narratives dynamically impact individual and group perceptions, behaviors, and motivations, thereby shaping identity construction, norms and values, and group interactions. Narratives may promote violence and hate, recruit people to conflict, or encourage people to work for peace. Narratives include messages about violence and conflict itself, including circulating stories about events, actors, and causes of conflict that may shape people’s perceptions and behaviors. These narratives circulate through a variety of domains, including traditional media, social media, school curricula, official pronouncements, or community rumors.

Control of narratives and modes of dissemination are established arenas of social and political contest, and the spectrum of competing narratives in society often reflect fault lines of conflict. While narratives

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22 Since March 2022, the Government of El Salvador has suspended fundamental rights to reign in gang violence. Suspected gang associates can be arrested without reason and denied access to a lawyer. While conducting fieldwork in Honduras, the team frequently heard from people who applauded President Bukele’s approach, even though it has been widely criticized by human and civil rights organizations.

as drivers of peace or conflict predate the current digital era, digital technologies amplify narratives, which can generate opportunities for peace or increase the risk that violence will escalate.

- **Consider who creates and promotes narratives for conflict, violence, or peace.** Powerful actors, including states and other elites, often exert control over the information ecosystem to disseminate dominant narratives and block curtail, or surveil counter-narratives.

- **Consider how narratives shape perceptions.** During an assessment, teams should explore what narratives are circulating in the information environment and how they shape different groups' perceptions, behaviors, and motivations. For example, are there high levels of hate speech circulating on social media or on community radio? Or is the media being used to spread messages of peace? Among what communities? Narratives also include messaging by key actors and institutions about issues that may be sources of grievance for identity groups, including narratives designed to escalate or deny the importance of grievances.

- **Distinguish between the core narrative and the stories behind it.** Assessment teams can think of the narrative as the meta-story, a way of interpreting events that is shaped through a series of individual messages and stories. When considering how to engage narratives to shift social norms, focusing on the stories, rather than the narrative (and not understanding the stories as reinforcing the larger narrative) will limit the ability of available tools to change the narrative (and thus potentially shift the social norms).

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**Narratives & Stories in the Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine serves as an example of how individual messages and stories were utilized by the Kremlin to promote an overarching narrative. The narrative, or meta-story, from the Kremlin described Russian efforts to liberate Ukraine, while messaging and stories included:

- “Russia launched a special military operation to protect Russian-speaking Ukrainians and de-nazify Ukraine.”
- “Russian soldiers were greeted as liberators.”
- “There were no Ukrainian civilian casualties because security forces had comported themselves with great care and constraint.”

The words “war” and “invasion” were not used by state media, and there was no mention of the bombing of Kyiv. The Kremlin also weaponized social media, hiring people to spread disinformation about the war and incite arguments online.

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24 Metropolitan Group, 2022. “Voice: Shifting Narratives to Create a Just and Sustainable World.”
• **Narrative landscapes and polarization.** Understanding and navigating the landscapes of competing narratives can help development professionals to reduce polarization and contribute to an environment less conducive to the spread of disinformation and misinformation.

• **Narratives may affirm or challenge social norms and values.** While norms and values are generally slow to change and rooted in everyday local practices, narratives can be quite fluid and shifting, with digital media narratives allowing for real-time portrayals of violence and conflict to circulate across local and national borders.

**Social norms** are the social and cultural rules which guide behavior and perceptions of others within societies. They dictate how we behave to fit in and shape group and individual behaviors at all levels of society. They can be defined as “the mutual expectations within a group about the appropriate way to behave.”

There are often powerful incentives for complying with norms, such as rewards of social acceptance, and punishments, such as threats of social marginalization and even violence, for challenging them. Norms defining the behaviors, expectations, and perceptions of others may be widely shared or deeply contested by people within a group or society. Norms can, and do, change. For example, in many parts of the world, women’s rights activists have succeeded at shifting expectations of and behaviors towards women and girls in all their diversity.

• **Norms and identity.** Norms are powerful because they draw upon people’s deep-seated desire to belong within social groups. When norms are shared, they bind identity groups and shape forms of civic participation. The importance of belonging can override contrary attitudes, morals, and even the prospect of legal penalties. This is especially true in fragile environments where uncertainty and insecurity prevail and social networks are crucial to security and survival. Behavior change is often difficult when norms are at play, as individuals may feel under pressure to comply. However, this does not mean that norms are static.

• **Not all norms are beneficial.** Norms can condone violence as acceptable within intimate partner or family relationships, or as an expected response to conflict, leading to a normalization of violence. In other contexts, contested norms may reflect increasing divisions within a society, such as backlash against LGBTQI+ or women’s rights advocates in patriarchal societies.

• **Addressing norms through development.** Peacebuilding interventions ultimately seek to change the behaviors of individuals, groups, and institutions. Understanding what norms shape those behaviors can inform how and where development interventions should seek to engage. But other actors seek to change norms and behaviors, as well. For example, organized criminal networks can shift social norms, and consequently, behaviors, by providing crucial services and

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competing with the state for legitimacy. In these situations, activities promoting good governance may inadvertently increase levels of violence and contestation.

