



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT ASSESSMENT

Analytical Framework



A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF USAID'S CENTER FOR CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE PREVENTION

The development community's approach to peacebuilding is in the midst of a much-needed reckoning. All too often, donors, including USAID, treat conflict as a frustrating backdrop impeding our development objectives or an insurmountable problem to be chipped away at through limited peace and security programming. This discards an immense opportunity for change.

The Violence and Conflict Assessment (VCA) is based on the premise that development assistance tools and approaches can promote peace if we design them to capitalize on those opportunities. However, our work can also accidentally contribute to conflict and violence if we aren't careful and thoughtful in our strategies, program design, and implementation.

The Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention (CVP) offers the VCA as a tool to help align our work, regardless of the sector, to achieve these ends. At its core, the VCA helps users make sense of the complex challenges of working in conflict and violence in a systematic and approachable way.

The VCA builds on the Agency's decades of experience conducting conflict assessments and the Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF) 2.0. It reinforces the strengths of the CAF, while also addressing implementation challenges, incorporating new and emerging evidence, and strengthening connections across the Agency's work. These updates include exploring the broader forms of violence that occur both within, and outside of, traditional armed conflict spaces; incorporating elements of political economy analysis; identifying more nuanced roles of actors in conflict and violence-affected settings; examining the role of narratives; and seeing conflict and violence as part of wider systems of shocks and stresses that are frequently a reality in the places we work.

We recognize the VCA is one among many assessment approaches and resources, each with their strengths and limitations, and we hope it can be useful to practitioners beyond USAID. We also hope it does justice to the collaborative thinking and experience CVP has encountered in the peacebuilding community and that it will evolve as the field continues to innovate.

Don Chisholm, Director
Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention
Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization
2024

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This product is the result of significant contributions from across the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Government, and USAID's peacebuilding partners. The VCA was produced by USAID's Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention in USAID's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization.

The principal authors are Leslie Dwyer, Karen Kaplan, and Tristan Willman. Special thanks to CVP's Violence and Conflict Assessment Working Group for their substantial technical input: David Hunsicker, Julie Werbel, Alayna Tetreault-Rooney, Rick Morgan, Lisa Chandonnet-Bedoya, Rebekah Krimmel, Nicole Patierno, Claire McGillem, Tanya Alfredson, Jacob Good, Michelle Linder, David Alpher, Marzia Faraz, Yehuda Magid, Brittany Chernoff, Theresa Outlaw, Ray Jennings, and Ted Glenn. Special thanks to Don Chisholm, Ryan McCannell, and Rob Horvath for their leadership of CVP through this update. CVP also wishes to extend our appreciation to the many USAID and partner technical experts who took time to share their reflections and recommendations.

The VCA update was an iterative process. It builds on years of intentional efforts to learn from USAID's experience conducting conflict assessments. CVP is grateful to the team that supported the 2019 evaluation of the CAF, whose insights and efforts provided a foundation for this update. Their thought leadership in further developing the Violence Addendum to the CAF 2.0 in partnership with USAID/LACLEARN and their substantial contributions to this framework have been instrumental.

CVP also extends its thanks to the assessment teams, technical experts, and USAID staff who piloted the framework with, and in support of, USAID/Honduras, USAID/Sri Lanka and the Maldives, USAID/Uganda, and USAID/Kenya and East Africa, as well as the professionals with USAID/CPS Peacebuilding Evaluation, Analysis, Research and Learning, including Sophie Sportiche, Julia Rizvi, David Yamron, Emily Determan, and Elliot Meador for their dedicated stewardship of the VCA and commitment to innovating in its application.

Recommended citation for this document: USAID, *Violence and Conflict Assessment* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2024).

ACRONYMS

ADS	Automated Directive System	OU	Operating Unit
CAF	Conflict Assessment Framework	P/CVE	Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism
CDC	Center for Disease Control	PEA	Political economy analysis
CLA	Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting	SEM	Social-ecological Model
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy	SOGIESC	Sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics
CPS	Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization	TOC	Theory of Change
CVP	Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention	USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
GBV	Gender-based violence	VCA	Violence and Conflict Assessment
LOI	Line of Inquiry	WPS	Women, Peace, and Security

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary 1

1 USAID’s Approach to Analyzing Armed Conflict, Violence, and Peace 4

1.1 Background 5

1.2 Why Conduct a Violence and Conflict Assessment 6

1.3 Scalable Approaches to Violence and Conflict Assessment 8

2 The Violence and Conflict Assessment 10

2.1 Analysis 11

 Step 1: Identify Drivers and Mitigating Factors of Conflict and Violence 12

 Step 2: Identify Key Actors and their Roles 23

 Step 3: Identify Relationships between Drivers, Mitigating Factors, and Key Actors 26

 Step 4: Map Potential Trajectories 30

 Step 5: Identify Potential Interaction Effects 32

2.2 Response 34

 Step 6: Develop and Prioritize Response Recommendations 35

Annex I: Key Concepts behind USAID’s Analytical Approach 41

Annex II: Key Terms related to Conflict, Violence, and Peace 45




Annex III: Consulting the Evidence Base for Response and Design 46

End Notes 47

Navigating this Document

Tip: Use the navigation bar at the bottom of the page to move between sections. The red bar indicates which section you are in.

Boxes provide readers with additional information on the VCA. Look out for:

 <p>Key Definitions</p>	 <p>Process Notes</p>	 <p>Examples and Further Insights</p>
<p>Key Definitions explain critical terms for applying the assessment framework.</p>	<p>Process Notes highlight connections between the assessment framework and the mechanics of planning, conducting, and managing Violence and Conflict Assessments.</p>	<p>Examples and Further Insights illustrate key concepts by sharing concrete cases and additional perspectives.</p>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

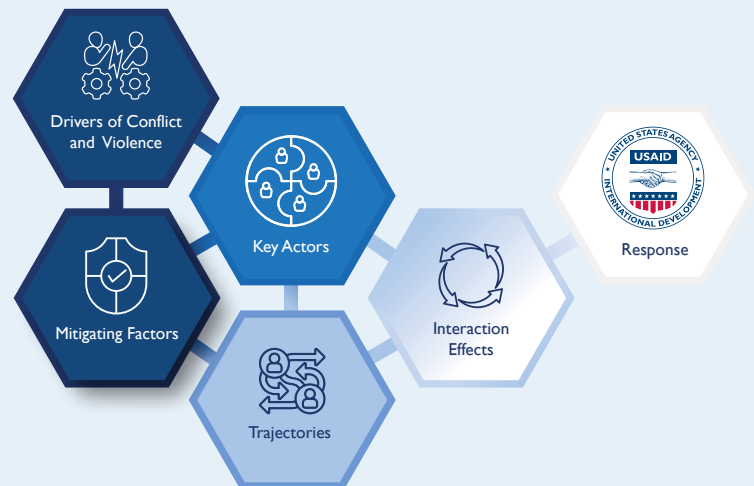
USAID's Violence and Conflict Assessment (VCA) is a tool to assist USAID Missions, U.S. government counterparts, and partners to better understand, address, and navigate the pervasive challenges of armed conflict and violence. USAID recognizes the critical role that fragility, conflict, and violence 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 together with its companion document, the VCA Application Toolkit, which provides concrete guidance on planning and logistics, fieldwork, data collection, synthesis, writing, and reporting.

ASSESSMENTS PROVIDE RECOMMENDATIONS TO HELP DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS:

- 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: **ANALYSIS AND RESPONSE.**

- Analysis** describes USAID's approach to identifying the dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace and how these dynamics interact with our development interventions and approaches.
- 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 Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) approaches to promote operational readiness in the face of fragility, conflict, and violence.



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 focused on a targeted set of risks.

USAID's Violence and Conflict Assessment: Analytical Framework

STEP 1.

IDENTIFY THE FACTORS THAT DRIVE AND MITIGATE CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

The VCA identifies **drivers and mitigating factors** by examining the interactions through and among five key analytical lenses:



- **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** are the salient markers of similarity, affinity, or distinction among groups of people.
- **Institutions** refer to 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 and incentives** are 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, and values** collectively refer 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 the 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.

STEP 2.

IDENTIFY ACTORS SHAPING CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND PEACE OUTCOMES

The assessment framework examines key actors, or individuals or groups that have the potential to shape outcomes in conflict, violence, or peace. While individuals and groups may play multiple roles, the VCA specifically seeks to identify the following:



- **Mobilizers, Perpetrators, and Peace Actors** have the means and motivation to mobilize others or act themselves for sustained conflict, violence, or peace;
- **Enablers and Influencers** help to shape an environment that is conducive to violence, conflict, or peace, or shape individuals' behavior in violence and conflict-affected contexts by encouraging others to behave peacefully or violently; and
- **Groups Affected** are most likely to be impacted by the dynamics identified.

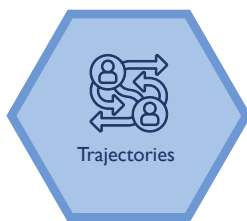
STEP 3. IDENTIFY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DRIVERS, MITIGATING FACTORS, AND KEY ACTORS



VCA's look for systematic and repetitive interactions and transactions between individuals, groups, and institutions that either mitigate or drive conflict and violence over time.

