



# Conflict Sensitive Assistance in Libya Forum

## Conflict sensitivity considerations relating to the COVID-19 response in Libya

31 March 2020

### Key points

- COVID-19 can be expected to have a significant impact on Libya's peace and conflict environment, requiring updated analysis and scenario thinking about international engagement priorities and approaches.
- Changes in international assistance to respond to COVID-19 priorities and as a result of new limitations posed by the disease will likely have a direct interaction with peace and conflict in Libya, with the risk of inadvertently triggering a worsening of the situation. At the same time, strategic COVID-19 responses could be used to contribute to peace.
- Policy and activity planners and project staff should refer to the conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities matrix provided in this report to help identify ways to mitigate and respond to the conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities they may face as they respond to COVID-19.

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a potentially transformative event for Libya. While at the time of writing significant number of infections had not yet been reported in Libya, the expectation was that COVID-19 would pose significant public health challenges to a country with struggling health infrastructure. At the same time, the political, economic and social dynamics which the spread of COVID-19 will introduce into Libya will have an impact on Libya's broader peace and conflict context – shifting the priorities and capacities

**What is conflict sensitivity?**

Conflict sensitivity recognises that we cannot separate our humanitarian, development and political assistance activities from the peace and conflict context in which we work. All our activities *interact* with the peace and conflict context and this may have positive and/or negative effects.

Conflict sensitivity is an approach to working that aims minimise the way assistance activities may contribute to conflict and maximise the contributions assistance makes to sustainable peace.

of conflict actors and affecting the underlying drivers of peace and conflict in the country.

In this context, as international assistance providers adapt their programming, it is essential to consider the conflict sensitivity of the COVID-19 response, to ensure that activities do not inadvertently trigger or contribute to conflict tensions, and to identify ways in which efforts towards helping Libya resolve its deep-seated conflicts can continue or are ready to resume once the emergency response is over.

This brief note is intended to aid international assistance providers to strengthen the conflict sensitivity of their support to the COVID-19 response in Libya. The note identifies potential conflict sensitivity considerations that assistance planners and project staff should keep in mind as they work on the COVID-19 response, and provides suggestions on how to manage and monitor these. The considerations aim to be as tangible and practical as possible, to ensure that conflict sensitivity considerations can be taken into account at a time when quick, adaptable responses are being developed.<sup>1</sup>

The note is in three sections. The first section briefly outlines some of the ways in which COVID-19 may affect the peace and conflict context in Libya. The second section briefly outlines the COVID-19 response by national and international actors at the time of writing. The third section presents a matrix outlining potential conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities relating to provision of international assistance to the COVID-19 response and identifies measures to mitigate, respond to and monitor these.

## **The potential impact of COVID-19 on peace and conflict in Libya**

As international assistance providers review their activities, both those directly related to COVID-19 and those focusing on other issues, over the short to medium term, it is important that they consider how the broader peace and conflict context may change as a result of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic can be expected to have a significant impact on Libya's peace and conflict environment, changing the priorities and capacities of conflict actors and affecting many of the key political, social and economic drivers of peace and conflict in the country. This section considers some of the ways in which COVID-19 will impact the peace and conflict context at different levels.<sup>2</sup>

### **Impact on national conflict**

Changing dynamics due to COVID-19 can be expected to have an effect on military operations around Tripoli. Both Government of National Accord (GNA) forces and Haftar-affiliated Libyan National Army (LNA) forces have attempted to use shifting international attention as an opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> The note has been informed by a range of sources. It draws on informal consultations with international organisations and Libyan officials involved in the preparation process for a possible COVID-19 outbreak. It is further informed by a survey conducted in 14 communities through PCI's Social Peace Partnerships (SPPs). Finally, it builds on insights from PCI's work to strengthen conflict sensitivity in Libya through the Conflict Sensitive Assistance (CSA) programme, in particular building on the CSA Libya Conflict Sensitivity Risks and Opportunities Resource, which identifies common conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities relating to international assistance in Libya generally.