Data collected by assessment teams should inform partnership decisions, including whether the state, civil society, other stakeholders (business, media, pop-culture, etc.) or a combination are best positioned to shift norms supporting corruption and organized crime. The assessment should also identify points of leverage and potential points of resistance that could limit the desired impacts of programs. For example, it may be possible to recruit and train police to combat corruption and organized crime, but if actors in the justice system resist change, these interventions may meet with limited success.28

**Social Norms of Gender**

In violence and conflict-affected contexts, social norms that dictate appropriate gendered behavior may play a powerful role. For example, norms that link masculinity to violence may work to “normalize” family or community-level violence or to encourage the recruitment of boys and men to armed conflict. Social norms that restrict the participation of women, girls, or LGBTQI people from civic engagement and decision-making may limit their potential to serve as champions for peace or, conversely, to use violence as a means to achieve their aims.

However, men and boys are not “naturally” violent and women and girls may not necessarily be prone to peace. In many contexts, women and girls have taken up arms or provided material and social support for conflict. Likewise, people of all genders have worked to promote peace in their communities, making context-specific analysis crucial. The analysis must also consider how and where development can advance inclusion without unintentionally leading to harm.

**Values.** Values represent social standards of what is or is not considered good, important, or worthwhile. While few people may see violence in and of itself as a “good,” other values – such as a perception by male youth that they must be tough or aggressive to be respected as men, or a social emphasis on the importance of “discipline” in families or schools – may become supporting links in a chain of influence helping to drive violent behavior. Values are often transmitted by both formal and informal social institutions, including families, religious groups, schools, media, and public culture. Assessment teams should understand the social context in which values are formed and to avoid making external normative judgments that could undermine trust in the assessment process.

**Social Media Helping to Shape Norms**

Social media can be a powerful force in shaping norms that promote conflict, violence, or peace. For example, Facebook became available in Myanmar in 2000 and use of the platform grew rapidly. The military, posing as fans of national heroes or popular public figures, unleashed a systematic campaign

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targeting Muslim Rohingya. Military personnel created troll accounts and fake news and celebrity pages….By leveraging admiration for popular figures, this social media campaign helped to shift norms around violence and discrimination, making them feel more acceptable and justified.


USAID’s Conflict & Violence Addendum to the Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment\textsuperscript{29} includes additional considerations for examining these issues.

\textsuperscript{29} USAID, Conflict and Violence Addendum to the Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment, 2022.
Step 2: Identify Key Actors and their Roles

Key actors are the individuals or groups that have the potential to significantly shape outcomes in conflict, violence, or peace, whether as mobilizers, enablers and influencers, or groups affected.

Understanding the different roles individuals and groups play in driving or mitigating conflict and violence can help inform our programmatic approaches by highlighting the behaviors, attitudes, and actions of individuals, groups, and institutions that drive conflict and violence systems. The VCA maps the roles that different actors play in shaping the dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace to identify these potential entry points. Individuals and groups may not have explicit goals related to promoting or perpetuating violence in order to influence outcomes in a significant way.

Key actors may operate in both formal and informal domains of influence, inside or outside of the state. They may be specific individuals (e.g., a gang leader recruiting members to engage in violence or a politician creating a militia to promote their interests) or a more diffuse group of individuals (e.g., a social movement for peace and justice). When identifying key actors, it is important to use an inclusive analytic lens that can identify diverse actors, including those operating in informal domains of influence or within informal institutions, for example, within kin groups or communities. Individuals may play multiple roles (e.g. perpetrators of violence may themselves be victims).

The VCA focuses attention on those who are considered to be key actors by identifying groups, individuals, and institutions who play the following influential roles:

- **Mobilizers, Perpetrators, and Peace Actors.**
  - **Mobilizers.** Mobilizers are those who have both the means and motivation to organize others for sustained conflict, violence or peace. These may include those who recruit others to join gangs, VEOs, militias, or combatant groups, as well as those who mobilize others to join movements for violence prevention or peace. These may also include elites who direct the formation of groups working for violence, conflict, or peace. Often, mobilizers will actively work to shape and promote narratives and stories that advance their objectives and spur action. For example, in Bangladesh, key actors leveraged perceptions and experiences of increased food prices and narratives of corruption to mobilize groups for violent protest.³⁰
  - **Perpetrators and Peace Actors.** Perpetrators are those who carry out acts of violence or who act to sow divisions between groups, either of their own accord or at the direction of mobilizers or armed groups. The VCA also actively seeks to identify those agents of positive change, or peace actors, working on their own or as part of a

larger effort to strengthen social cohesion and the structures that help a society peacefully navigate conflict and violence.

- **Enablers & Influencers.** Enablers and influencers are those individuals or groups whose actions contribute to conditions conducive to conflict, violence, or peace. Violence or peace are not necessarily their specific objectives.

  - **Enablers.** Enablers are those whose actions alter the conditions in an environment in a way that contributes to conflict, violence, or peace. They may shape the system of incentives, provide the channels for or means of mobilization, or otherwise shape conditions that change the decision-making calculus of participants in conflict, violence, or peace. More concretely, these may be individuals or groups providing direct support to violent groups (e.g., providers of weapons, financial donors) as well as those providing more indirect support (e.g., communities that protect armed rebel groups; media broadcasting hate speech; or governments failing to address rising levels of violence in families and communities which in turn escalates).