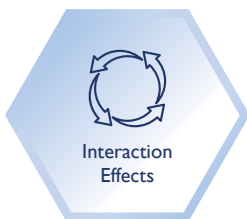
- **Dynamics Driving Conflict and Violence** frequently include exclusion, elitism, corruption, capacity deficits, state repression, and violent political competition.
- **Dynamics Mitigating Conflict and Violence** are patterns that limit the outbreak, intensity, or scale of violence. They are not always positive. VCAs seek to identify opportunities to promote peace and strengthen social cohesion.

STEP 4. MAP POTENTIAL TRAJECTORIES



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 examine **historic patterns, trends, and triggers** that might shape future conflict or violence, as well as **windows of opportunity** for advancing peace and security.

STEP 5. IDENTIFY POTENTIAL INTERACTION EFFECTS



To inform conflict-sensitive development, teams explore potential **interaction effects** between these dynamics, trajectories, and the development landscape. These interactions relate to factors like geographies, perceptions, resource transfers, populations, and partnerships.

STEP 6. IDENTIFY AND PRIORITIZE RESPONSE RECOMMENDATIONS



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 strategic, programmatic, and operational **recommendations**, as well as a roadmap for turning findings and recommendations into action through supported unit processes, programming, coordination, and initiatives. This process draws on **collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA)** principles to facilitate continued analysis and conflict-sensitive adaptation after the assessment.



USAID'S APPROACH TO ANALYZING ARMED CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND PEACE



USAID'S APPROACH TO ANALYZING ARMED CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND 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.¹

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, including those groups already in vulnerable situations. Armed conflict and violence elevate the risk of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), mass atrocities, human rights abuses, and violent extremism. Violence outside traditional conflict accounts for approximately 80 percent of violent deaths today;²

Fueling an increasing number of the humanitarian disasters to which USAID responds. Conflict drives an estimated 80 percent of humanitarian needs.³ Over 100 million people were forcibly displaced as of May 2022, and an estimated 75 percent of those displaced remain so for at least five years.⁴ Displacement from these crises not only affects civilian livelihoods but also 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 that 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. It is also the driving force behind the creation of the Agency's Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization.⁵ Prevention represents a central tenet of USAID interagency policy initiatives, including the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability,⁶ the Women, Peace and Security Act,⁷ and the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act.⁸ These efforts collectively represent an approach to promoting individual well-being while addressing institutional and structural barriers to peace and security. They also bolster the systems and services that protect human rights and enable democratic governance within the rule of law.

1.2 WHY CONDUCT A VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT ASSESSMENT

The assessment framework described in this document is 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 through assessments that are tailored to meet users' operational and learning needs.

VCAs apply a structured analytical approach to:



1. **Identify** the dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace in 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 across USAID's Program Cycle.⁹ These recommendations address the following challenges faced by USAID Missions and development practitioners:

- At a minimum, **ensuring USAID employs Do No Harm approaches** across the spectrum of its development and humanitarian assistance approaches;
- Helping **USAID's development and humanitarian interventions, regardless of sector, address and geographically target 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 **shocks and stresses caused by human action and inaction**; and
- **Improving operational readiness** through conflict-sensitive adaptation and an increased understanding of the conflict and violence context.

USAID's Approach to Conflict, Violence, and Peace

The VCA informs more than just USAID's peace and security programming.

USAID employs a variety of approaches across sectors to improve the sustainability of development interventions, build peace and prevent conflict and violence, and overcome the pervasive challenges of working in conflict and violence-affected settings.

Employ conflict-sensitive approaches across sectors and contexts

Do No Harm: Design and implement interventions to avoid exacerbating conflict or causing unintended harm to communities, partners, and beneficiaries.

Integrating Conflict Considerations into Sectoral Programming: Intentionally design sectoral interventions to address underlying conflict drivers and build peace.

Conflict Sensitive Adaptive Management and Operational Readiness: Anticipate, adapt, and respond to the challenges of working in conflict-affected contexts through adaptive management approaches.



Credit: USAID, Colombia

Promote peaceful, inclusive, and just societies through prevention and peacebuilding

Direct Prevention: Engage groups at increased risk of perpetrating, experiencing, and/or falling victim to conflict to prevent violence.

Structural Prevention: Strengthen the “enabling environment for peace,” or the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies.

Strategic Prevention: Use interagency and multidonor partnerships, regional approaches, and locally-led development to enhance the impact and sustainability of direct and structural prevention interventions.



Credit: USAID, Indonesia

Mitigate the effects of conflict and violence on individuals, institutions, and systems

Limiting Impacts on Wider Patterns of Instability and Fragility: Limit the effects of conflict and violence on compound crises, anticipate and respond to shocks and stresses, and support recovery.

Building Resilience to Conflict and Violence: Reduce vulnerability to the effects of violence and armed conflict, improve protection outcomes, and support recovery.



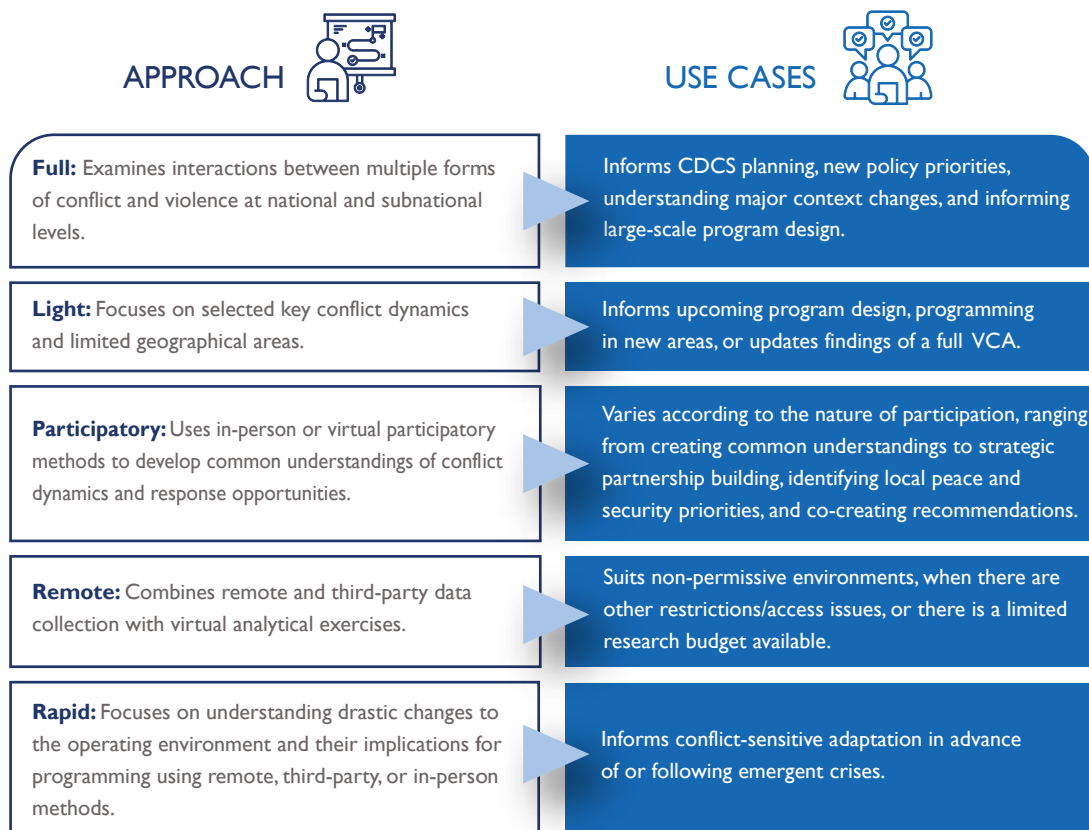
Credit: USAID, Peru

1.3 SCALABLE APPROACHES TO VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT ASSESSMENT

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 changes in the context that might impact the implementation of its development or humanitarian interventions.

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

FIGURE I. SCALABLE APPROACHES TO VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT ASSESSMENT



CORE VCA PRINCIPLES

Regardless of an assessment's geographic scope or approaches, all VCAs adhere to a series of core principles:

- Use **conflict-sensitive research methods** to avoid unintended harms associated with conducting data collection in fragile, conflict- and violence-affected settings;
- Apply **multiple methods** to strengthen the quality and utility of the analysis and leverage the strengths between qualitative, quantitative, and geospatial methods;
- Employ data collection approaches **inclusive of gender and social identity groups present in a context** to ensure analysis is grounded in the varied experiences and perspectives of diverse groups;
- Incorporate **local expertise and data sources** to ensure findings reflect local experiences of and priorities related to conflict, violence, and peace; and
- Prioritize and incorporate actions designed to deliver **actionable recommendations** to inform decision-making.



