



# CONFLICT AND SEED SECURITY PROGRAMMING

## Focus on Africa | *Summary Brief*

L. SPERLING, K. LAMBERT, G. OTIM, AND J. MARCH

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## Overview

Africa has a longstanding history of conflict, with armed conflicts now spanning at least 18 countries and, in the sub-Saharan region alone, nearly doubling over the last decade. Smallholder farmers in these areas often endure multiple seasons of disrupted production. For instance, in North Kivu, DRC, farmers have navigated conflict for more than 60 growing seasons since 1993, and in Northeast Nigeria, over 28 seasons since 2011.

This summary brief distills key insights from a recently released [working paper](#) centered on conflict in African smallholder farming areas. The paper focuses on seed security; *seed* being one of the core inputs of farmers' agricultural production, and *seed assistance* being among the prime interventions humanitarians use in conflict-affected contexts. It examines how conflict affects seed systems and reviews the range of seed security interventions implemented in response. Central to this analysis is whether the interventions have been tailored to reflect conflict-induced seed system changes—a concept this paper introduces as **conflict-intentional** programming.

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***Conflict-intentional programming** guides implementers to identify possible conflict-induced seed system changes and to steer their humanitarian response to better adapt to or mitigate those effects through explicit technical or social modifications.*

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The paper argues for going beyond the humanitarian imperative to Do No Harm to calling also for interventions that better respond to the conflict-affected realities at hand—through intentional technical and social modifications. Drawing on evidence from 10 African countries (in addition to examples from Syria and Gaza), the paper presents the most comprehensive analysis to date on seed system functioning and seed security response in conflict contexts (100+ references). The driving aim is to improve emergency seed security responses implemented in conflict-affected areas by steering seed security programming to become more **conflict-intentional**.

This summary brief highlights the key findings from this research, as well as an initial set of four concrete steps proposed to move the field forward, even in the short term.

## Key Findings

The paper presents findings under three major themes, with key details from each summarized below.

### 1. Conflict Features and Seed System Changes

**The review identified over 20 conflict-induced changes that might take place in seed systems. Each can have marked implications on seed systems and seed system programming, and the scope of possible changes proves diverse and very wide-ranging.** The changes embrace phases of crop and seed management from the beginning of production to the end: e.g., what type of land will be used, what plot size, which crop, which variety, which seed source, planting time, non-seed input use, crop management, post-harvest management (processing, storage), sale, and more. The conflict-induced changes can also induce complex shifts in strategy: for instance, shifting from food to cash crops; moving away from processing; changing where seed is obtained; and altering the way specific crops are tended. While the cases identified largely involved changes that might be perceived as negative or closing options, a small number of the induced shifts opened possibilities, for example, introducing new varieties and creating novel links with seed production groups.

**While it is key for humanitarians to recognize the seed system-related changes that unfold, they must also understand the rationale for a change. There can be multiple reasons for a shift, with the diverse reasons translating to different types of support.** Take the case of crop choice. Farmers may shift a crop for multiple reasons: stability is uncertain and they need shorter duration crops; inputs are unavailable so they move to crops that do not need fertilizers; or the conflict patterns cause a farmer to miss the crop planting window, so they shift to another crop type. The paper identified six distinct reasons for a single possible shift in crop choice.

In sum, beyond marked violence, loss of assets, and generalized fear, **conflict may induce changes in the fundamental technical ways that farmers choose, tend, and process their crops.** Humanitarians need to understand the rationale for these conflict-induced technical changes if seed security programming is to be conflict-intentional and effective.

## 2. Seed Security Interventions: Broad Range

The paper identified the types of seed security interventions practically being implemented in conflict-affected contexts. Through extensive literature and web-based searches, 11 basic technical types were identified. Each intervention type—for example, direct seed distribution (DSD), seed production, or voucher transfer—was briefly described (i.e., what does it entail) and then each case was reviewed as to whether the design or implementation showed evidence of conflict-intentional programming (i.e., was the intervention tailored to respond to conflict-induced changes). Admittedly, many activity descriptions were quite brief. In reviewing cases, the authors could only comment on what was concretely documented.

That said, a cluster of central findings emerged from the totality of cases.



*The basic interventions implemented in conflict-affected contexts largely parallel those implemented in normal times—seemingly with little tailoring (or conflict-intentional programming).*

Sonia Nguyen/FAO

1. Seed security interventions are taking place in many and diverse conflict-affected contexts in Africa. This paper cites 24 cases from 10 countries.
2. The seed security work implemented in these contexts includes a wide range of responses.
3. The basic set of interventions implemented in the conflict-affected contexts largely parallel those implemented in routine seed security programs, in normal times. There were a few exceptions identified: spurring extensive international seed networks and, possibly, airdrop delivery.
4. The interventions reviewed embraced select technical modifications linked to conflict-induced stresses: for example, alterations in storage design to address theft and shifts in crop choice to boost nutrition and respond to dietary needs.
5. Broadly, the technical tailoring (i.e., conflict-intentional programming) seems to have been modest, especially in relation to the extent of possible conflict-induced changes.
6. Given the importance and relative stability of informal seed systems, it was surprising to find very few efforts to support the informal sector specifically.
7. As a global set, the responses mainly focused on the supply-side, and on giving something free to beneficiaries. This thrust contrasts with expert advice that market-driven systems for service delivery (i.e., not supply-led programming) should be the essence of agricultural support in conflict-affected countries.
8. In terms of actively tailoring responses in conflict-affected contexts, the cash-based responses seem much more advanced than those linked to seed security. Cash-based analysis provides specific guidance around the risks and benefits of diverse approaches (e.g., cash vs. voucher; digital vs. paper).



