

What is MSTC?

Introduction

At its simplest, a “Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts” (MSTC) analysis is an intense, participatory three-and-a-half day workshop involving up to 25 participants, four facilitators and one full-time documenter. By harnessing the collected wisdom of the participants, MSTC seeks to analyse a national or regional conflict at the macro-level. The workshop is not a training event but a strategic analysis tool that generates practical recommendations. The goal is for conflict analysis to translate into tangible humanitarian, development, and advocacy priorities that are appropriate and relevant to fragile contexts.

The MSTC tool should form part of the landscape or context assessment of any NGO working in fragile contexts. The tool can and should be used multiple times in a country, especially in dynamic contexts where turbulence creates significant and rapid changes in power. The results of each workshop often profoundly affect the way NGOs continue to work in conflict contexts.



World Vision Ethiopia staff in an MSTC exercise in 2008.

History of MSTC Analysis

World Vision International (WVI) senior leadership commissioned a tool in 2000 that could be placed in the hands of NGO staff working in turbulent contexts. The tool sought to empower NGO staff to integrate their knowledge of the dynamics of their context into their relief, development, and advocacy programming plans.

Since 2003, 40 workshops have been completed in 22 countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Participants have included World Vision staff, policy-makers and development practitioners, including UN staff, government officials, and donor representatives. International Alert reviewed the MSTC framework in 2009 and WV presented MSTC to the International Studies Association conference in 2010. CARE Nepal conducted an MSTC analysis in August 2011. World Vision is preparing to publish the MSTC for wider external use.

Aim of MSTC Analysis

MSTC aims to equip NGO staff **to analyse and articulate the actors, symptoms, political economy, trends and triggers** of ongoing and sometimes chronic political and economic instability.

MSTC Analysis is specifically designed for contexts where political and economic turbulence and conflict are affecting the work of humanitarian actors on the ground. The outcomes of MSTC Analysis help NGO staff respond in the most effective and beneficial way.

What are ‘Turbulent Contexts’?

Turbulent contexts may refer to chronically fragile countries or regions that are either suffering from long-term, overt violent conflict or are ostensibly at peace but are undermined by hidden violence. Natural disasters amplify social turbulence. In the aftermath of a disaster, the recovery process often reveals deep fault lines within society.

Turbulent contexts are profoundly and protractedly **political** in nature. The instability in turbulent contexts is **chronic** rather than acute. Most turbulent contexts experience **ongoing cycles** of ‘peace’ followed by ‘conflict’. Violent conflict can be understood as part of a *system of violence*. NGOs, therefore, become more effective by focusing on the **long-term, cyclical, and political nature** of complex contexts.

Conflict expressed in disagreements or differing interests is normal and can be a stimulus for constructive and positive change. MSTC Analysis seeks to identify key factors and trends that cause conflict to escalate into violence, in order to plan more effective interventions that help reduce or prevent both overt and systemic violence.

Why ‘make sense’ of turbulence?

Objective humanitarian work requires in-depth contextual understanding. Attempts to misappropriate or manipulate aid are commonplace in fragile contexts. Humanitarian and development actors operate in many environments where conflict and division are embedded and difficult to discern. MSTC Analysis can help NGOs probe these contexts and respond in more effective

ways. Most importantly, context analysis is critical to avoid inadvertently adding to the instability or violence.

MSTC analysis is designed to dovetail with the 'Do No Harm/Local Capacities for Peace (LCP)' approach to planning aid which many NGOs use to contextualize their development work.¹ MSTC Analysis provides an overview of the wider context, which can be used to enrich and drive a Do No Harm analysis.

MSTC Analysis also addresses advocacy imperatives at national and international levels. Increasingly, NGOs are influencing policy discussions regarding multi-lateral humanitarian assistance, to ensure that aid supports economies of peace, not war.

What does MSTC Analysis look at?

Informed by the academic understanding of conflict causes, MSTC looks both at "grievance" factors (culture, language, religion, history, etc.) and at "greed" factors (political economy, winners and losers) and how both affect the most vulnerable.² In many turbulent contexts, economic "losers" have no means and winners have no reason to end the conflict. War can become 'economics by other means'; instability can become the cover for massive profiteering and economic abuse.

An economic analysis of war needs to be complemented social analysis on exclusion and marginalisation, history and belief systems³. MSTC Analysis uses specially designed, practical tools to peel away the political, economic, and socio-historic layers of complex conflicts. Both "greed" and "grievance" analyses produce a rich, textured picture, with important insights into the makeup of the turbulent context and its complex interactions.

Basic questions guide the participants in the workshop as they work systematically through the MSTC Analysis Tools:

1. What **historical phases** have marked the context?
2. What are the **symptoms of instability**?
3. Which **actor-groups** influence the turbulence?

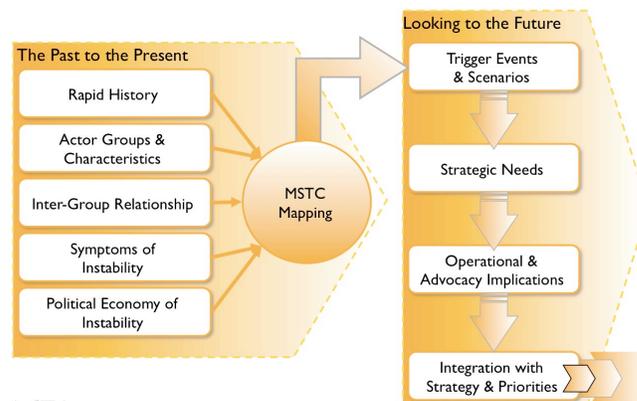
¹ Anderson, Mary B. 1999. *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace Or War*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner.

² See, particularly, Le Billon, Philippe. 2000. *The Political Economy of War: What Relief Agencies Need to Know*. London: Humanitarian Practice Network Paper 33, ODI. Also, *Silent Emergencies* in March 2002 issue of Humanitarian Exchange, the magazine of the Humanitarian Practice Network.

³ Department for International Development (DfID). 'Conducting Conflict Assessments: Guidance Notes.' London.

4. Who controls the **resources & power** fuelling the turbulence?
5. What **resentments & stereotypes** influence the turbulent context below the surface?
6. Which **trigger events** may reasonably be expected to create new scenarios?
7. Are there clear **strategic and operational implications** of the dynamics of turbulence?

MSTC Analysis Cycle



Conclusion

The MSTC facilitation process involves weeks of research and careful selection of participants from within and outside the host organisation. The participants bring their diverse perspectives, experiences, and expertise to analyse their own context. Senior leadership of the organisation receive an 'initial findings' presentation, including draft recommendations, within a few days of the end of the workshop, and a 12-page executive summary within one month. Within a week of the end of the workshop, participants receive a detailed and confidential written record of the workshop proceedings, without attribution. Dependent on the permission of the host, detailed recommendations are distributed widely.

Though the MSTC tool was specifically designed for World Vision use, the tool generates considerable interest outside the organisation, from civil society, governments, and the private sector. When participants engage the process fully, and the facilitators are able to elicit and document their full input, the MSTC tool is capable of producing world-class context analysis.

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