Representatives from civil society groups, government, and the private sector in St. Ann, Jamaica vote on priorities for reducing the high levels of youth-perpetrated crime and violence in their communities. Credit: Jamie Barnett/FHI 360



Process Notes

LINES OF INQUIRY

To ensure assessments respond to the operational needs of the supported Mission or Operating Unit (OU), VCAs seek to answer tailored lines of inquiry (LOIs). Assessment teams work with the supported unit to identify these LOIs, which ultimately should reflect questions that will directly equip decision-makers and program managers to make more informed operational decisions. LOIs 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.



Examples and Further Insights

If you are interested in learning more about USAID's Violence and Conflict Assessment

Email: CVP's Analysis and Evidence Team at analysisevidenceteam@usaid.gov

Visit: <https://www.usaid.gov/about-us/organization/bureau-conflict-prevention-and-stabilization>



2. THE VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT ASSESSMENT



2. THE VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT ASSESSMENT

The VCA is a structured analytical approach to examine 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: **Analysis and Response**.

2.1 ANALYSIS

VCA Analysis 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 analysis phase is focused on identifying dynamics that are most prevalent and salient.

These dynamics are affected by many interrelated factors. To help teams unpack complex dynamics, the VCA examines the **drivers and mitigating factors shaping violence, conflict, and peace** and actors that play influential roles in these dynamics (**key actors**). Building on these dynamics, the VCA also examines future projections (**trajectories**), as well as potential **interaction effects** between the observed dynamics, trajectories, and the development landscape.

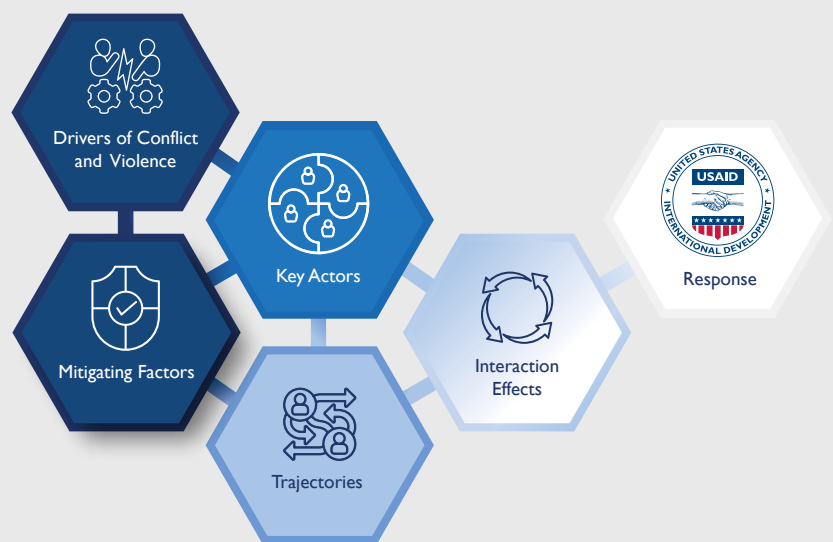
This section examines the respective components of the VCA **analytical framework** in detail, as well as how these concepts come together in practice.

FIGURE 2. VCA ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The VCA is a structured analytical approach to help USAID and our partners better navigate the challenges of working in conflict and violence affected situations.

The VCA's purpose is to:

1. Identify dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace in the operating context
2. Provide technically sound and actionable recommendations



STEP 1

IDENTIFY THE FACTORS THAT DRIVE AND MITIGATE CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE



DRIVERS AND MITIGATING FACTORS

The VCA first identifies the drivers of and mitigating factors for fragility, conflict, and violence, and how they contribute to the outbreak, escalation, or recurrence of conflict and violence.

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

Mitigating factors¹⁰ 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 also exacerbate the potential for future violence and conflict.



Key Definitions

DRIVERS

Drivers of fragility, conflict, and violence are factors that, when mobilized, contribute to the outbreak, escalation, or recurrence of conflict and violence.

MITIGATING FACTORS

Mitigating factors dampen the risk of violence and/or help a society peacefully manage their conflicts.

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



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



CONTEXT

Contextual factors are not causes of conflict, violence, or peace. However, they shape the evolution of conflict and violence systems.

Context includes “foundational factors” described in USAID’s Political Economy Analysis (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.”¹¹ Some contextual factors are local, such as a customary land tenure system or a history of deep factionalization, while others may apply to national and transnational levels. Context also considers shared experiences that shape the environment where VCAs take place.

KEY FACTORS FOR CONSIDERATION:

- **Demographic, historic, natural, and human development factors**, such as systems of governance, the 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** 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, and transnational influences** are factors that affect and may shift local systems, which are dynamic and susceptible to change. **Shocks** are external, short-term deviations from long-term trends that have substantial negative effects on people’s well-being, 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.¹²

While not all shocks and stresses can be predicted, assessment teams should identify which shocks, stresses, and patterns of transnational influence recur and may shape—or be shaped by—future trajectories. Examples include climate change, vulnerability to natural disasters, food insecurity, refugee flows, or the presence and activities of geopolitical actors.

Transnational influences refer to factors originating beyond the geographic parameters of a 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.

- **Perceptions of the U.S. government, USAID, partners, and legacy involvement in the context** can inform recommendations. 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 to consider include past U.S. government support to administrations or political parties, involvement in military interventions in the country, or social or cultural ties through diaspora.



Key Definitions

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 histories of conflict or violence, shocks, stresses, and transnational influence, and perceptions and legacies of U.S. involvement in a context.



Examples and Further Insights

The World Food Programme’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 and insecurity remains the main driver.¹³



IDENTITIES

In conflict-affected contexts, tensions may occur along lines of group identity, including ethnic, racial, religious, political, economic, linguistic, tribal, or geographic differences, among others.

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. Groups may organize or mobilize around identities to engage in collective, sometimes violent, action.

- **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 harden into rigid “us versus them” binaries, or cause groups to splinter or re-form 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 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 cut across 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.
- **Identities overlap and shift based on context.** 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.



Key Definitions

IDENTITIES

Identities are salient markers of similarity, affinity, or distinction among groups of people. While identity differences do not cause conflict, they may influence recruitment into armed or peaceful movements or shape how people are impacted by conflict, violence, and peace.



Examples and Further Insights

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.

Given the presence of multiple, overlapping identities, assessment teams should focus on how identities intersect 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.

- **Identity often shapes the distribution of power and patterns of exclusion and inclusion.** Power, access to resources, and decision-making are often distributed along lines of identity, and assessment teams need to understand how different groups of people perceive their power and agency within the violence and conflict-affected context.¹⁴

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 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.



Examples and Further Insights

YOUTH, PEACE, AND SECURITY

Age can be critical to consider when exploring how different segments of the population experience and interact with conflict and violence, as well what opportunities exist for their meaningful inclusion in efforts to build peace and strengthen social cohesion. Youth and elderly are often overlooked, and in the case of youth, frequently misrepresented.



As the Youth Action Agenda to Prevent Violent Extremism and Promote Peace highlights, “Youth are often portrayed as either perpetrators of violent extremism or as possible victims of recruitment into violent groups. However, this narrative fails to capture the fact that most young people are part of the solution.”¹⁵ USAID’s work in Youth, Peace, and Security seeks to maximize the positive role that youth can play in shaping a more peaceful future. VCAs can support these efforts by engaging youth in the analysis, understanding youth perspectives and challenges, and seeking to identify pathways for improved youth participation, protection, youth violence prevention, partnerships, and disengagement and reintegration.



INSTITUTIONS

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 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 hierarchies of elders or 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.

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.

- **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 entry points 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, to ensure that recommendations adhere to Do No Harm principles.



Key Definitions

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.



Examples and Further Insights

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).

— Bernier and Ruth, *Networks for Resilience: The Role of Social Capital*¹⁶

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 (Sustainable Development Goal 16, 2024).”

— Management Systems, *International, Organized Crime, Conflict, and Fragility*¹⁷

- **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 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 shape 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.
- **Service delivery and dignity.** Beyond performance, *how* you are treated by systems and services matters. Challenges in accessing basic requirements that citizens are allowed is a core grievance that impacts public perception of democratic institutions. This concept of “people-centeredness” and dignity in service delivery for public institutions, justice actors, and security services is a central component of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16, promoting just, peaceful, and inclusive societies.¹⁸ Teams should explore where grievances may be shaped or compounded by this mistreatment.
- **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? Can communities effectively address the violence they face? Are perceptions of poor institutional performance causing people to disengage from civic life, or possibly look for alternative providers of basic services or security?



INTERESTS AND INCENTIVES

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.



Key Definitions

INTERESTS AND INCENTIVES

Interests and incentives are the motivations for engaging in violence or conflict for economic, political, or social gain or need.

- **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 from doing so, e.g., a family member, police officer, or friend. Evidence demonstrates that most violent crime is committed by a small number of people concentrated in a limited number of high-risk places,¹⁹ sometimes referred to as “**hot spots.**” Hot spots may be broad or contained to a few city blocks.
- **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.** VCAs should collect data not only on those who commit acts of violence but also on the majority of people in the same community or area who do not. A leader’s motivations for engaging in violence and conflict frequently differ from 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, 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. Somalia and Yemen are extreme examples of what 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.²⁰ 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.²¹

- **State 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 deeply entrenched interests lead those in positions of power to resist change.²² 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, private military organizations, 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 criminal or communal 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



NARRATIVES, SOCIAL NORMS, AND VALUES

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 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.

