

RESEARCH FOR ALL PODCAST SERIES 1

EPISODE 1 – CONFLICT SENSITIVITY

Full transcript

May Thazin Aung: Hi everyone, my name is May Thazin Aung and I am a research fellow at SEI-Asia. In this episode, we are very excited to have Dr. Sudarat Tuntivivat, who is Conflict Sensitivity Advisor for SUMERNET. She is also a lecturer and researcher at Srinakharinwirot University in Bangkok, Thailand. Dr. Sudarat Tuntivivat, welcome to the podcast.

You are an adviser on conflict sensitivity for SUMERNET. Can you tell us why conflict sensitivity is important to include in a research project? Give us a few examples from the region about why it is so important in a research project?

Dr. Sudarat Tuntivivat: Well, water management research must consider the dimensions of potential conflict because of the complexity created by different economies, ecosystems, climates, politics, and cultures within Mekong river. Especially now as water resource are becoming increasingly unpredictable due to climate change leading to higher potential for water conflict.

For example, in recent years, the lack of rainfall and the rapid development of hydropower dams has caused droughts in lower Mekong basin. On the other hand, in some years, a high volume of rainfall lead to floods, landslides, water contaminations cause serious damage to livelihoods, properties, and farmlands of different groups of people in Mekong. Therefore, it is important for water management researchers to conduct conflict analysis and implement their research project in a conflict sensitive fashion.

May Thazin Aung: Yes, I think it is very interesting that you highlight some water related issues in the Mekong region. And our SUMERNET program is focusing on water scarcity. So while it is important to address conflict, what does that actually mean in practice?

Dr. Sudarat Tuntivivat: Conflict is any situation in which two or more social entities perceive themselves as having incompatible goals. As researchers, we are not only affected by conflicts, but we also influence the dynamics of conflict where we conduct our research. Ideally, the effect will be positive: researchers will contribute to knowledge and development. However, in some cases, our research interventions may actually increase the risk of violent conflict.

Conflict in research can occur in many domains, including: (i) Financial conflict such as competing over aids, funding, and financial interest in research outcomes; (ii) Emotional and Behavioral conflict such as power imbalance in which participants feel pressured into research participation or burnout among research team; and the last one I found very familiar is role conflict such as researcher's roles are unclear and personal gain from research outcomes that can cause conflict in the research.

While most people associate negative ideas with conflict, conflict is a part of human existence, and the goal of peacebuilding is to transform the destructive ways we deal with conflict to lead to more constructive outcomes. Associating conflict with constructive outcomes will change our perspectives to a more positive and win-win situation when thinking about conflict.

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May Thazin Aung: Thank you so much for highlighting the researcher's code of conduct and our roles in influencing conflict within a context and I think it is really important for us to reflect upon. Especially for your researchers who just started, do you have any advice to share on how they can implement projects that are sensitive to conflict. Maybe more experienced researchers are used to navigating issues of power dynamics and any of the other issues you have mentioned. But for young researchers, can you give some of the advice on how to implement conflict sensitivity in research projects?

Dr. Sudarat Tuntivivat: Yes, the young researchers can incorporate Do No Harm tool into their research project for the application of conflict sensitivity. Do No Harm is based on six important assumptions. First, when a research intervention enters a context, it becomes part of that context. Second, all contexts are characterized by Dividers and Connectors. Third, all research interventions will interact with both Dividers and Connectors, making them better or worse. Fourth, research interventions interact with Dividers and Connectors through their organizational actions and the Behavior of researchers. Fifth, the Details of a research intervention are the source of its impacts. And sixth, the researchers always have the Options to better our research interventions.

May Thazin Aung: It seems easy when you break it down into steps, but I am sure in reality, it is hard to implement. For all of us listening out there, can you give us some examples of resources so that we can reference in order to address conflict sensitivity in research?

Dr. Sudarat Tuntivivat: Yes. Researchers should read Do No Harm Handbook by Mary Anderson who created a concept of Do No Harm 30 years ago. And another good resource is DCA Collaborative Learning Projects also have many publications on Conflict Sensitivity and Do No Harm. You can also take a free course by the UN system Staff College on Conflict Sensitivity.

May Thazin Aung: Are there any examples of resources from the region or by researchers from the region that you can also reference?

Dr. Sudarat Tuntivivat: Actually, DCA Collaborative Learning Projects also has a publication on Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity in Myanmar. You can look at it as an example of the context in the Mekong region.

May Thazin Aung: Alright. Thank you so much Dr. Sudarat for joining us today and for sharing your knowledge and experience with us. It's been really nice having you and we hope to talk to you again some time.

Dr. Sudarat Tuntivivat: Thank you very much for inviting me.