  - **Influencers.** Influencers are individuals or networks whose actions shape people's behavior by making individuals more susceptible to mobilization for conflict, violence, or peace. This may occur by generating and circulating narratives that shape others' perceptions and motivations. Influencers may have the ability to mobilize others, although usually for a limited period of time, for example, mobilizing people to join a protest or mob. Social media and messaging apps like WhatsApp often serve as conduits for this type of influence.

    In other cases, these influencers may act as brokers, or individuals and groups uniquely situated to facilitate connections between groups by virtue of pre-established trust and relationships. Through brokers, external actors, like policy makers and government officials, can quicken the consensus building process when conducting outreach.

- **Groups Affected** refers to those most likely to be impacted by conflict and violence or involved in peace efforts. This includes looking at those most at risk for experiencing atrocities and other harms.

  - Individuals or groups may face higher risk or vulnerability to violence due to factors such as identity (e.g. LGBTQI+ individuals), geographic location, socio-economic characteristics, the threat they present to the interests of conflict or violence actors (e.g. environmental defenders), or other distinguishing factors. Assessments should examine what factors make these groups vulnerable to experiencing violence, the source of the threat against these groups, and what coping and protection strategies these groups employ to reduce their risk.\(^{31}\)

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Similarly, some of these distinguishing characteristics will also shape the extent to which mitigating factors or peaceful action impact or involve different groups.

Understanding these considerations allows assessment teams to generate recommendations to improve support to protection and empowerment efforts as part of the ‘response’ phase of the assessment.

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**Gender, Key Actors, and the VCA**

The VCA approaches gender as a cross-cutting topic. Team insights related to the role of gender in shaping conflict and violence dynamics may prove helpful additions to USAID Mission Gender and Social Inclusion analyses called for in ADS 205.32

As standard practice, USAID’s Gender and Social Inclusion analyses examine the following domains:

- Cultural Norms and Beliefs;
- Gender Roles, Responsibilities, and Time Use;
- Access to and Control over Assets and Resources;
- Patterns of Power and Decision-making; and
- Safety and Security, including Gender-based Violence.

The VCA can help Missions and supported OUs better understand how these domains are influenced by and, in turn, influence, patterns of conflict, violence, and peace. The following considerations are particularly important to examine in fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings:

- Gender roles in mobilizing for, enabling, and influencing conflict, violence, and peace;
- Societal norms and narratives around masculinities in conflict and violence;
- Levels of inclusion of women and persons with diverse SOGIESC in state security forces and non-state armed groups;
- Acceptance of the rights of women and persons with diverse SOGIESC, including in the public narrative and patterns of hate speech;
- Levels of meaningful inclusion and participation of women and persons with diverse SOGIESC in peace processes, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and key government institutions;
- How conflict and violence alter access to assets and resources and patterns in safety, security, power, and decision-making; and
- Differences in protection and resilience strategies employed by persons with diverse SOGIESC.

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Step 3: Identify the Relationships between Drivers, Mitigating Factors and Key Actors

Assessments examine the relationships between the drivers and mitigating factors and key actors to identify the most prevalent and salient dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace. Dynamics are systematic and repetitive interactions and transactions between individuals, groups, and institutions that either mitigate or drive conflict and violence over time.

Dynamics Driving Conflict and Violence

Understanding the system in which these relationships and actors operate helps teams to identify the factors that perpetuate violence, conflict, or peace, why actors behave the way they do, and how these relationships are interconnected.

- **Distinguish between cause and effect.** As patterns begin to emerge, the team will distinguish between causes and effects of violence, conflict, and peace. **Causes** are the root sources helping to drive conflict, whereas **effects** are the visible manifestations and impacts of conflict, violence, and peace. For example, a cause of conflict may be land grabbing by the state and the private sector from vulnerable populations who are unable to achieve justice through corrupt formal judicial systems. The effects may be violent confrontations over land or acts of violence against land defenders, along with reductions in community livelihoods and heightened grievances towards the state. The cause is a deep, systemic issue of corruption and criminality by the state that may take years of development support to shift. This does not mean that effects are unimportant. Effects, the resulting acts of violence, must also be addressed in the short term to save lives and address protection concerns.

- **The grievances and motivations that drive individuals and groups to take up arms or engage in violence and conflict may be heavily shaped by identities or incentives, but they are seldom strictly based on one or the other.** Below are examples of how dynamics ultimately reflect the interactions between the VCA’s lenses and the actors involved.

  - Many of the patterns that assessment teams will see emerging from their data will examine interactions between identity and other lenses of the VCA framework. For example, perceptions of institutional performance reflect the interactions between identity groups and institutions that give rise to positive or negative attitudes towards these institutions’ effectiveness and legitimacy. These dynamics may be amplified or mitigated by actors promoting certain narratives, as well as the social norms held by identity groups.

  - Grievances may be expressed in many different ways. Grievances often provide key actors with opportunities to mobilize or influence others to engage in violence or conflict. Sometimes, grievances fester in what is termed **latent conflict** until individuals
or groups emerge with the means and motivation to encourage others to act on their grievances. As part of their analysis, teams will need to account for both overtly expressed grievances, as well as segments of the population that opt to disengage.

- In other cases, identity will play a more limited role, but the incentives present in a system may be more prominent. For example, prevalence or scarcity of certain natural resources in a context may incentivize violent competition. The management or mismanagement of those resources may shape both licit and illicit livelihood opportunities that create incentives for certain key actors who may benefit from prolonged conflict. Meanwhile, narratives may reinforce the profitability of illicit activities while highlighting institutional failures to provide licit livelihood opportunities.