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

During analysis, teams should:

- **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 community radio? Or is the media being used to spread messages of peace? Among what communities? Narratives



Examples and Further Insights

REPRESSING GANG VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR

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, USAID's VCA team frequently heard from people who applauded President Bukele's approach, even though it has been widely criticized by human and civil rights organizations.



Key Definitions

NARRATIVES, SOCIAL NORMS, AND 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.

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.

- **Look for changing narratives as early warning.** In some cases, shifts in narratives represent precursors to violence, mobilize others to action, and incite violence or atrocities. Understanding and tracking how the tenor and tolerance of violent narratives changes over time can provide critical insights for atrocity prevention efforts and early action.
- **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.²⁴ 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 underlying social norms).
- **Look for opportunities to reduce polarization.** Understanding and navigating the landscapes of competing narratives can help development professionals to reduce polarization²⁵ and contribute to an environment that is less conducive to information manipulation.
- **Identify how narratives 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 fluid and shift, with digital media narratives allowing for real-time portrayals of violence and conflict to circulate across local and national borders.



Credit: Aleksandr Golubev



Examples and Further Insights

NARRATIVES AND 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.

Social norms are the social and cultural rules that 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.”²⁶ 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.

- **Norms are closely tied to 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.²⁷ 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 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals or women’s rights advocates in patriarchal societies.
- **Norms shape entry points for development.** Peacebuilding interventions ultimately seek to change the behaviors of individuals, groups, and institutions. Understanding what norms influence 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 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 of these actors that 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 not succeed.²⁸



Examples and Further Insights

SOCIAL NORMS OF GENDER

In violence and conflict-affected contexts, social norms that dictate appropriate gendered behavior often play a powerful role. For example, norms that link masculinity to violence may “normalize” family or community-level violence or 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 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 “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 that shape values and avoid making external normative judgments that could undermine trust in the assessment process.



Examples and Further Insights

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 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.

—Paul Mozur, *The New York Times*²⁹

USAID’s [Conflict and Violence Addendum to the Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment](#)³⁰ includes additional considerations for examining these issues.

STEP 2

IDENTIFY ACTORS SHAPING CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND PEACE OUTCOMES



The VCA maps the roles that different actors play in shaping the dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace to identify potential entry points in the wider system. **Individuals and groups do not have to explicitly promote or perpetuate violence 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, VCAs should look at diverse actors, including those operating in informal domains of influence or within informal institutions (e.g., within kin groups or communities). **Individuals may play multiple roles (e.g., perpetrators may themselves be victims).**

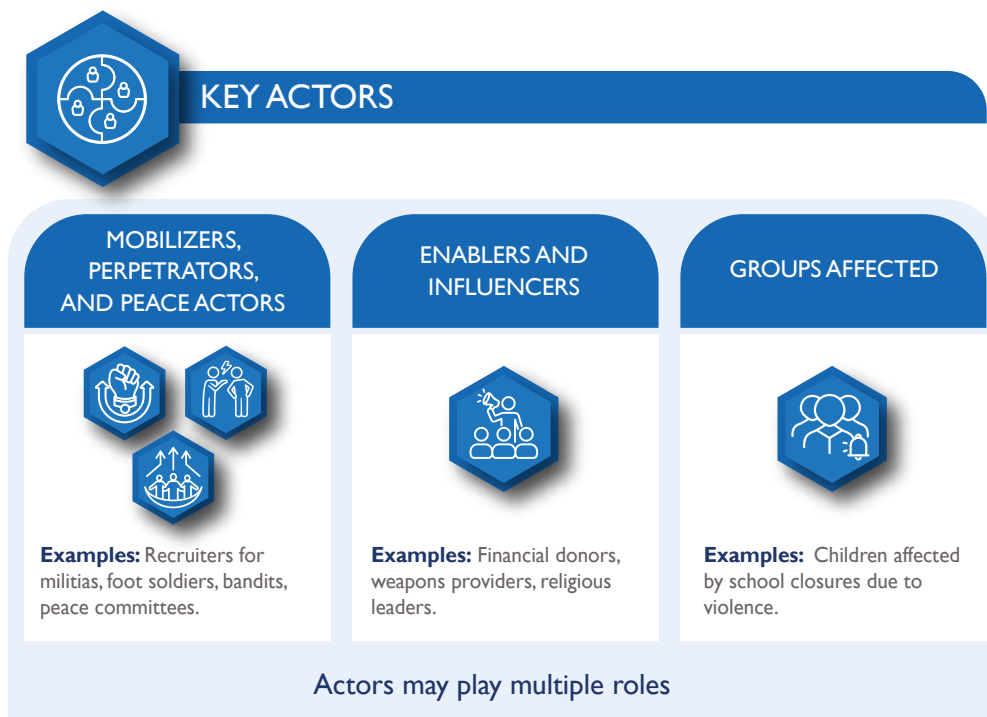


Key Definitions

KEY ACTORS

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

FIGURE 3. KEY ACTORS



THE VCA PRIORITIZES IDENTIFYING GROUPS, INDIVIDUALS, AND INSTITUTIONS WHO PLAY THE FOLLOWING INFLUENTIAL ROLES

Mobilizers, perpetrators, and peace actors have the means and motivation to mobilize others or act themselves for sustained conflict, violence, or peace.

MOBILIZERS, PERPETRATORS, AND PEACE ACTORS

> **Mobilizers** are actors who have both the means and motivation to organize others for sustained conflict, violence, or peace. They may include those who recruit others to join gangs, violent extremist organizations, 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 to work for peaceful or violent ends. Often, mobilizers will actively 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.³¹

> **Perpetrators** are actors 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. Motivations for participating in and perpetrating violence may differ starkly from the incentives and interests that drive elites and mobilizers of armed groups. Understanding the profiles of perpetrators of violence is a critical component of atrocity risk prevention efforts.

> **Peace actors** are agents of positive change who work 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. Peace actors may be international or local, as well as formal or informal. VCAs can help USAID better understand the strengths of, relationships between, and challenges faced by different peace actors. While this understanding can help inform peacebuilding interventions, it is also critical to consider how and where international support or partnership might inadvertently undermine local peace actors' efforts.

ENABLERS AND INFLUENCERS

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

> **Enablers** are individuals or groups 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) or peaceful platforms (e.g., private sector actors promoting inclusion across conflicting groups or philanthropic foundations) as well as those providing more indirect support (e.g., communities that protect armed rebel groups; media broadcasting hate speech or messages of tolerance; or governments failing to address rising levels of violence in families and communities that then escalates).

> **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, such as mobilizing people to join a protest or mob, although usually for a limited period of time. Social media and messaging apps like WhatsApp often serve as conduits for this type of influence, as can academic forums.

In other cases, 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

Groups affected refers to those most likely to be affected 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. ethnicity or gender), 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, what types of threats these groups face, and what coping and protection strategies these groups employ to reduce their risk.³²

> **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 VCA Response phase.



Examples and Further Insights

GENDER, KEY ACTORS, AND THE VCA

Gender is a cross-cutting and essential element of the VCA. Team insights into how gender shapes conflict and violence dynamics and opportunities for peace can complement USAID Mission Gender and Social Inclusion analyses called for in Automated Directives System (ADS) 205.³³

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

- Laws, Policies, Regulations, and Institutional Practices;
- 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 GBV.

The VCA can help users 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 people with diverse SOGIESC in state security forces and non-state armed groups;
- Acceptance of the rights of women and people 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.

STEP 3

IDENTIFY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN DRIVERS, MITIGATING FACTORS, AND KEY ACTORS



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.

- **Teams should 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 that help to drive conflict, whereas **effects** are the visible manifestations and impacts of conflict, violence, and peace. For example, the state and private sector may cause conflict through land grabbing from vulnerable populations who are unable to access justice in corrupt 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. In this example, the cause of conflict is a deep, systemic issue of state corruption and criminality that may take years of development support to shift. This does not mean that effects are unimportant. Effects, or 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.** The examples in the box labeled “Common Patterns in Conflict and Violence” illustrate how dynamics ultimately reflect the interactions between the VCA’s five 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. Actors promoting certain narratives and social norms may amplify or mitigate these dynamics.

- **Grievances may be expressed in many 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.



Key Definitions

DYNAMICS

Dynamics are systematic, repetitive interactions and transactions between individuals, groups, and institutions that either mitigate or drive conflict and violence over time. 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.

- **In other cases, identity will play a more limited role, but the incentives present in a system may be more prominent.** For example, the 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 to prolong conflict. Meanwhile, narratives may reinforce the profitability of illicit activities while highlighting institutional failures to provide licit livelihood opportunities.

COMMON PATTERNS IN CONFLICT AND 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 with one another.