<sup>2</sup> PCI models peace and conflict in Libya around three inter-related conflict 'domains': a conflict over the structure of the Libyan state and who controls it which plays out at the national political level; local level conflicts over local economic resources, access to administrative rights and inter-communal relations; and the roles and interests of international actors within Libya, which seek both to help Libya transition towards sustainable peace and use their engagement in Libya to advance their own interests. Each of these conflict domains are interrelated and feed into one another; however, each also retains its own dynamics. Addressing the issues driving one domain will not necessarily address issues driving others.

to escalate military operations, potentially in a bid to change facts on the ground and fighting has escalated in and around Tripoli since the COVID-19 pandemic began.<sup>3</sup>

In the medium term there is a possibility that COVID-19 will affect the fighting capacity of both GNA and LNA forces. If infections become widespread, members of armed groups may become sick or be less willing to engage in behaviour that could lead them to become sick, reducing the numbers of fighters available to both sides. If national authorities need to impose restrictions to deal with COVID-19 infections, particularly by imposing lockdowns or curfews, members of armed groups can be expected to be reassigned for public security tasks. This may be particularly relevant for LNA forces, should it become necessary to redeploy forces fighting in and around Tripoli to police cities and towns in the East.

At the same time, national authorities may attempt to use emergency measures introduced to limit the COVID-19 spread, such as curfews and limits to mobility, in a heavy handed manner to control populations, to obscure or justify human rights abuses of rivals or vulnerable groups, or to target political opponents.

COVID-19 can also be expected to interact with national polarisation. The GNA and the Interim Government (IG) have separately and introduced different measures to prevent and respond to COVID-19. Within this context, actors on both sides have attempted to make political use of the COVID-19 pandemic either by declaring their own capability to deal with the situation, or by discrediting their rival authority's intention or capacity to do so. Inaccurate data, or a lack of understanding of data, around COVID-19 may also become increasingly part of politicised narratives by actors seeking to shift credibility. Such divisive narratives could further deepen national polarisation. Depending on how the COVID-19 situation unfolds, if rival authorities are seen to have addressed the crisis differently and with different levels of success, levels of public support for rival governments could tangibly shift, affecting the power-dynamics between them and with implications for the political process.

The COVID-19 response is managed separately by rival national authorities, who interact with local authorities separately. Within the conflicted political context, national authorities may attempt to use COVID-19 assistance as leverage to encourage local areas to align with them.

Municipalities in the south are likely to be worse affected overall than other regions of the country, as local governance structures have less capacity to respond, weaker services, and historically have weaker connections to national authorities. This may contribute to further regional marginalisation of the South.

### **Impact on local conflict**

A significant spread of COVID-19, linked to misinformation about how it spreads, may lead communities to scapegoat certain groups for transmitting the virus, causing stigmatisation and eroding social cohesion in and among communities. Where inter-communal tensions already exist, such a dynamic is likely to occur along existing lines of division, further worsen animosities and could, in some instances, spark violence. In a context of immense pressure on communities, migrants are particularly likely to be blamed for spreading the virus which may become a trigger of discrimination and violence against migrant populations.

Fear of catching the virus and rumour mongering may erode trust within communities and undermine previously built relationships while the efforts of local conflict management mechanisms to mediate between communities and nurture positive relationships may be challenged as dialogue approaches are complicated by social distancing limitations.

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<sup>3</sup> On 22 March 2020, both the GNA and LNA reportedly indicated they would abide by an 'humanitarian pause' to allow for COVID-19 responses, but this was almost immediately broken and violence has intensified since then.

Local authorities' and community leaders' management of the COVID-19 situation may also impact local peace and conflict dynamics. Where there are perceived or actual inequalities and tensions between groups in terms of access to medical care, COVID-19 infections may deepen such tensions if the distribution of treatment is perceived to deliberately favour some groups over others. Particular risks exist where neighbouring geographic areas receive different levels of medical assistance, where local decision makers are not representative of all communities within their local area, or medical facilities are located in a part of a local area accessible to only one community. Unequal access to medical care and treatment may push groups to increasingly safeguard their own interest and increase competition over local administrative structures, in some cases potentially triggering violence.