### COMMON PATTERNS IN CONFLICT & VIOLENCE

Motivations for participating in violence can be complex and layered. The following dynamics reflect common ways in which grievances, motivations, and key actors drive violence and conflict across contexts. These dynamics often exist alongside each other and interact.

**Elitism** is sometimes referred to as a vertical divide, separating the “haves” from the “have-nots.” The makeup of elites will vary greatly depending on the context. In some cases, they will be members of the government and the private sector, while in others they may be heads of organized criminal networks where power and resources are highly concentrated in the hands of a few. Perceptions of entitlement by elites can also be a form of grievance if they feel that their position is threatened.

**Exclusion** is a form of horizontal divide, restricting some groups from the resources and opportunities available to others. Exclusion may appear along social, economic, and political lines, including ethnicity, religion, caste, age, location, gender, social class, profession, or other identity. It is not uncommon for patterns of grievance around elitism and exclusion to be present at the same time.

**Chronic capacity deficits** are enduring systemic failures of formal and informal institutions to deliver what is expected of them. These capacity deficits may be a result of limited resources and abilities, or they may reflect an absence of political will to extend benefits to particular groups or regions of the country. **Mismanagement of strategic resources** such as oil or minerals, can also contribute to perceptions of chronic capacity deficits, and usually aligns closely with elitism, exclusion, and corruption (see below). Chronic capacity deficits also include instances where formal institutions are completely absent, opening the door for informal institutions, including malign actors, to fill the gap and effectively compete for legitimacy with the state.

**Non-state securitization** occurs when groups take up arms or turn to non-state armed actors as a means of providing security. This may occur as a particular type of chronic capacity deficit where the state is absent or unable to provide security, though it may also respond to an intentional choice by
the state to deny security to certain groups. These groups tend to organize around existing structures, whether rooted in ethnic, political, community, or even economic ties. This dynamic may manifest as community based armed groups, autodefensas, private security, or armed militias. Rise of armed groups challenges the state’s monopoly over the use of force and can be a source of instability.

State repression, including state violence and human rights violations often fuel grievances when not met with effective justice responses. While these kinds of abuses have always existed, in the contemporary era of digital media, they are more likely to be widely publicized and lead to grievances by people who may not be direct victims but who feel a sense of shared identity, outrage, or empathy. Grievances towards human rights abuses may result in nonviolent social action, or they may be perceived as providing justification for violent movements for change.

Violent political competition occurs when individuals or groups perceive and employ violence as means of gaining, consolidating, and retaining power. It involves targeted killings or use of violence or the threat of violence to secure or maintain control of economic, political, or social influence. This dynamic often reflects a connection to corrupt networks, organized violent crime, and co-opted state institutions or officials. Examples include killings of human rights defenders, electoral violence, competition between warlords, and armed groups with connections to organized violent crime.

Corruption is defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. It can take many forms, including public servants demanding bribes for services, patronage networks, politicians that divert public resources into personal accounts, or private companies bribing officials to secure contracts or for other favors.\footnote{Transparency International, 2022. https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption.} Corruption alone rarely leads to conflict or violence, but it often accompanies and strengthens other patterns of grievance, for example, when diversion of state resources impacts the state’s capacity to deliver basic services or when there are perceptions that justice or security is only available to those with the ability to pay.

Dynamics that Mitigate Violence and Conflict

\textit{Mitigating dynamics reflect those interactions in an environment and the related actions of key actors that suppress violence and conflict or provide a foundation for the resolution of conflict and disputes through peaceful means.}

Interactions across the five lenses of the VCA may expose where and how institutions are addressing identity groups’ grievances, what incentives exist for peaceful cooperation between polarized groups, what narratives promote tolerance of others, and how social norms serve to regulate and promote nonviolent behavior.
Key actors may play a variety of mitigation roles. These include increasing the perceived consequences for participating in violence, serving as dispute arbiters, or providing protection or security to groups and individuals.

- **Mitigating factors are not normatively positive.** A violence or conflict mitigating factor, while sharing some characteristics of USAID’s definition of resilience, does not always serve to reduce chronic vulnerability or facilitate inclusive growth. Mitigating factors may actually undermine democratic principles and perpetuate dynamics of exclusion, such as when security force crackdowns limit criminal violence but lead to repression and violations of human rights.

- **Mitigating factors influence outcomes in different ways:** they may mitigate the likelihood that conflict and violence will break out or recur, the scale at which it manifests, or the effects of conflict and violence on individuals, groups, institutions, or systems.

- **Mitigating factors may look different across individual, institutional, or systemic levels.** While understanding mitigating factors for individuals and groups in conflict and violence is critical to improving well-being, building positive peace also requires identifying how these outcomes can be linked to institutional and structural prevention and resilience capacities.

- **Mitigating factors at the individual and household level.** For individuals, households, and communities, mitigating factors include approaches that reduce risk, build resilience to conflict and violence, and help shape decisions encouraging individuals to address grievances or meet their interests peacefully. The VCA helps assessment teams consider what factors from across the analytical lenses are helping individuals make the decision to employ peaceful means to address their grievances or pursue their objectives and what actors influence these decisions.