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. In others, they may be heads of organized criminal networks where power and resources are highly concentrated in the hands of a few. When elites feel their position is threatened, they often fight to retain power and resources.

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. Patterns of grievances around elitism and exclusions are often 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 result from 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 natural and 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. 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, and may manifest as community-based armed groups, autodefensas, private security, or armed militias. The 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 a means of gaining, consolidating, and retaining power. It involves targeted killings or the 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.³⁴ Corruption alone rarely leads to conflict or violence, but it often accompanies and strengthens other patterns of grievance, for example, when the 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

Interactions between 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, the narratives that promote tolerance, and how social norms serve to regulate and promote nonviolent behavior.

Key actors may play a variety of mitigation roles, including increasing the perceived consequences for participating in violence, serving as dispute arbiters, or providing protection or security to groups and individuals.

- **Mitigating dynamics are not normatively positive.** A violence or conflict-mitigating factor, while sharing some characteristics of USAID's definition of resilience,³⁵ does not always serve to reduce chronic vulnerability or facilitate inclusive growth. Mitigating factors may 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. In some cases, this means mitigating factors aimed at immediate or near-term violence and conflict prevention may compound underlying grievances and jeopardize long-term stability.
- **Mitigating dynamics influence outcomes in different ways.** They may mitigate the likelihood that conflict and violence will break out or recur; the scale at which conflict and violence manifests, or the effects of conflict and violence on individuals, groups, institutions, or systems. Mitigating factors may also look different across individual, institutional, or systemic levels, and assessment teams should explore what factors connect these levels.
- **Mitigating dynamics at the individual and household levels reduce risk and build resilience to the effects of conflict and violence.** They also enable individuals, households, and communities to use peaceful means to resolve their grievances. The VCA helps assessment teams consider which factors from across the analytical lenses help individuals decide to employ peaceful means to address their grievances or pursue their objectives, and which actors influence these decisions.



Key Definitions

MITIGATING DYNAMICS

Mitigating dynamics are repeating social patterns that suppress violence and conflict or provide a foundation for the resolution of conflict and disputes through peaceful means.

RESILIENCE AND MITIGATING DYNAMICS

The concept of **resilience** helps unpack how mitigating factors can limit the adverse effects of conflict and violence on people and systems. Conflict and violence are man-made shocks affecting individuals, communities, and systems. Research conducted through USAID's Center for Resilience highlights resilience capacities that can contribute to the well-being of individuals and communities faced with these shocks, including access to markets, assets, and natural resources, social capital, and responsive institutions. **Resilience to conflict and violence** focuses on the capacities that enable individuals, groups, and societies to withstand, adapt to, and recover from the threat and effects of conflict 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.³⁶ Assessment teams should consider what coping and protective strategies are being employed against the threats of conflict and violence present within the system and which actors constitute the most salient threats against these groups. This approach bridges concepts from resilience and humanitarian protection approaches³⁷ to promote improved human security for both individuals and communities.

- **Mitigating dynamics at institutional and systemic levels support and promote societal pathways to the peaceful resolution of grievances.** Pathways for Peace,³⁸ Positive Peace Index,³⁹ and many other studies highlight the attitudes, institutions, and structures that 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 identify which actors in the system are best placed to create and uphold channels for inclusive, peaceful, and just resolution of conflicts.
- **Inclusive governance and political processes are powerful mitigating dynamics.** The extent to which peaceful dispute resolution and governance systems meaningfully incorporate marginalized voices plays a powerful role in mitigating grievances, patterns of exclusion, and harm. Assessments should map these patterns of inclusion and exclusion to identify how and where inclusive approaches can be bolstered or expanded.
- **Mitigating dynamics in crisis-prone contexts address various shocks and stresses.** Armed conflict is often only one of the shocks that individuals, households, communities, and systems face in many of the places where USAID works. In these cases, factors that contribute to disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, early warning, and 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. Identifying these factors helps to inform coordinated action across humanitarian assistance, development, and peacebuilding to collectively address compound crises.⁴⁰

STEP 4

MAP POTENTIAL TRAJECTORIES

Projecting how dynamics evolve requires an understanding of the system and how it is likely to behave. Trajectories describe potential pathways that violence and conflict 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.

Teams should intentionally consider what time horizons are most useful to the supported unit and the decision-making processes the assessment is intended to support. For a rapid assessment, relevant horizons will be much shorter than assessments designed to inform a new CDCS.

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**.

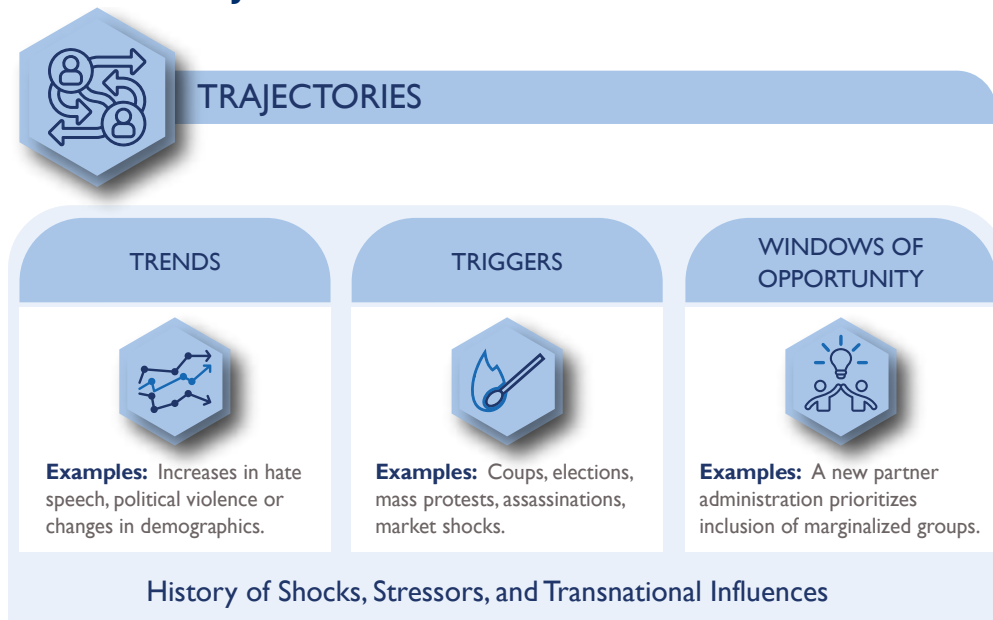


Key Definitions

TRAJECTORIES

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

FIGURE 4. TRAJECTORIES



- **Historic shocks, stresses, and patterns of transnational influence** can provide insights into potential patterns or recurrent challenges, as in places prone to cycles of natural disasters, coups, or incursions from and tensions with neighboring states. Analysts should both consider these patterns as a starting point while also keeping in mind that future shocks and stresses do not always look like those of the past.

- **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. The team should explore how the trends identified during analysis might interact and how this might change their likelihood or impact.
- **Triggers** are immediate, often 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, such as elections or a holiday. They can also be unexpected events, such as a natural disaster or pandemic. While not all triggers are shocks, 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 analysis to the response phase, these trajectories will be critical for developing recommendations that address both the root causes and the short-term impacts of the trigger. Teams should also consider trends, triggers, and windows of opportunity that may exist across both short- and long-term time horizons.



Process Notes

EXPLORING HIGH IMPACT AND LIKELY TRAJECTORIES THROUGH ANALYTICAL EXERCISES AND TOOLS

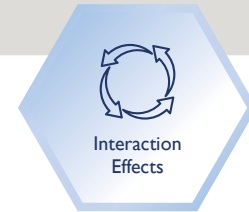
The VCA captures a snapshot in time, but its insights can help users understand potential future outcomes and developments. For particularly likely or high-impact trajectories, users may choose to conduct follow-on analytical exercises to inform adaptive management, contingency plans, and operational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

Some of these exercises and tools include:

- **Scenario Planning:** An analytical deep-dive to explore how possible trajectories may affect the operating context and to proactively identify adaptive management approaches across sectors and inform long or short-term planning, including in areas like climate security or atrocity prevention.
- **Sentinel Indicators:** Indicators that signal a 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 a 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 that draw on development and contextual data to help analyze risk, provide early warning of conflict, and inform prevention and response plans.
- **Social Listening and Sentiment Analysis:** Open-source data collection and analysis approaches that can provide insights into changes in public perceptions and conflict narratives over time.

STEP 5

IDENTIFY POTENTIAL INTERACTION EFFECTS



Conflict-sensitive development requires understanding where and how our interventions, strategic presence, policies, and partnerships interact with conflict and violence to avoid harm and capitalize on opportunities to promote social good.⁴¹

The drivers, mitigating factors, actors, and trajectories that constitute VCA analysis each hold the potential to interact with the development landscape in ways that have implications for strategy, program design, and implementation. By intentionally examining these possible intersections, VCAs help to identify which past actions, perceived actions, inaction, or behaviors may be undermining wider development outcomes and positive peace. Donors and implementing partners often examine these interaction effects at the activity or sub-activity level, but the VCA should also examine how strategic approaches might be interacting with wider dynamics of conflict and violence.

