

From analysis to action:

World Vision's journey of rapid context analysis in humanitarian emergencies

December 2016



This briefing explains one of the tools¹ that World Vision has developed in order to assess contexts rapidly: ‘Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response’ (GECARR). It shares some of the challenges, impacts and reflections that World Vision and others have observed when conducting context analysis in dangerous places. It highlights some key challenges involved when doing context analysis in fragile and conflict-prone contexts as well as some of the elements of effective context analysis that have been observed. We draw upon discussions with 20 key informants based on the ground and in headquarter offices including INGOs, donors, think tanks and consultants.

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To understand complex contexts you often need to be in the middle of them.

As a humanitarian, you sometimes have to put yourself in dangerous places in order to more deeply understand them and you need to use this understanding to better reach the most vulnerable children and their communities.

Through my own experience doing context analysis with our staff and partners in some of the most fragile and conflict-prone settings, such as Central African Republic and Burundi, I’ve seen these exercises lead to greater understanding of the places where we work. This understanding has enabled us to be effective in the midst of turbulence.

Working in these contexts isn’t easy and sometimes involves real danger. Yet these are the types of contexts everyone needs to better understand in order to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable people in the world and this briefing shares some of our journey doing that.

*- Johan Eldebo, Senior Humanitarian Policy Adviser
(Co-Creator of GECARR)*

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What is Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response?

GECARR was created by World Vision staff in 2014. GECARR provides a ‘good enough’ macro-level analysis of a country or a specific geographic context of a country. It’s used during or in anticipation of an imminent humanitarian emergency. GECARR produces a snapshot of the current situation by drawing together the views of a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders, including local communities and beneficiaries. It identifies plausible future scenarios and generates actionable and practical recommendations for INGOs involved in humanitarian responses. The methodology is designed in a way that is flexible to be adapted to different contexts and constraints and it was designed to be an inter-agency tool. To date, eight GECARR analyses have been conducted in: Central African Republic, Syria, Jordan, Kurdish Region of Iraq, Sierra Leone/Senegal, Burundi, DRC and Mali.

World Vision is a global Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation. We are dedicated to working with children, families and communities in around 100 countries to end extreme poverty and injustice. Today, World Vision is responding to more than a dozen complex humanitarian emergencies around the world.

Working in the places with the most vulnerable children

For organisations like **World Vision**, aid is needed by the most vulnerable people in the areas where it is the most difficult for us to work.

“We don't have a normal life. The only normal day that I can remember was on New Year day. I ate and I felt happy. I don't have enough food now”
- child GECARR participant in an IDP camp in Goma, DRC.

BY **2030** the share of **GLOBAL POOR LIVING IN FRAGILE & CONFLICT-AFFECTED SITUATIONS** is projected to reach²

46%

A CHILD BORN IN A FRAGILE STATE IS **2X** AS LIKELY TO DIE BEFORE

5 yrs

as a child born in a more stable low-income country³

70%

of **INFANT DEATHS WORLDWIDE** occur in fragile states⁴



If aid is to reach the most vulnerable, especially children, aid agencies need to be able to operate successfully in high-risk and conflict-affected areas.

Aid agencies must be able to secure grants, advocate and communicate, implement programmes and build inclusive societies in dangerous places.

Working effectively in conflict-prone and fragile situations requires flexibility and innovation. Responding to these challenges tests the ability of aid organisations to understand complex environments and adapt our objectives, ways and working and partnerships accordingly.⁵ Aid organisations working in fragile contexts must be agile to respond to current, potential and unpredictable future challenges.

Understanding context as one of the critical starting points

Actors working in conflict affected areas, including World Vision, are realising that their interventions may have unintended impacts on the contexts within which they are working and have grown aware of the need for conflict sensitivity. Conflict sensitivity is the ability of an organisation to understand its context, the interaction between its intervention and the context and act upon this understanding in order to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive impacts on conflict. A corner stone of conflict sensitivity is context analysis.