- **The concept of resilience is particularly helpful when considering how mitigating factors limit the adverse effects of conflict and violence and reduce fragility.** Conflict and violence are man-made shocks affecting individuals, communities, and systems. Research conducted through USAID’s Center for Resilience highlights a number of resilience capacities that can contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities, including access to markets, assets, and natural resources, social capital, and responsive institutions.

- **Resilience to conflict and violence** focuses on those capacities that enable individuals, groups, and societies to withstand, adapt to, and recover from the threat and effects of conflict.

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34 USAID defines resilience as “the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth.” USAID Resilience Policy, 2022.
and violence. For example, evidence suggests informal social protection networks are critical lifelines for those faced with conflict- and violence-related threats by granting safe passage during internal displacement, facilitating recovery from wounds, and meeting households’ basic needs when normal channels are denied.\textsuperscript{35} Assessment teams should consider what coping and protective strategies are being employed against the threats of conflict and violence present within the system and what actors constitute the most salient threats against these groups. This approach bridges concepts from resilience and humanitarian protection approaches\textsuperscript{36} to promote improved human security for both individuals and communities.

- **Mitigating factors at institutional and systemic levels support and promote societal pathways to the peaceful resolution of grievances.** Pathways for Peace,\textsuperscript{37} Positive Peace Index,\textsuperscript{38} and numerous other studies highlight those attitudes, institutions, and structures which help societies peacefully manage conflicts. These include, but are not limited to, acceptance of the rights of others, free access to credible information, a healthy business enabling environment, equitable management of natural resources, and inclusive governance systems. Assessments can help highlight how to strengthen systemic incentives for peace and what actors in the system are best placed to create and uphold channels for inclusive, peaceful, and just resolution of conflicts.

- **Mitigating factors in shock-prone contexts.** Armed conflict is often only one of the shocks that individuals, households, communities, and systems face in many of the places USAID works. In these cases, factors which contribute to disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, early warning, improved social protection, are particularly critical, as they reflect a number of the institutional means by which shock-prone societies can mitigate the spread and effects of conflict and violence. This further helps inform coordinated action across humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding to collectively address compound crises.\textsuperscript{39}

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\textsuperscript{35} USAID, Informal Social Protection Networks in Conflict-Affected Contexts, 2022.

\textsuperscript{36} USAID and Global Protection Cluster, Protection Analytical Framework, 2021.

\textsuperscript{37} UN and World Bank Group, Pathways for Peace, 2019.

\textsuperscript{38} Institute for Economics and Peace, Positive Peace Index, 2021.

Step 4: Map Potential Trajectories

Trajectories are possible alternative futures for a country and their potential impact on conflict and violence. Trajectories include possible trends and triggers which might shape patterns of future conflict or violence and windows of opportunity for advancing peace and security. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, this also means examining potential interactions of compound shocks, stresses, and transnational influences.

Projecting how dynamics evolve requires an understanding of the system and how it is likely to behave. Trajectories describe potential pathways that these dynamics may take in the future. While some programming recommendations for USAID will correspond with the current nature of the system, including immediate needs for the protection of people from violence or escalating levels of conflict, Missions operating in complex environments should anticipate changes to the system and expect to adapt.

These trajectories may also be linked to the historic, compound shocks, stresses, and patterns of transnational influence explored as part of the context that characterize many conflict-affected settings. Trajectories represent a combination of trends, triggers, and windows of opportunity.

- **Trends** are gradual or periodic changes in the context. They reflect forward projections based on the data collected and the team’s understanding of what is happening in the local system. Projections may suggest a reduction in violence, continuation of the status quo, or upticks in violence and potential for new conflict.

- **Triggers** are immediate, usually observable actions or events that can provoke acts of violence, suppression, or conflict. They refer to specific points in time, usually actions or events, that interact with the system, potentially leading to escalations in violence and conflict, or an opportunity to build peace. Triggers may be anticipated events, for example, elections or a holiday. In some cases though, they will be unexpected, for example, a natural disaster or pandemic. Not all triggers are shocks, but some shocks can serve as catalysts of change, violence, or peace.

- **Windows of opportunity** represent openings to advance peace, security, and development objectives. They may be tied to social conditions, political administrations or will, or relate to aspects of the trends and triggers the team identifies during data collection.
To develop trajectories, the team will explore the intersection of trends and foreseeable triggers. As the team transitions from the diagnostic phase of the VCA to the recommendations phase, these trajectories will be critical for developing recommendations that address both the root causes and the short-term impacts of the trigger. Consider trends, triggers, and windows of opportunity that may exist across both short and long term time horizons.

**Figure 5. Considerations for Identifying Trajectories**

The VCA captures a snapshot in time, but its insights can help users understand potential future outcomes and developments. For particularly likely or high-impact trajectories, users may choose to conduct follow-on analytical exercises to inform adaptive management, contingency plans and operational readiness.

Some of these exercises and tools include:

- **Scenario Planning** - an analytical deep-dive into possible trajectories to explore how outcomes might impact different aspects of the context or development opportunities and inform long-term planning, including in areas like climate security or atrocity prevention.

- **Sentinel Indicators** - indicators that signal deterioration of security or increases in threat levels that, when triggered, initiate pre-planned action or contingency measures; these indicators are particularly relevant in contexts facing high risk of mass killings or atrocities and can help inform scenario planning.