Interaction effects may manifest in a variety of forms. The list below identifies some key categories and questions VCA teams can explore to help identify how and where the dynamics and trajectories encountered are influencing, or are being influenced by, programming or strategic decisions.

- **Geography.** Where is this dynamic physically concentrated, and what activities are present in those locations? Will any of the identified trajectories disproportionately affect specific locations where USAID is working?
- **Sectoral impacts.** What types of development sectors does the dynamic or trajectory affect? Are there specific sectors that feature prominently in the dynamics and trajectories encountered? Or are there sectors that might be well positioned to contribute to prevention efforts?
- **Beneficiary and partner identities.** Which groups or institutions involved in USAID interventions were affected by the observed dynamics? Did the VCA highlight any unintended consequences for partners for participating in or being affiliated with interventions?
- **Resource transfers.** By introducing resources, whether they are physical (goods) or social (opportunities), USAID, U.S. government, or partner presence might be changing the system of incentives that shape conflict or violence or contribute to tensions. Did the VCA highlight patterns of distribution of goods or services along conflict lines? Did the introduction of resources or services serve to undermine existing structures or create divisions? Or contribute to market effects that otherwise shaped the vulnerability of groups affected by conflict and violence? Did the VCA highlight the legitimization of groups or leaders who drive, perpetrate, or enable conflict and violence? Or the stigmatization of actors contributing to peaceful resolution of conflicts?



Key Definitions

INTERACTION EFFECTS

Interaction effects are the ways in which the dynamics and trajectories in a place and an intervention or actors' presence, actions, and behaviors, mutually influence each other. Understanding these interactions is a critical component of conflict-sensitive development.

- **Behaviors and approaches.** Do our behaviors or approaches reinforce or counter these dynamics and narratives? Have USAID, U.S. government, or partner communications and interactions shaped perceptions positively or negatively? Did the VCA expose instances where the messages conveyed by USAID or our partners, either implicit or explicit, were seen as conveying respect, accountability or lack of accountability, fairness or inequity, or transparency?
- **Narratives, perceptions, and legacy effects.** Where do the dynamics and trajectories encountered in the VCA reflect consequences of past policy or partnership decisions? What are the narratives surrounding these policies, partnerships, and their implications, and what groups hold different views? What actions have reinforced these narratives, and do they constitute risks or opportunities for peacebuilding and development?



Process Notes

SYNTHESIS: BRIDGING ANALYSIS AND RESPONSE

Once teams finish collecting data to answer the assessment’s LOIs, 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 analysis phase become **inputs** for assessment teams as they generate response recommendations. The synthesis process consists of the following steps:

<p>1 Answer the assessment’s LOIs.</p>	<p>Teams process, share, and document findings from across the data collected to answer the priority questions from the assessment’s LOIs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This should hit topline findings and not all information collected. It should help teams highlight regional variations and identify gaps.
<p>2 Identify the most relevant dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace.</p>	<p>Teams identify the dynamics from data collection that are the most prevalent and salient to the development context.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
<p>3 Describe the priority dynamics using the lenses of the VCA analytical framework.</p>	<p>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?”</p>
<p>4 Identify entry points suitable for development response.</p>	<p>Entry points are aspects of a dynamic where interventions may positively shape attitudes, behaviors, institutions, or incentives for peace or address underlying drivers of conflict or violence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entry points do not 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 USAID’s or USAID partners’ manageable interests. • Systems mapping tools and exercises can help visualize dynamics, possible entry points, and identify sources of resilience.

2.2 RESPONSE

The response phase 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 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 through 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, target and coordinate humanitarian assistance, 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 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.

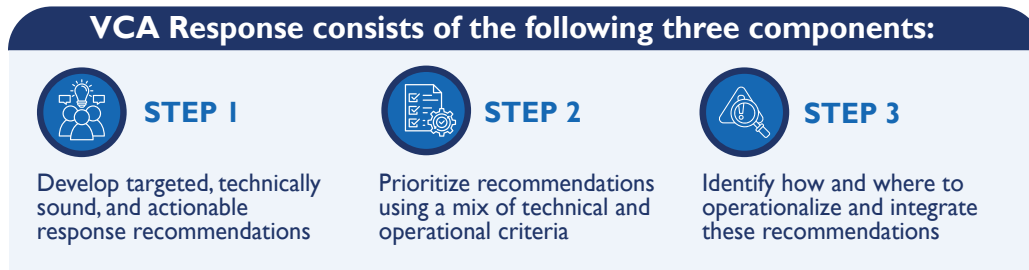
The VCA Response also identifies what trends Missions should track following the conclusion of the assessment and propose ways to operationalize recommendations, plan for contingencies, and adapt to changes in the conflict context.

STEP 6

DEVELOP AND PRIORITIZE RESPONSE RECOMMENDATIONS



FIGURE 5. STEPS IN THE VCA RESPONSE



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. Considerations for the assessment team include:

- **What theories of change (TOCs) describe the pathways to more inclusive, just, and peaceful societies based on the team's findings.** As assessments are conducted at different levels and may seek to address very different problems, TOCs should be used to the extent they are useful as an organizing function for developing recommendations. For example, a TOC may be particularly helpful if assessments are intended to inform specific program designs.
- **Number of recommendations to prioritize and share.** These must be actionable, manageable in number, and prioritized based on agreed upon and transparent criteria. Assessments frequently seek to deliver recommendations at the strategic level (including policy, partnerships, and coordination), programmatic recommendations, but also recommendations that address management, adaptation, and learning.
- **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 delivering 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.

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 U.S. government 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.

Additional guidance on applying these criteria and generating response recommendations is included in the VCA Application Toolkit.

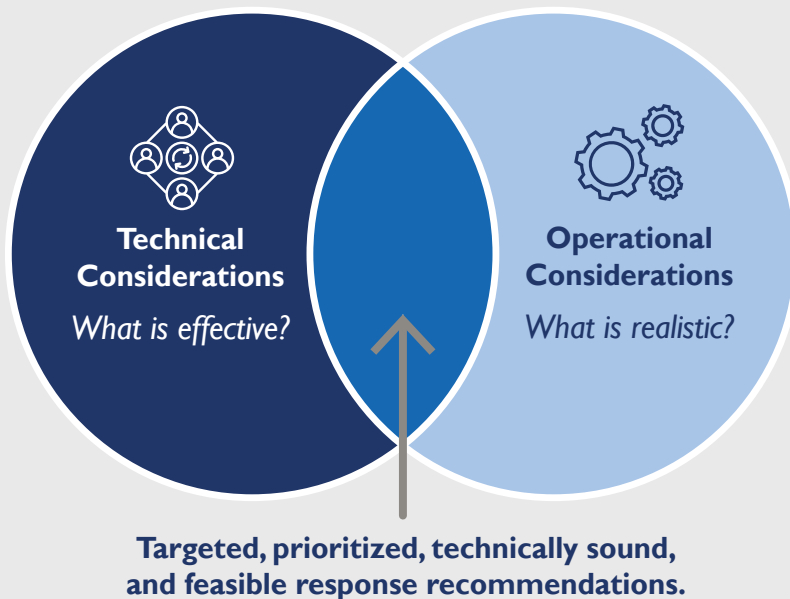


Process Notes

CRITERIA FOR DEVELOPING AND PRIORITIZING RECOMMENDATIONS

While VCAs may address similar development challenges, each context is ultimately unique. Every context features different conflict and violence dynamics and peacebuilding opportunities, and every USAID Mission or unit has its own decision-making needs, operational realities, and strategic priorities.

VCA criteria are meant to respond to this reality while still providing teams with a means of evaluating and prioritizing recommendations.





TECHNICAL CRITERIA

The following Technical Criteria can help assessment teams ensure potential recommendations reflect best practices in peacebuilding and development.

<p>T1 Is the recommendation reflective of VCA data and analysis?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the recommendation supported by what the team heard during the assessment?
<p>T2 Is the recommendation based on evidence and best practices in peacebuilding?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do evidence reviews in the technical area suggest this approach will be effective?
<p>T3 Does the recommendation increase risk of harm for any groups?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would this action somehow lead to unintended harm? • Would the approach increase risk for beneficiaries, partners, host communities, or the U.S. government?
<p>T4 Does the recommendation promote local capacities and sustainability?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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?
<p>T5 Is the recommendation based on a sound theory of change?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do the proposed recommendations logically lead to the intended result? • Does the recommendation’s potential effectiveness rely on assumptions that cannot be made?



Process Notes

See [Annex III](#) to find evidence reviews of different technical approaches from across the peacebuilding community of practice.



OPERATIONAL CRITERIA

Operational Criteria 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 based on what approaches both capitalize on organic processes and reinforce wider Mission priorities.