Shortage in personal protective equipment and medical supplies may be perceived as lucrative business opportunities by local armed actors engaging in illicit trade. This can empower conflict actors and provide them with leverage over local populations and authorities in need of the equipment, increasing the influence of armed actors in local governance. Where several armed groups exist, it can cause competition over control of trade, which may lead to violence. In some cases, armed actors may take control of medical facilities either to secure treatment of their own ranks or to control a resource that provides leverage.

### **Impact on international dynamics of conflict in Libya**

The shifting focus of international leaders and diplomatic actors, particularly within European states and the US, towards addressing domestic crises relating to COVID-19, reduces the attention given to Libya's internationally led political process, exacerbating the challenges already faced by that process. Without the internationally led political process sustaining an impetus for dialogue keeping national and international conflict actors around the table, those actors may be incentivised to ramp up efforts to pursue a military solution on the ground.

The UN and several states have appealed to national actors to halt fighting in order to focus on addressing an impending COVID-19 outbreak. By putting pressure, international actors may be successful in using the COVID-19 situation as impetus to reduce violence. However, the lack of enforcement following such statements and the recognition that such actors are otherwise occupied with their own crises, may in fact worsen confidence in international actors and the international assistance process among Libyans.

Further, as some international actors are reducing their engagement in Libya, others may seek to exploit the crisis to push for their own interests and increase their leverage in the conflict. Until now, some international actors who are providing military assistance to national actors do not appear to have reduced engagement as a result of COVID-19 concerns domestically or internationally. Eventually, differences in how different international actors have engaged throughout the COVID-19 pandemic may cause changes in both the political and military capital of different international actors, and shifts in the dynamics of international interference and the international peacemaking process.

The COVID-19 situation may induce negative perceptions of international organisations, if the virus is perceived to have been brought into the country and spread by foreigners and Europeans in particular. This may be impacted by the priorities set and actions or (perceived) inaction by international organisations. Differences between the capacity and equipment available to address COVID-19 in Libya and in donor countries as well as behaviour and signals sent by staff on the ground, such as wearing personal protective equipment without supplying communities with the same, may cause dissatisfaction and decrease trust in the international assistance as a whole.

## **The COVID-19 response in Libya**

This section provides a quick overview of the COVID-19 response in Libya by both national authorities and international authorities, as PCi understands it at the time of writing. It is not exhaustive and other sources will be able to provide more comprehensive and up-to-date information, but is included here as it provides the base assumptions informing the identification of conflict sensitivity considerations in the subsequent section.

### **National response**

There is widespread concern among authorities and health professionals in Libya that the country has insufficient capacity to handle the consequences of a significant COVID-19 outbreak. There is a lack of medical facilities, necessary equipment and capacity to detect and manage infections. Health care staff are lacking and are often inadequately informed and equipped to deal with COVID-19 patients.

To date, the response from national authorities has been marked by the national environment of contested authority and institutional division.

The National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) issues regulations, oversees testing and monitoring nationwide. While it is anchored in the GNA Ministry of Health, it also reportedly liaises informally with authorities under the LNA and the Interim Government (IG). The rival national authorities have each introduced stringent regulations to prevent or mitigate an outbreak and initiated separate preparation processes. At present, however, implementation appears to be progressing slowly and may be hindered by inefficiencies in institutions and processes.

In response to limited actions from national actors to support municipalities to prepare, local authorities and community leaders in some municipalities are taking initiatives on their own to prepare for an outbreak. These include coordinating collaboration amongst local actors for example by setting up local crisis committees and collaborating with private sector local awareness raising campaigns, measures to enforce social distancing, and preparing health facilities. Other municipalities lack the resources and knowledge to take measures to prepare.

### **Response of international assistance providers**

In response to the evolving COVID-19 situation globally and in Libya, international assistance providers are reviewing and adapting their planned assistance activities and modes of delivery. This involves assessing the feasibility and relevance of already planned activities and anticipating emerging needs, followed by adaptation of modes of delivery and possible reprioritisation of assistance to respond directly to needs arising in relation to COVID-19.

There are indications that some donors are reviewing the capacity and possibility of their implementing partners to continue to implement programmes as planned. Donors are working with implementing partners to adapt existing programmes to the COVID-19 situation, identifying alternative ways of working to continue to deliver needed assistance. In many cases, donors are halting commencement of new programming in order to prioritise COVID-19 related responses.