- **Geospatial Modeling** - mapping projections based on current trends and interactions between different contextual and conflict-related factors and geospatial data.
- **Forecasting** - quantitative models drawing on development and contextual data to help analyze risk, provide early warning of conflict, and inform prevention and response plans.

### Step 5: Synthesize Findings

Once teams finish collecting data to answer the assessment’s lines of inquiry (LOI), the team begins the synthesis process. During synthesis, the team comes together to make sense of the data collected to provide actionable insights. The outputs of the diagnosis phase become inputs for assessment teams as they generate response recommendations. The synthesis process consists of the following steps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</table>
| 1) **Answer the assessment’s LOI.** | Process, share, and document findings from across the team’s data collection to answer the priority questions from the assessment's lines of inquiry.  
  - This should hit topline findings and not all information collected. It should help teams highlight regional variations and identify gaps. |
| 2) **Identify the most relevant dynamics of conflict, violence & peace.** | Teams identify the dynamics from data collection that are the most prevalent and salient to the development context.  
  - Assessments may employ different methods. One simple approach is to name the most significant dynamics using journalistic “headlines.”  
  - Teams should prioritize and limit the number of dynamics explored. |
| 3) **Describe the priority dynamics using the VCA.** | Teams then describe each priority dynamic and their associated trajectories using the VCA lenses by asking questions such as, “What identities does this dynamic affect? What institutions shape these outcomes? What incentives are at stake for different actors?” |
| 4) **Identify entry points suitable for development response.** | Entry points are those aspects of a dynamic where interventions may positively shape attitudes, behaviors, institutions, or incentives for peace or address underlying drivers of conflict or violence.  
  - Entry points don’t specify approaches. Instead, they reflect areas of friction in the current system contributing to conflict.  
  - Not all entry points will be suitable for development interventions or fall within the manageable interest of USAID or USAID’s partners.  
  - Systems mapping tools and exercises can help visualize dynamics and possible entry points. |
| 5) **Identify the possible points of interaction between identified dynamics and** | Conflict sensitive development requires understanding where and how our interventions interact with the conflict & violence context, including:  
  - **Geography.** Where is this dynamic concentrated? Does it impact locations where USAID is working?  
  - **Sectoral impacts.** What interventions does the dynamic impact? |
USAID’s programs and approaches.

- **Beneficiary & partner identities.** Does the dynamic involve or impact any groups or institutions involved in USAID interventions?
- **Behaviors & approaches.** Do our behaviors or approaches reinforce or counter these dynamics?

### 2.2 RESPONSE

The Response portion of the assessment framework is designed to assist USAID Missions and users to effectively prevent, manage, and mitigate conflict and violence. To do this, the VCA pairs the analysis produced during diagnosis with a semi-structured approach to formulating *targeted, prioritized, technically sound, and actionable response recommendations* to Missions and other assessment stakeholders. Response planning begins once teams complete data synthesis.

VCA response recommendations are designed to help Missions address all or some combination of the following challenges:

- How to prioritize potential entry points where interventions can prevent violence and contribute to peace, both directly via peace and security interventions or by aligning other development interventions to address underlying drivers of fragility, conflict and violence;
- How and where existing programs affect and are affected by fragility, conflict and violence dynamics, and how programs can adapt for improved effectiveness;
- How development interventions can reduce vulnerability to conflict and violence for groups at highest risk of experiencing harm;
- How Missions can best prepare for conflict and violence related shocks and stresses, adaptively manage programming, and integrate peacebuilding considerations into wider, cross-sectoral resilience strategies;
- How to adapt operational and management practices, processes, and partnerships to better identify, understand, and respond to changing fragility, conflict and violence dynamics.

While recommendations address similar challenges, every conflict and violence-affected setting is unique, and thus requires contextualized responses. Similarly, recommendations must be tailored to the decision-making needs of each Mission. Instead of providing a structured checklist, the VCA Response process employs a set of *technical and operational* criteria to generate, refine and validate prospective recommendations.

The VCA Responses further also identifies what trends Missions should track following the conclusion of the assessment and proposes ways to operationalize recommendations, plan for contingencies, and adapt to changes in the conflict context.

VCA Response consists of the following three components:

- Developing *targeted, technically sound, and actionable response recommendations*;
- Prioritizing recommendations using a mix of technical and operational criteria; and
Identifying how and where to operationalize and integrate these recommendations.
**Step 1: Develop Response Recommendations**

The process of developing recommendations builds directly on the outputs of the synthesis process. During synthesis, teams will have identified and prioritized potential entry points for development interventions to address drivers of conflict and violence or advance peace. The process includes the following steps:

![Figure 7. VCA Process for Developing Recommendations](image)

Considerations for the assessment team include:

- **How many recommendations to prioritize and communicate.** These must be actionable, manageable in number, and prioritized based on agreed upon and transparent criteria.

- **Level of specificity of the recommendations.** This may be tied to the extent to which recommendations are expected to be delivered as a direct output of the assessment versus as a product of follow-on CLA engagement with a wider pool of Mission staff or other stakeholders. For example, a Mission may choose to have an assessment team present findings as an input to a co-creation activity design workshop, drawing on more participatory response processes.