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

<p>O1 Does the recommendation align with strategic, political, and operational policy priorities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there regional or national policies and strategies that response recommendations should seek to advance? • Does the Mission or U.S. government have standing approaches, priorities, or partnership commitments with the partner country that should be used to inform prioritization?
<p>O2 Does the recommendation make sense based on programmatic footprint and lessons learned?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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?
<p>O3 Is the recommendation realistic considering the operational constraints (budgets, feasibility of access, time horizons, etc.)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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?
<p>O4 Does the recommendation consider how USAID fits into the context and donor landscape?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is USAID the right actor to lead an intervention? If not, can USAID convene other actors for greater impact? • Does the recommendation consider our limitations as U.S. government or leverage our strategic or comparative advantages?
<p>O5 Is there sufficient political will for the recommendation to be feasible?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the political will of local partners (host government and civil society) suggest there is a foundation for success at this point? Why or why not? Is this expected to change, and what can be done to increase political will?

IDENTIFY HOW AND WHERE TO INTEGRATE AND OPERATIONALIZE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to programmatic and operational recommendations, the VCA Response intends to allow the Mission and assessment stakeholders to operationalize recommendations and to continue analyzing critical dynamics after the 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 an **Utilization Plan** or **CLA Plan**. This 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 monitoring, evaluation, and learning and management strategies and resources, activity footprint and capabilities, partnerships, and operational needs. These plans may address all or some combination of the following approaches:

- **Integration workshops** 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;
- **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, this should include identifying sentinel indicators and tying the indicators to associated response plans;
- **Continued analysis**, through 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.



3. ANNEXES



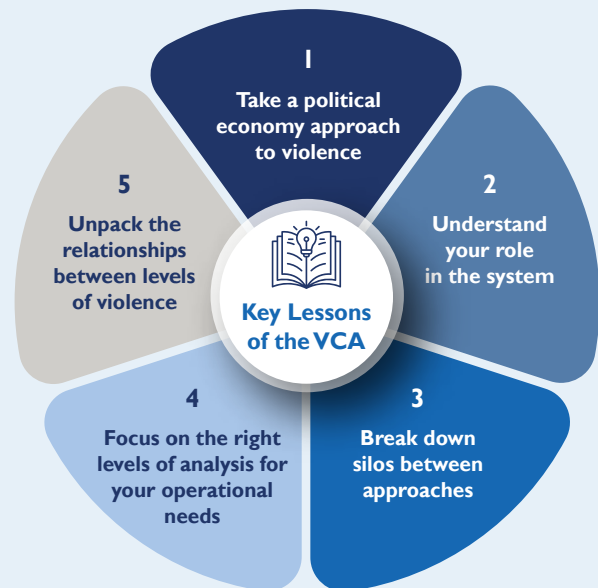
ANNEX I

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, most violent deaths today occur outside of conflict zones, primarily in urban settings.

The VCA employs a systems approach to analyzing dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace. This approach builds on the following five lessons and practices, applicable across contexts, to help assessment teams make sense of their environments and organize their efforts:

FIGURE 6. KEY LESSONS OF THE VCA



I. TAKE A POLITICAL ECONOMY APPROACH TO CONFLICT AND 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 that 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”**⁴² and is the basis for the political economy approach.

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?”

2. UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE IN THE SYSTEM

Just as every development intervention becomes part of the context, so too does USAID’s—and the U.S. government’s—strategic presence and the legacies of past policy decisions and interventions. The politics around donor efforts, relationships with state, international, private sector, and civil society partners, and perceptions of the U.S. government 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 U.S. government.

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 sensitivity⁴³ to the strategic decisions we make through intentional **self-assessment**.⁴⁴ This concept of **strategic conflict sensitivity** takes place over longer time horizons than the lifecycle of any individual development or humanitarian intervention.

3. 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 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.⁴⁵

The Center for Disease Control's (CDC) **Social-ecological Model (SEM) of Violence**⁴⁶ 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.

FIGURE 7. THE SEM

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.



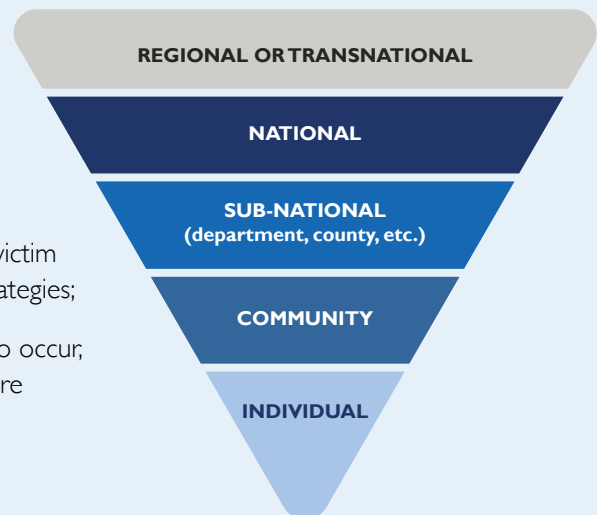
4. FOCUS ON THE RIGHT LEVELS OF ANALYSIS FOR YOUR OPERATIONAL NEEDS

Where teams focus their collection and inquiries should align to the decisions the assessment is meant to inform. 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 levels.

FIGURE 8.VCA LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

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

- Including flexible and complementary LOIs 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.



5. 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:

ATROCITY PREVENTION

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 and other atrocity crimes, including genocide, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes.⁴⁷

Key Resources: [U.S. Interagency Atrocity Risk Assessment Framework](#); [USAID Field Guide: Helping Prevent Mass Atrocities](#)

CITIZEN SECURITY AND YOUTH VIOLENCE

Examine individual and interpersonal risk factors, employ place-based data collection and analytical approaches, and examine the incentives and disincentives at play. Prioritize both protection and prevention strategies.

Key Resources: [Youth in Development Policy](#); [Youth Violence in LAC: A Resource Guide for Aligning Indicators and Interventions to Deepen Impact](#)

RESILIENCE

Look at those capacities that 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.

Key Resources: [Resilience and Food Security Amidst Conflict and Violence](#); [Risk and Resilience Assessments](#)

ORGANIZED CRIME AND CORRUPTION

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.

Key Resources: [Crime and Violence Prevention Field Guide](#); [Organized Crime, Conflict, and Fragility](#)

GENDER AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

Consider identities as central components of the analysis. Consult marginalized voices, examine differential experiences of conflict and risk, and seek out opportunities to advance systemic inclusion.

Key Resources: [ADS 205 Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID's Program Cycle](#); [USAID's WPS Implementation Plan](#); [Suggested Approaches for Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle and in Mission Operations](#)

MENTAL HEALTH, AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

Consider past histories of conflict and levels of trauma as part of the context. Employ trauma-sensitive data collection approaches. Consider mental health, and psychosocial support and public health approaches as critical components of response options.

Key Resource: [Using Trauma-informed Approaches to Build Lasting Peace](#)

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT

Highlight narratives and people 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.

Key Resources: [Conflict and Violence Addendum to USAID's Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment](#)

CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Examine the long- and short-term impacts of climate change on how societies manage their resources, and the potential risks and opportunities these dynamics hold for conflict and violence prevention.

Key Resource: [USAID Climate Strategy 2022-2030](#); [Land and Conflict Toolkit](#); [Water and Conflict Toolkit](#)

GEOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT

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.⁴⁸

Key Resource: [USAID's GeoCenter](#); [USAID Geospatial Strategy](#)



Examples and Further Insights

HOW APPROACHES CONVERGE: AN EXAMPLE FROM YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION EFFORTS IN CAPE FLATS, SOUTH AFRICA

During the apartheid era in South Africa, families were forcibly relocated to Cape Flats. When relocated, existing gangs became territorial, creating a violent gang culture that has been entrenched for decades. Even after the end of apartheid, a sense of powerlessness in Cape Flats communities, accompanied by high levels of youth unemployment, remains.

A study conducted in 2020 found that gangs in Cape Flats mainly target boys, focusing on their need for recognition. Three themes that emerged from this study closely align with the SEM used to frame citizen security assessments and programming in Latin America and the Caribbean. These include:

- Personal factors: low self-esteem, approval from peers, and benefits of being part of a gang;
- Family factors: a lack of belonging; love, acceptance, and support; child-headed households; dysfunctional or absent parental guardian/supervision; and exposure to violence in the home; and
- Environmental factors: Beliefs, values, norms, culture, religious systems, and socio-economic elements including poverty, crime and self-protection, and substance abuse.

These findings suggest that accounting for contextual differences, the SEM framework, youth violence prevention approaches, and MH/PSS approaches can help assess risks and inform responses.

— Marichen Van Der Westhuizen, “Youths in Gangs on The Cape Flats”⁴⁹

ANNEX II

KEY TERMS RELATED TO CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND 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 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 effects 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

ANNEX III

CONSULTING THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR PEACEBUILDING RESPONSE AND DESIGN

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 and Gender Equality in Fragile Contexts](#) (2021)

The **Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)** [Crime, Violence, and Conflict](#) evidence hub consolidates findings from impact evaluations and studies in peacebuilding and prevention.

Innovations for Poverty Action [Peace and Recovery Program](#) focuses on wider conflict prevention and peacebuilding, particularly in post-conflict settings.

