

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

1. What is context analysis?

Context (Latin) – Tying together / Analysis (Greek) – Breaking up

In a literal sense, to do context analysis is to break up that which is tied together.

As humanitarians looking to do context analysis, we can take context to mean an environment in which we operate, and analysis as identifying and organising individual parts of it. These constituent parts include people, places, events, interests and ideas that interact (or are tied together) to create the environment around us.

2. Why do we do context analysis?

To better understand

By breaking a context down into its individual parts, we are trying to better understand them. At the same time, by better understanding these individual parts, the aim is to better understand how they fit together. Despite the literal meaning of analysis, breaking up a context into its individual parts only serves to help us piece them together again, providing us with a clearer, more organised understanding of the context. At its most effective, context analysis identifies connections between different parts of a context that were not previously obvious, exposing new meaning or significance.

This may sound complex, but context analysis is an everyday activity. We do not cross or drive a road, without first analysing an array of moving objects, road signs and weather conditions.

To make better decisions

Most context analysis, particularly in the humanitarian sector, is intended to inform decisions about how we respond to our environment, including:

- What projects and programmes do we implement to address humanitarian or development needs
- How we identify and manage safety and security risks to staff

Equally as important, but sometimes neglected, context analysis should help us better understand how our decisions in turn affect and change that context. Through our presence in a context – as organisations and as individuals – we ourselves become part of it. This recognition lies at the heart of Do No Harm principle.

Fundamentally, if we do not analyse and understand the contexts in which we operate as humanitarians, we increase the risk of poor-quality programming and of harm to ourselves, our staff and local populations.

General purposes for context analysis

- Simplify complexity
- Improve situational awareness
- Organise information to inform decision-making

- Identify risks
- Understand the impact of our actions (positive and negative)
- Think about and plan for change

Specific purposes for context analysis

- Humanitarian needs assessment
- Acceptance and access strategy
- Security risk assessments and risk management
- Programme design and delivery
- Conflict sensitivity
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Scenario and contingency planning
- Country strategy
- Advocacy, coordination and research

3. How do we do context analysis?

There is no one, definitive way to do context analysis. It is as much an action or way of thinking, as a structured process that draws on one or a number of formalised methodologies or context analysis tools. Context analysis may produce a specific output – a written product or a presentation – but not always. It is a teamwork, involving the ones who better know the local context.

At its most basic, however, context analysis is concerned with asking critical questions, organising the answers to those questions and identifying how they are connected.

Asking who, what, where and when is an essential starting point in identifying the different components of a context. Yet if we stop there, we are only describing a context. To analyse a context, we need to ask how something works as it does and more powerfully, why.

One approach often used to ensure that we are analysing and not just describing is to ask:

- **What?** Who did what, where and when)
- **So what?** Why did this happen, why is it important, in general and specifically to me or my organisation)
- **Now what?** What might change in the context as a result, how soon might these changes happen, why might they be significant to me or my organisation)

Other things you will need to analyse context

- A specific, well-defined issue or problem that your context analysis will explain. The contexts in which humanitarians operate are often highly complex. It is unrealistic to think that your analysis of a context can be exhaustive or all-encompassing. This is the work of years, and no context analysis is ever definitive. Instead, frame your analysis around a specific issue or problem. Never start a context analysis exercise without knowing how it will be used and its intended audience, what area or geography you should analyse and over what time. Approach context analysis as if you are attempting to answer a specific overall question.
- Sufficient and reliable information. This can be hard to gather, especially in often politicised humanitarian contexts. Establish a wide network of different contacts, read widely and verify information with multiple sources.

- An awareness of and willingness to challenge bias (especially your own).
- Repetition. Contexts change, often rapidly. Context analysis needs to be repeated at regular intervals to ensure that any conclusions are still relevant and accurate.
- Some context analysis tools and methods. See below.

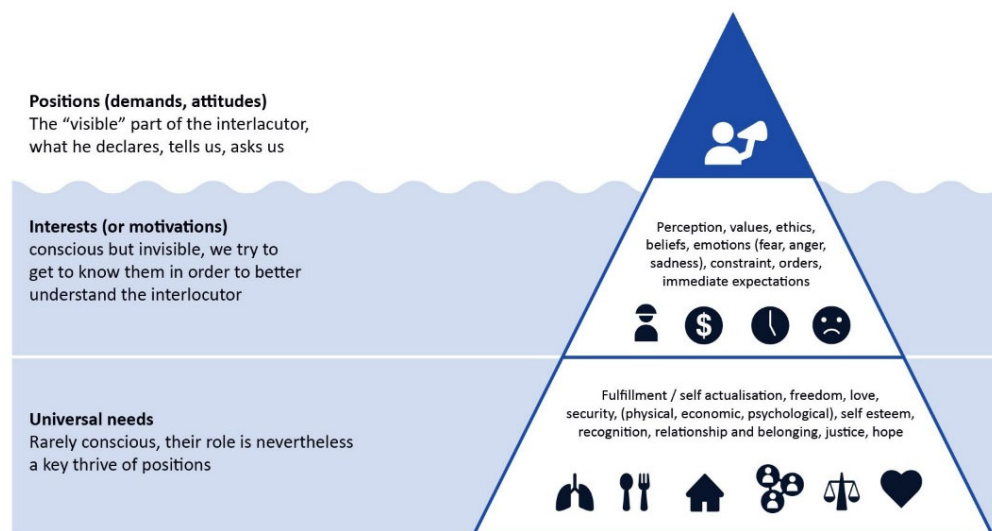
4. Context analysis tools

Context analysis tools, frameworks and methodologies are numerous. As there is no one definitive tool, you can use one or several in combination. While these tools will help guide and structure your analysis, remember that analysis does not have to be a lengthy or elaborate process (unless you want it to be). Some examples of tools are below.

The iceberg

Icebergs are larger beneath the surface than they appear above water. This is often similarly true of the operating environments in which humanitarians operate and the actors we engage with: Only so much about them can be understood from what we see on the surface.

Useful when: Moving beyond surface level information to identify underlying root causes. Can be applied to a specific conflict in a broad sense, or to an individual actor. Particularly useful for in-depth area or conflict profiles, conflict sensitivity assessments, or to inform access negotiations.



Actors' analysis

Identify local actors involved in your issue. Proceed as a team to a description of each local actor. Several NGOs use descriptive tables (who, history, mandate, objective, nuisance power, distinguishing marks, link with NGOs, etc.).

Examine their positions, interests, and needs.

Document their relationship with each other. Some actors are affected by the conflict, some others are fuelling/ defusing the conflict. Understand who is linked to whom, get the relationships and dynamics of power. It helps to identify interlocutors and intermediaries for further analysis and actions.

Perceive how they consider NGOs. Gather information about the history and state of relationship between NGOs and this group. Question the link between NGO presence in the area and their ideology/ political goals. Analyse former NGO incidents involving the group or the reaction of the group during NGO incidents.

Explore what possible action could be employed considering the above information. Keep in mind, the advantages and disadvantages of having a relationship with this actor. (Examples: Provides useful information about the context (+); keeping our operations safe by controlling their elements (+); risk of assimilation (-); risk of unreasonable demands (-); risk of being manipulated (-))

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- Analyse in team/ coordination!
 - Conduct analysis to better understand, and decide.
 - Conduct analysis to improve programming, access and safety.
 - Be specific!
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