- **Who will be engaged in the process and how.** Teams should explore how to ground-truth and validate their recommendations with key stakeholders, including local experts and partners, Mission, and U.S. Embassy staff.

- **Timeline and method for delivery of recommendations to the Mission and other stakeholders.** Intentionally consider how CLA approaches can be applied to work with users on integrating recommendations into organic processes.

**Step 2: Prioritize Recommendations against Technical and Operational Criteria**

To help VCA teams evaluate the feasibility and potential effectiveness of prospective recommendations, the assessment framework provides a series of criteria that reflect *technical* considerations and the *operational* constraints found in any context.

These criteria reflect lessons learned from past conflict assessments, best practices from across the peacebuilding community of practice, and operational realities related to development, USAID, and USG processes. Depending on how and where this framework is used, assessment teams should consider if other filters may be appropriate or useful to include or prioritize.

Detailed guidance on applying these criteria and generating response recommendations is included in the VCA Application Toolkit.
While VCAs are intended to address similar development challenges, each context is ultimately unique.

- Every context features different conflict and violence dynamics and peacebuilding opportunities.
- Every Mission has unique decision-making needs, operational realities, and strategic priorities.

In recognition of this need for flexibility, the VCAF Response applies a set of technical and operational criteria to help assessment teams generate, refine, and validate recommendations.

### Technical Criteria

Technical Criteria are those considerations that can help assessment teams ensure potential recommendations reflect best practices in peacebuilding and development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T1. Is the recommendation reflective of VCA data and analysis?</th>
<th>• Is the recommendation supported by what the team heard in the course of the assessment?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T2. Is the recommendation based on evidence and best practices in peacebuilding?</td>
<td>• Do evidence reviews in the technical area suggest this approach will be effective?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| T3. Is the recommendation sensitive to conflict dynamics? | • Would this action somehow lead to unintended harm?  
• Would the approach increase risk for beneficiaries, partners, host communities, or the USG? |
| T4. Does the recommendation promote local capacities and sustainability? | • Does the recommendation strengthen local capacities to manage conflict?  
• Would this response be likely to affect change beyond the life of a finite intervention?  
• Are there “bright spots” that development interventions can help scale or amplify in terms of impact? |
| T5. Is the recommendation based on a sound Theory of Change? | • Do the proposed recommendations logically lead to the intended result?  
• Does the recommendation’s potential effectiveness rely on |
Consulting the Evidence Base when Shaping VCA Response Recommendations and Designing Peacebuilding Interventions

Whether developing recommendations in support of a Violence and Conflict Assessment, serving on a Technical Evaluation Committee, or participating in activity design, USAID's peacebuilding cadre and development professionals should ensure potential approaches reflect best practice and are supported by the evidence base. The following resources from leading peacebuilding and learning organizations reflect the state of this evidence and should be consulted when developing recommendations.

The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) produces the Building Peaceful Societies Evidence Gap Map highlighting the state of evidence across approaches, as well as a series of systematic reviews with summaries of evidence in the following areas:

- Strengthening Intergroup Social Cohesion in Fragile Situations (2020)
- Strengthening Women’s Empowerment & Gender Equality in Fragile Contexts (2021)


The Governance, Crime, and Conflict Initiative Evidence Wrap-Up (2021), a collaboration between J-PAL, Innovations for Poverty Action, and UKAID addresses what works in the areas of policing, justice provision, crime and violence, criminal organizations and rebel groups behavior change, peacebuilding, reconciliation, post-conflict recovery, and combating violence against women.

Alliance for Peacebuilding consolidated evidence into subsector reviews in the following areas:

- Sub-Sector Review of Evidence From Reconciliation Programs (2019)
- Peacebuilding Approaches To Preventing And Countering Violent Extremism (2018)
- Literature Review: Effective Inter-Religious Action In Peacebuilding Program (EIAP) (2016)


The United States Institute for Peace's Learning Agenda includes a series of thematic evidence reviews in areas such as nonviolent action, strategic religious engagement, and Women, Peace & Security.
**USAID's Armed Conflict and Violence Learning Agenda**, initiated in 2021, is dedicated to building the evidence base in USAID’s peacebuilding approaches. The *Learning Agenda* focuses on issues such as conflict sensitivity, conflict integration, climate security, P/CVE, and conflict and violence prevention.

## Operational Criteria

Operational Criteria are those considerations that speak to the contextual limitations and realities governing how a Mission or supported stakeholders prioritize and manage their resources, relationships, and operations. By understanding these constraints, assessment teams will be able to prioritize recommendations along the lines of what approaches both capitalize on organic processes and reinforce wider Mission priorities.

Assessment teams should work with stakeholders prior to data collection to articulate guiding operational considerations across these categories prior to producing recommendations.

| O1. Does the recommendation align with strategic, political, and operational policy priorities? | ● Are there regional or national policies and strategies that response recommendations should seek to advance?  
   ● Does the Mission or USG have standing approaches, priorities, or partnership commitments with the partner country that should be used to inform prioritization? |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| O2. Does the recommendation make sense based on the programmatic footprint & lessons learned? | ● Are there current activities that are well situated to put the recommendation into practice?  
   ● Is the Mission planning activities that could realistically incorporate the recommendation into their design?  
   ● Have the approaches in question been tried by USAID or other actors? To what effect? How can past experiences inform current likelihood of success? |
| O3. Is the recommendation realistic considering the operational constraints (budgets, feasibility of access, time horizons, etc.)? | ● Are there pragmatic and management-related reasons why the proposed intervention would not be likely to succeed?  
   ● Is the recommendation consistent with Mission appetite for new programs versus adaptation, physical access to geographies, and time horizons?  
   ● Would response options require resources (fiscal or human) the Mission could not provide? |
| O4. Does the recommendation reflect USAID's positionality and | ● Is USAID the right actor to lead an intervention? If not, can USAID convene other actors for greater impact? |
partnerships?