Getting the analysis of a context right in conflict prone and fragile situations and then acting on it, is one of the critical starting points for developing proactive and effective responses. Acting on analysis enables the right operations to take place when needed and in a way that is appropriate for that area. An understanding of a context and how that context might change in the future allows agencies to be more proactive and less reactive in their actions. It enables responses to take place faster and before crises hit in order to minimise the impact.

Our journey: context analysis in volatile environments

If getting our analysis of a context right in conflict-prone and fragile situations can help us develop more proactive and effective responses;

- **What can effective context analysis look like in these places?**
- **What are the challenges?**

In the next section we draw upon the observations of a variety of stakeholders including other INGOs, donors, think tanks and consultancies in order to highlight key challenges. We draw upon our experiences with GECARR to illustrate how we have sought to address some of these challenges.



Challenge: An aid system that doesn't always facilitate flexibility → **World Vision experience with GECARR:**

Those interviewed agreed that good contextual understanding should lead to adaptation- needed changes in our programmes to reflect the dynamic nature of the places where we work. However, interviewees felt the current aid system does not allow for a great amount of flexibility and adaptation. For example, when grants require compliance with agreed budgets and planned inputs and activities, and payment (or a proportion of) is tied to results, implementing organisations are then unable to innovate or make appropriate adjustments to changing and dynamic environments. The structured nature of the aid system can prevent needed adaptation, particularly in fragile contexts.

Although we work in a system that can often be inflexible, we have designed GECARR to encourage adaptability and flexibility. For example, GECARR produces actionable recommendations which can facilitate needed programmatic adaptation and change. GECARR logistics were designed to be flexible. For example the GECARR questionnaires used in data collection, including child questionnaires, can be adapted according to a particular context. Another example of GECARR flexibility is that there can be several versions of the final report, which can help with potential sensitivities, in order to encourage greater outreach. We have tried to reach a balance between reaching minimum standards to deliver a quality analysis and producing an analysis in a time-efficient way that's 'good enough' in order to quickly inform operations and planning moving forward.

World Vision has also been actively sharing GECARR and our experiences using the tool in order to encourage flexibility amongst donors. We have been engaging in donor influencing around the need for time and money for context analysis.

“It takes a very bold programme manager, who is being evaluated on delivering pre-determined outputs, to actually make changes in a programme”
- Interviewee

Challenge: Response staff don't have time to do context analysis

Staff time and capacity are key challenges to conducting effective context analysis in fragile and conflict-prone settings. In the midst of a humanitarian response, where a context is likely to be rapidly changing or has dramatically changed, many interviewed said they didn't have the time or capacity to engage in context analysis- either through the use of context analysis tools or through more informal mechanisms. They also felt there isn't a substantial culture of reflection on context and key macro issues within the humanitarian sector; thinking about how our actions affect the context that we're operating in is often not deeply grappled with due to lack of time.

“In the humanitarian sector, we like being busy. There isn't really a culture of slowing down or being thoughtful about what we're doing’
- Interviewee

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World Vision experience with GECARR:

World Vision was equally challenged by the need for some immediate analysis ahead of or in the initial phases of a humanitarian emergency, yet our staff in responses have limited capacity and time to do more in-depth analysis. However, these staff were still expected to inform proposals and strategies with some understanding of changing contexts and relationships.

World Vision therefore designed GECARR to be light touch- the timeframe to plan a GECARR is a recommended minimum of two weeks. The tool purposely does not heavily rely on the time of response staff. GECARR draws upon an external facilitator with the support of an in-country focal point. This team facilitates the process and produces the GECARR report. Response staff are able to validate or challenge data collected in a three-hour scenario planning workshop which helps to triangulate data. Following the data validation phase the facilitators guide in-country senior staff members through a debrief meeting which can encourage deeper reflection and the planning of next steps with resulting roles and responsibilities. This can help agencies adapt to identified potential scenarios. The final report is produced quickly in order to be as relevant as possible to a changing context. The report is designed for a busy response team and is purposefully compact (usually between 4-5 pages).