Many organisations together with donors are planning activities to respond directly to a COVID-19 outbreak. At the time of writing, PCi understands that the COVID-19 response is organised around three main pillars:

- Providing capacity support, including institutional support and training of medical and health professionals to deal with the disease;
- Supplying equipment for detection and treatment; and
- Raising awareness within the broader population.

These activities, as well as existing programmes, face significant challenges as a result of the different measures imposed by competing Libyan authorities to curtail the spread of the virus. Activities that require face-to-face interaction are unlikely to be possible, due to the need to restrict opportunities for transmitting disease and travel restrictions. The closure of borders, internationally as well as within the country, and other restrictions on movement of goods, restricts supply channels and movement of key personnel. The (partial) lockdown complicates access and communication and may cause delays or inability to deliver.

### **Conflict sensitivity considerations relating to the COVID-19 response**

Building on the reflections outlined in the previous sections, this section identifies a number of potential interactions between the international COVID-19 response and the peace and conflict context in Libya.

Two matrices are included: one detailing conflict sensitivity risks, ways in which the COVID-19 response could inadvertently worsen conflict in the country; the other detailing a conflict sensitivity opportunity, through which the COVID-19 response could contribute to peace in Libya.

### **How to use the conflict sensitivity interactions matrices**

The matrices identify conflict sensitivity interactions and describes how each may influence peace and conflict. For each interaction, suggested mitigations or adaptations are identified aimed at managing the interaction's likelihood or impact, possible responses are outlined should the risk occur, and potential ways of monitoring whether the interactions have occurred are identified.

The mitigations, responses and monitoring mechanisms are suggestions and may not be appropriate for all actors or situations. However, they are included to allow planners and project staff to quickly reference the matrices and incorporate into their own activities wherever appropriate and possible without needing to develop their own adaptations.

Conflict dynamics in Libya are highly complex and manifest differently in each local geographic area. As a consequence, interactions identified here are relatively high level. Understanding of interactions and suggested adaptations may need to be adapted to local areas where COVID-19 assistance is being delivered, while additional interactions may also exist and should be identified or considered when designing or implementing activities.

## Conflict sensitivity risks

	Potential interaction between COVID-19 response and conflict	Description	Possible mitigation, response and adaptation	Approach to monitoring
C1	<p>COVID-19 related assistance is diverted or stolen by armed groups and used for own ends.</p> <p>(Theft/diversion risk)</p>	<p>COVID-19 resources, including both supplies and services, may be vulnerable to theft and/or diversion by armed groups either for own use, for resale or to control distribution. Armed groups, or members of groups, may also seek to redirect medical assistance towards their own members outside a normal triage process by pressuring doctors and medical institutions.</p> <p>Initially this risk may be manageable, as some groups seem to be acting in a community spirit. However, it may increase if concern over infections becomes significant and if armed groups' attitudes to COVID-19 becomes more self-interested.</p> <p>Primarily, this interaction could reduce the effectiveness of COVID-19 response. It could also empower armed groups, affect their relationship with national institutions and affect the way they are seen by the public.</p>	<p><i>Mitigation:</i></p> <p>Work with government and medical facilities to support establishment of security plans.</p> <p>Ensure community awareness raising efforts regarding COVID-19 extend to armed groups to encourage understanding of the importance of allowing assistance to get where it is intended.</p> <p><i>Response:</i></p> <p>Existing humanitarian access processes.</p> <p>Communicate with government about incident of theft/intimidation and identify ways to put pressure on the responsible armed group if possible.</p>	<p>Track proportion of assistance reaching intended destination.</p> <p>Support reporting mechanisms for medical facilities to flag incidents of threat/intimidation by armed groups and individuals.</p>
C2	<p>COVID-19 related assistance is directed by political authorities to build their own support.</p> <p>(Theft/diversion risk)</p>	<p>National political authorities may attempt to redirect COVID-19 assistance in order to secure political capital from local authorities and communities.</p> <p>National authorities are highly unlikely to apply explicit political conditionalities to the COVID-19 response, but decisions over where assistance should be prioritised may be influenced by attempts to gain political credibility by demonstrating a more effective response to COVID-19 than their rivals. National authorities may tacitly link increased COVID-19 support to local authorities with a request that those local authorities align more closely with them.</p> <p>This interaction could impact the relationship between individual local areas and national authorities, with the potential, in extreme circumstances, to change the political alignment of local areas. It would also contribute to political polarisation as national authorities frame their response in comparison to their rivals'.</p>	<p><i>Mitigation:</i></p> <p>Establish and publicly communicate clear and transparent criteria for allocating COVID-19 assistance.</p> <p>Consider potential political motives for authorities' recommendations for where assistance should be delivered/prioritised.</p> <p><i>Response:</i></p> <p>Reference clear criteria for allocating COVID-19 assistance when discussing distribution with authorities.</p>	<p>Include awareness of the political alignment of areas and recipients when mapping the distribution of assistance.</p> <p>Keep a record/log of authorities' recommendations for where assistance should be directed.</p>