- Does the recommendation leverage our strategic or comparative advantage or reflect our limitations as USG?

OS. Is there sufficient political will for the recommendation to be feasible?

- Does the political will of local partners (host Government and civil society) suggest there is a foundation for success for the response at this point in time? Why or why not? Is this expected to change?

**Step 3: Identify How and Where to Integrate and Operationalize Findings and Recommendations**

In addition to programmatic and operational recommendations, the VCA Response is intended to equip the Mission and assessment stakeholders to operationalize recommendations and to continue to analyze critical dynamics beyond the conclusion of the formal assessment. To accomplish this, the assessment team works with supported unit partners to identify remaining research gaps, considerations for continued monitoring of the context to inform future conflict sensitive adaptation, and means of integrating recommendations into organic Mission and OU processes.

For supported Missions or units who wish to structure their responses, the VCA response may include a *Collaborate, Learn, and Adapt (CLA) Plan*. This CLA Plan details how key findings will inform stakeholder learning, monitoring, and adaptation following the conclusion of the assessment. This step requires integrating findings into organic user processes as well as identifying discrete opportunities for building on the common understanding created through the assessment process.

These plans will vary significantly by context as they are tied to a unit’s existing MEL and management strategies and resources, activity footprint and capabilities, partnerships, and operational needs. At a general level, these plans may address all or some combination of the following approaches:

- **Integration workshops** to work with stakeholders, including technical offices, activity implementing teams, or other partners to identify how and where recommendations can be incorporated into existing or planned activities. These may include incorporating assessment findings into pre-planned Mission or user processes, such as activity design workshops or portfolio reviews;
- Identifying priority *learning questions* for potential inclusion into Mission Performance Management Plans, Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plans, Learning Agendas, and/or follow-on research;
- **Context monitoring** plans to identify priority changes in conflict dynamics and programming interactions; in contexts where there may be a risk of mass atrocities, identify sentinel indicators and tie the indicators to associated response plans;
- **Continued analysis**, via more focused exercises such as *scenario planning, geospatial analysis*, or periodic updates to the detailed violence and conflict assessments; and
- **Adaptive management** practices that may help a Mission or user navigate conflict-related challenges. Examples include Mission orders on conflict sensitivity, conflict advisory groups, or regional integration approaches.

The VCA Application Toolkit includes a more detailed description of how CLA approaches can help users integrate and operationalize findings from the assessment for improved development outcomes.
ANNEX I: KEY TERMS RELATED TO CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, & PEACE

**Conflict**  
an inevitable aspect of human interaction, conflict is present when two or more individuals or groups pursue mutually incompatible goals. ‘Conflict’ is a continuum. When channeled constructively into processes of resolution, conflict can be beneficial; however, conflict can also be waged violently, as in war.

**Conflict integration**  
efforts to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of development and humanitarian assistance by addressing the collective dynamics that underpin peace, security and core sectoral goals

**Conflict prevention**  
deliberate efforts to disrupt likely pathways to the outbreak, escalation, or recurrence of violent conflict and promote peaceful, resilient communities

**Conflict sensitivity**  
the practice of understanding how aid interacts with conflict in a particular context to mitigate unintended negative effects and to influence conflict positively wherever possible, through humanitarian, development and/or peacebuilding interventions

**Fragility**  
fragility refers to a country’s or region’s vulnerability to armed conflict, large-scale violence, or other instability, including an inability to manage transnational threats or other significant shocks. Fragility results from ineffective or and unaccountable governance, weak social cohesion, and/or corrupt institutions or leaders who lack respect for human rights

**Humanitarian-development-peacebuilding (HDP) coherence**  
an intentional process to promote appropriate sequencing, layering, and integration across humanitarian, development, and peace assistance in pursuit of a common agenda

**Inclusive development**  
the concept that every person, regardless of identity, is instrumental in the transformation of their own societies and their inclusion throughout the development process leads to better outcomes

**Negative peace**  
the absence of violence or fear of violence

**Operational readiness**  
the ability of the operating unit to maintain its continuity capability and perform operations through any disruption, while prioritizing the safety of the workforce and their families

**Peacebuilding**  
a range of efforts at the community, national, and international levels to
address the immediate impacts and root causes of conflict and violence before, during, and after it occurs

**Positive peace** the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies

**Resilience** the ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth. In conflict and violence prevention, resilience often refers to protective structures (personal, group, institutional) that buffer individuals from the effects of adverse experiences

**Violence** the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person or against a group or community that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation

**Violence prevention** activities to prevent the use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation

For a more complete list of standard terms used across USAID’s peace and security community of practice and their sources, please see USAID/CPS/CVP’s Armed Conflict and Violence Glossary.