Challenge: Context analysis as an interesting intellectual exercise that doesn't translate into action

One key challenge identified was that context analysis often fails to get to the 'so what' questions. Analysis fails to lead to programmatic recommendations and then genuine adaptation and therefore becomes just an 'interesting intellectual exercise'. Some interviewed viewed context analysis endeavours as a drain on organisational funding and staff time. Complex, prescriptive and lengthy methodologies were found to often stay 'on the shelf'. Sometimes these tools were being run by consultants and as a result, organisations face difficulties implementing programmatic recommendations as external consultants often aren't able to assure that recommendations are translated into actions. Amongst donors and INGOS there has been a trend of adapting complex context analysis methodologies into something much more simple and light-touch.

“ We had a 50 page handbook that no one was using. We took it and adapted it. We developed a short screening tool that's still being used today’
- Interviewee ”

World Vision experience with GECARR:

World Vision designed GECARR to focus on practical and operational recommendations for immediate use by response offices. Designated in-country focal points seek buy-in from key staff prior to the exercise and then include them in the scenario planning workshop and/or the senior leadership team debrief session in order to help ensure the uptake of recommendations. GECARR facilitators have begun to follow up with the response office after each GECARR to ensure recommendations are being carried out and to provide needed support. However, it is crucial that GECARR is owned in-country and action plans include designated roles and responsibilities in order to ensure accountability and follow-up.

There is also the continued need for ongoing monitoring of the context. We have found that when the GECARR focuses on an imminent event that is very relevant to a response office (such as an upcoming election) recommendations are more likely to be translated into actions. Since trialling GECARR eight times, there has been an increase in the take-up of GECARR recommendations. However, assuring that recommendations translate into actions can still be a challenge.

Logistical issues can prevent context analyses from happening

Issues relating to security and access can prevent some context analysis exercises from happening in fragile and conflict-prone settings. Security challenges can also impact what data can be collected and by who and in what areas. Often the areas that have been the most impacted by a crisis are the most difficult places to access. Poor road quality, internet and communication challenges and slow bureaucratic processes in various settings can also pose challenges and delays. People interviewed noted that context analysis exercises often don't happen because gathering information in fragile and conflict-prone areas can be too difficult.



World Vision experience with GECARR:

GECARR was designed to draw upon a wide breadth of perspectives from community members without gathering participants to a central location. This meant in Mali for example, data was collected by multiple agencies in 5 regions from 235 community members without drawing participants to a central location. This allowed for data collection to take place in more volatile locations in the north. Other GECARR interviews occurred over Skype due to security constraints, such as in DRC for example. Yet there are logistical challenges involved in working with community members in various locations, particularly when community members aren't beneficiaries. Arranging meeting times, explaining the GECARR process and negotiating access with community leaders can take up a lot of time and energy. Timeframes and schedules don't always go to plan.

Going directly to communities to collect data can also sometimes be the only option. For example, in the context of the Ebola crisis, it would have been impossible to gather the insights from community members by drawing them together to a central location for health reasons. Information for the Ebola GECARR was gathered by a small group of facilitators by visiting participants in several areas. Logistical challenges continue to be a difficulty, but GECARR has been designed to allow for needed flexibility.



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'Security impacts data collection. It impacts our access to various areas and having representation from areas in workshops... I never left Kabul when I was in Afghanistan for a context analysis exercise- for security reasons'

- Interviewee

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GECARR: impact and reflections

We know that effective context analysis should lead to better aid. It should enable more flexible, innovative and proactive programming.

This is why World Vision is continuing to monitor and track how our contextual understanding is leading to action in order to continue to improve how we understand and work in fragile and conflict-prone settings.

In the next section, we have captured several examples which highlight some of the impacts and key reflections coming from different GECARRs.





Burundi GECARR

An inter-agency GECARR took place in April 2015 with Action Aid ahead of upcoming presidential elections. The GECARR aimed to inform inter-agency preparedness activities as well as advocacy and communications.