Overall, this review revealed relatively scant evidence that seed security interventions are being tailored to address conflict-induced stresses. This lag or gap contrasts to the significant number of interventions unfolding in an important number of countries.

*Seed might have some inherent or associated properties that make it one good entry point for peace-linked efforts.*

Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps



### 3. Seed security interventions linked superficially to spurring more social cohesion

Seed security interventions with stated aims to promote greater social cohesion or spur peacebuilding were separately reviewed. Such seed security and peace-linked work may be of relevance given the current promotion of Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus programming.

The paper first asked whether ‘seed’ is a good entry point for peace-linked work and suggested six features of seed and seed systems that might lend themselves to a seed and peace work coupling.

1. Seed sharing takes place and creates bonds in normal local systems. There may be a foundation of social cohesion, already linked to seed, that peace efforts can leverage.
2. Seed is sometimes closely tied to land, cultural identity, and pride—and perhaps healing. Safeguarding local varieties—and promoting joint stewardship of them—might help revitalize community pride towards broader social cohesion.
3. Seed is a relatively easy technology: ‘plug and play.’ Allied peace work might focus on the more complex cohesion processes, without major technical hurdles.
4. Seed grows: it has a future. The analogy to what is desired by peace may make seed a natural fit to social cohesion work.
5. Seed is often short cycle: it yields quick results. Seed is among the quicker technologies to mature and give results. In peace work, it may offer a short-term milestone against which possible social cohesion gains can be charted.
6. Seed management is often associated with women and youth—those most vulnerable in conflict. A focus on seed may also engage those most vulnerable.



None of these features of seed guarantees that its use will make a positive contribution to furthering social cohesion or peace. Simply, the coupling of seed and peace-linked work seems possible and potentially positive, for multiple reasons.

The paper then reviewed the relatively few types of seed interventions linked to social cohesion: DSD linked to Village Peace and Rights Days; gardens in war-torn zones; and seed sharing networks in active conflict zones. Whether seed is an especially good entry point for promoting social cohesion merits further discussion.



*Recently, a set of ‘Ten Guiding Principles for Good Seed Aid’ was developed and disseminated. The aim of these principles is not only to minimize bad—or even dangerous—technical practice, but also to significantly improve it. These might best be followed by all emergency seed aid actors.*

Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

## Actions to Move Forward

The subject matter of this paper is relatively new, as is the term of *conflict-intentional* programming. Four steps are suggested below to guide this seed security and conflict field towards a more solid foundation.

1. **Familiarize humanitarian globally with the concept of *conflict-intentional*.** While Do No Harm is widely understood, conflict-intentional programming is a newer concept. It seems important to socialize this term more widely in the global domain via, *inter alia*, publications, webinars, and online posts. The aim is not to reify the term but rather to spur its use in programming.
2. **Catalyze and review specific cases of seed security programming that has been conflict-intentional.** The available data on which this paper drew was modest—despite use of substantial search engines. It is possible that evidence resides in practitioners’ minds and experience but has yet to be documented. A targeted workshop or expert consultation might help capture practitioner insights from active conflict regions. Documenting this field-based experience is essential for refining and advancing conflict-intentional programming.
3. **Examine the potential of seed to promote social cohesion/peace: are the two a good match?** Seed programming may support social cohesion, making it a good fit for HDP Nexus goals. However, the contributions of seed to social cohesion and, possibly, peacebuilding remain largely underexplored. Joint reflection—via webinars, case calls, or integrated workshops—could clarify

when and how seed system work can contribute to broader social cohesion outcomes (possibly linked to #2).

4. **Develop conflict-intentional seed security programming checklists.** As knowledge on this topic advances, a second-order step would be to elaborate more detailed guidance. To operationalize the concept, conflict-intentional programming checklists might be created to guide seed security programming. Checklists should be grounded—for instance, should the crop choice be the same as pre-conflict? Do the focus crops require inputs that are available? And more. As seed security interventions are designed and implemented by a range of technical and non-technical personnel, checklists might be intelligible also for non-specialists.

Conflict-intentional programming should help to improve seed security programming in conflict contexts. That is the fundamental notion driving this overview paper. The term needs to be socialized, and its practical implications made more clear. There is also a need to better understand what happens to seed systems in conflict-affected contexts and how to respond (tailor) programming to better mitigate and adapt to any changes. These are concrete, distinct ways forward.

## CONTACT

Louise Sperling | SeedSystem  
[sperling@seedsystem.org](mailto:sperling@seedsystem.org)

Kristin Lambert | Mercy Corps  
[klambert@mercycorps.org](mailto:klambert@mercycorps.org)

Geoffrey Otim | ISSD Africa  
[geotim@mercycorps.org](mailto:geotim@mercycorps.org)