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:

- [Violence Reduction Subsector Review and Evidence Evaluation](#) (2019)
- [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 **UN SDG 16 Hub's Pathfinders** [Review of Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention](#) (2020) synthesizes effective prevention approaches in conflict prevention, prevention of mass atrocities, CVE, urban violence and organized crime, and interpersonal violence.

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 and 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.

NOTES

- 1 USAID, *USAID Policy Framework: Ending the Need for Foreign Assistance* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2019).
- 2 Flávia Carbonari, Alys Willman, et al, *Review of Evidence and a Global Strategy for Violence Prevention* (Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, March 2020).
- 3 World Bank Group, "Fragility, Conflict, and Violence," accessed January 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence>.
- 4 World Bank Group, "Fragility, Conflict, and Violence."
- 5 USAID, "Conflict Prevention and Stabilization," accessed 2022, <https://www.usaid.gov/conflict-prevention-stabilization>.
- 6 "U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability," U.S. Department of State, accessed 2020, <https://www.state.gov/stability-strategy/>.
- 7 USAID, *Updated U.S. Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2023). <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/U.S.-Strategy-and-National-Action-Plan-on-Women-Peace-and-Security.pdf>.
- 8 U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Strategy to Anticipate, Prevent, and Respond to Atrocities*, (Washington, DC: U.S. State Department, 2018).
- 9 The Program Cycle is USAID's operational model for planning, delivering, assessing, and adapting development programming in a given region or country to achieve more effective and sustainable results in order to advance U.S. foreign policy. See ADS 201 for additional information.
- 10 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 mitigating factors to avoid confusion with the USAID definition of resilience. USAID's Resilience Policy (2022) provides a deeper discussion of how USAID approaches resilience.
- 11 Alina Rocha Menocal, Marc Cassidy, et al., *Thinking and Working Politically Through Applied Political Economy Analysis: A Guide for Practitioners* (Washington, DC: USAID Bureau Center on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance, 2018) p. 5. <https://www.usaid.gov/democracy/document/thinking-and-working-politically-through-applied-political-economy-analysis>.
- 12 B. Sagara, E. Vaughan, et al., *Resilience Measurement Practical Guidance Note Series 2: Measuring Shocks and Stresses* (USAID Center for Resilience, 2019). <https://www.resiliencelinks.org/resources/tools-guidance/resilience-measurement-practical-guidance-series-guidance-note-2-measuring>.
- 13 Global Network Against Food Crises, 2022 *Global Report on Food Crises* (Rome: GNFC, 2022). <https://www.wfp.org/publications/global-report-food-crises-2022>.
- 14 See USAID's *Additional Help for ADS 201, Suggested Approaches for Integrating Inclusive Development Across the Program Cycle and in Mission Operations* (2018) for a foundation of how USAID approaches these issues.
- 15 "Youth Action Agenda to Prevent Violent Extremism and Promote Peace," YouthPower2, accessed on January 31, 2024, <https://www.youthpower.org/resources/youth-action-agenda-prevent-violent-extremism-and-promote-peace>.
- 16 Quinn Bernier and Ruth Meinzen Dick, *Networks for Resilience: The Role of Social Capital* (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2014). <https://www.resiliencelinks.org/system/files/documents/2022-09/Networks%20for%20Resilience-%20The%20Role%20of%20Social%20Capital.pdf>.
- 17 Management Systems, *International, Organized Crime, Conflict, and Fragility: Addressing Relationships Through a Review of USAID Programs* (South Arlington: MSI International, 2015), p.3. <https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/Crime-Conflict-and-Fragility-Technical-Report-9-30-2015-FINAL.pdf>.
- 18 "Sustainable Development Goal 16," United Nations, accessed on January 31, 2024, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/>.
- 19 Thomas Abt, *What Works in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-review and Field Study for the Northern Triangle*, USAID (Bethesda, MD: Democracy International, 2016). <https://democracyinternational.com/resources/what-works-in-reducing-community-violence-a-meta-review-and-field-study-for-the-northern-triangle/>.
- 20 Alex de Waal, Aditya Sarkar, Sarah Detzner, and Ben Spatz, "A Theory of Change for Violent Political Marketplaces," Conflict Research Programme Memo, World Peace Foundation, February 19, 2020, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/PMF-TOC-Feb-2020.pdf>.
- 21 USAID, Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention, "CAF Evaluation Dissemination Roundtable Series." (USAID internal, 2020).
- 22 Rachel Kleinfeld, *A Savage Order: How the World's Deadliest Countries Can Forge a Path to Security* (New York: Pantheon, 2018).
- 23 Rachel Kleinfeld, *A Savage Order*.
- 24 Metropolitan Group, *Voice: Shifting Narratives to Create a Just and Sustainable World*, 2022, <https://www.metgroup.com/ideas/voice-shifting-narratives-to-create-a-just-and-sustainable-world/>.
- 25 Institute for Integrated Transitions, *The Role of Narrative in Managing Conflict and Supporting Peace*, 2021, <https://ifit-transitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Role-of-Narrative-in-Managing-Conflict-and-Supporting-Peace-1.pdf>.

- 26 Phyllis Dininio, *Strengthening Rule of Law Approaches to Organized Crime: Social Norms* (MSI, 2021), <https://www.msiworldwide.com/story/strengthening-rule-of-law-approaches-to-address-organized-crime/>.
- 27 Cheyanne Scharbatke-Church and Diana Chigas, "Understanding Social Norms: A reference guide for policy and practice," *Social Norms, Corruption & Fragility* (Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, September 2019), <https://www.corruptionjusticeandlegitimacy.org/items/understanding-social-norms%3A-a-reference-guide-for-policy-and-practice>.
- 28 USAID, Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention, "CAF Evaluation Dissemination Roundtable Series."
- 29 Paul Mozur, "A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts from Myanmar's Military," *New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>.
- 30 USAID, *Conflict and Violence Addendum to the Digital Ecosystem Country Assessment* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2022), https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/USAID_DECA_Conflict%20and%20Violence%20Addendum.pdf.
- 31 A. Heslin, "Riots and resources: How food access affects collective violence," *Journal of Peace Research*, 58(2), 199-214, April 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0022343319898227>.
- 32 "Protection Analytical Framework," Global Protection Cluster, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/field-support/Protection-Analytical-Framework>.
- 33 Automated Directive System Chapter 205, "Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID's Program Cycle" (USAID, 2023), <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/205.pdf>.
- 34 "What is corruption?" Transparency International, accessed 2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/what-is-corruption>.
- 35 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." 2022 Resilience Policy Revision (Washington, DC: USAID, 2022), <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/Resilience-Policy-Revision-Jan-2023.pdf>.
- 36 J. Kim, M. Elsamahi, A. Humphrey, A. Kadasi and D. Maxwell, *Informal social protection networks and resilience in conflict-affected contexts: Lessons from South Sudan and Yemen* (Washington, DC: Resilience, Evaluation, Analysis and Learning (REAL) Associate Award, 2022), <https://www.resiliencelinks.org/resources/informal-social-protection-networks-resilience-conflict-affected-contexts-lessons-south>.
- 37 "Protection Analytical Framework," Global Protection Cluster.
- 38 World Bank Group, *Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict* (World Bank, 2019), <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/28337>.
- 39 ResourceWatch, "Positive Peace Index," accessed January 2024, <https://bit.ly/3Sle3KS>.
- 40 USAID Resilience Leadership Council, USAID Resilience Technical Working Group, *Programming Considerations for Humanitarian-Development-Peace Coherence* (USAID, 2022), <https://www.resiliencelinks.org/building-resilience/reports/programming-considerations-hdp-coherence>.
- 41 USAID, *Responsible Development: A Note on Conflict Sensitivity from USAID's Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention* (Management Systems International, 2020), https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XCZ1.pdf.
- 42 Alina Rocha Menocal, Marc Cassidy, et al., *Thinking and Working Politically Through Applied Political Economy Analysis*.
- 43 USAID, *Responsible Development*.
- 44 While self-assessment approaches vary, Lisa Schirch offers helpful considerations and resources as part of her book, *Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning*, 2018.
- 45 "U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security," USAID, accessed on January 31, 2024. <https://www.usaid.gov/women-peace-and-security>; "Conflicting Identities: The Nexus between Masculinities, Femininities and Violent Extremism in Asia" (UN Women, 2020), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/conflicting-identities-the-nexus-between-masculinities-femininities-and-violent-extremism-in-asia>.
- 46 "The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Prevention," U.S. Center for Disease Control, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/about/social-ecologicalmodel.html>.
- 47 Atrocity risk prevention requires cross-sectoral and interagency approaches. While the VCA can serve as an effective tool for informing prevention approaches and identifying patterns of structural and cultural violence and societal risk factors, teams should coordinate closely with human rights experts and interagency partners.
- 48 USAID, *USAID Geospatial Strategy* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2022).
- 49 Marichen Van Der Westhuizen, "Youths in Gangs on The Cape Flats: If Not In Gangs, Then What?," *Social Work* Vol 57 No 1; Issue 8, 2020.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