Impact:

- Identified the need to improve communications with people affected by a potential crisis; a Burundi Accountability Hotline project was established.
- Triggered a Start Fund alert⁶, which raised over £450,000 which was committed to 4 agencies for identified preparedness activities.
- Designed all new World Vision programmes and projects, worth approximately \$1.5 million, with GECARR findings in mind.



Reflection:

Inter-agency context analyses improves the quantity and quality of data collected and can provide a platform for joint planning and activities moving forward. We have been able to collect more and better information when various organisations are involved. Conducting a joint analysis can also help to validate data and can strengthen relationships.



Central African Republic GECARR

In September 2015, World Vision sought to conduct a GECARR in CAR in the context of an ongoing humanitarian response in order to inform operations moving forward.

Impact:

- World Vision collected data from three locations in Bangui and the south-west. Given an increase of violence during the GECARR, the team was evacuated which prevented the scenario planning workshop from taking place. The senior leadership debriefing was postponed to a later point while evacuating.
- Information collected was used to inform the response strategy and ongoing operations, as well as a short advocacy briefing which was used amongst internal and external stakeholders, including donors.



Reflection:

This experience highlighted the challenges of working in and seeking to better understand volatile contexts. Part of the analysis wasn't completed on time due to security concerns.



Ebola Crisis GECARR:

A GECARR was undertaken in Sierra Leone with remote support from Dakar in January 2015. The GECARR was conducted in the midst of the Ebola crisis to enable better operations, advocacy and communications.

Impact:

- Developed and clarified advocacy and policy messages during the response; three policy briefings were developed from GECARR findings.
- GECARR informed policy positions at the World Health Assembly and donor conferences in Brussels and New York.



Reflection:

It can be difficult for a response team to develop locally sourced contextual understanding to inform advocacy messages in the midst of a response. Drawing upon community perspectives to develop a greater understanding of the context, needs and potential future scenarios can help to clarify advocacy messages.

Democratic Republic of the Congo GECARR:

A GECARR was conducted in April 2016 in DRC in the context of upcoming presidential elections to inform World Vision's preparedness activities.

Impact:

- Report recommendations fed into three grant proposals for the governments of the UK, US as well as the UN. Two grants have been successful and one is awaiting a decision.
- Impacted operational decision making; GECARR recommendations were used to support the hiring of a Security Manager.
- Fed into UN contingency plans in DRC.
- Findings informed advocacy messages to stakeholders in DRC and to key representatives from the EU, UK, US and Canadian governments which increased understandings of the context.
- Strengthened linkages between World Vision sub-national offices which were involved in the process. Increased staff capacity to monitor and adapt to their context and more regular context monitoring is taking pace.



Reflection:

Given the volatility of the context, many of the GECARR logistics needed to change or adapt during the process. Facilitators relied on the flexibility of the tool in order to make rapid changes at a short notice throughout the preparation and execution phases of the GECARR.

Working in and seeking to better understand volatile contexts isn't easy.

We share some of World Vision's journey with GECARR because we believe that one of the starting points for developing proactive and effective responses can be developing a shared view of the context and appropriate responses with our partners.

In seeking to do this, there have been many challenges, reflections and adaptations along the way.

GECARR is just one of the tools that we are using in volatile contexts.

For more information about other tools, please visit: www.wvi.org/peacebuilding

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End Notes:

1. World Vision uses other context analysis tools such as MSTC: <http://www.wvi.org/making-sense-turbulent-contexts> and IPACS, a micro-level analysis tool: <http://www.wvi.org/peacebuilding-and-conflict-sensitivity/publication/integrating-peacebuilding-and-conflict>
2. World Bank, 2016: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/fragilityconflictviolence/overview>
3. Post-2015 Goals for Children: Stop at Nothing, World Vision International, 2014
4. Post-2015 Goals for Children: Stop at Nothing, World Vision International, 2014
5. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67696/summary-note-briefing-papers.pdf
6. Start Fund Alerts raise an alert for a new crisis through the Start Fund