C3	<p>(Perceived) inequalities in COVID-19 response contribute to national divide and/or local tensions.</p> <p>(Distribution risk)</p>	<p>Actual or perceived inequalities in the geographic or community distribution of COVID-19 responses may interact with existing political and inter-communal tensions.</p> <p>At the national level, such inequalities are likely to be used by political authorities or community groups to highlight narratives of exclusion.</p> <p>At the local level, communities may feel that neighbouring communities have greater access to COVID-19 related assistance than they do, contributing to inter-communal tensions. In some areas where inter-communal tensions are high, tensions over access to COVID-19 assistance could spark violence between communities.</p>	<p><i>Mitigation:</i></p> <p>Provide clear and coherent public communication about criteria and basis for COVID-19 response and decisions about where assistance is directed.</p> <p>Assess, during planning, whether barriers exist for some community groups to access COVID-19 assistance compared to others at the local level.</p> <p>Ensure that counterparts who are able to influence where assistance is delivered are representative of all beneficiary communities or incorporate additional consultation mechanisms to assistance planning where necessary.</p> <p>Understand what local conflict resolution mechanisms are available in areas of assistance and how to access them, including potentially through other (peacebuilding) organisations or assistance providers.</p> <p><i>Response:</i></p> <p>Reiterate criteria as the basis for decision making.</p> <p>Engage with local conflict resolution/resilience mechanisms where possible to deescalate tensions and identify ways to ensure equitable delivery of assistance.</p>	<p>Include awareness of political alignment and community alignment of areas and recipients when mapping the distribution of assistance.</p> <p>Ensure mapping of COVID-19 infections and response is disaggregated by locally relevant conflict groups where possible.</p> <p>During situation assessments, include questions about how communities perceive the delivery and distribution of COVID-19 assistance.</p> <p>Track conflict events at local level relating to COVID-19 and to distribution of assistance.</p>
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C4	<p>Choice of partners for international COVID-19 response affects relationships between local and national level.</p> <p>(Capacity risk)</p>	<p>During a period of emergency planning, international assistance providers may seek to work only through national authorities without discussion with local authorities. Alternatively, if national authorities are acting inefficiently or are seen to be contributing to risks C2 and C3 above, assistance providers may seek to work directly with local authorities. In reality, the picture is likely to be mixed, with some assistance providers working with local authorities directly while others coordinate more strongly at the national level.</p> <p>Choices about whether to engage directly with local or national authorities in a period of crisis may affect the relationships between these levels. Direct support to local authorities may reduce local confidence in the effectiveness of national institutions to respond in such situations, contributing to fragmentary dynamics within Libya's political environment. Engagement only with national authorities in a highly polarised political context may exacerbate political inequalities while reducing the efficiency of the emergency response.</p>	<p><i>Mitigation:</i></p> <p>Using international engagement at both national and local levels, explicitly support connection, information sharing and coordination between these levels, encouraging responsive decision making.</p> <p><i>Response:</i></p> <p>Where appropriate, proactively support conflict resolution between national and local levels through coordination mechanisms.</p>	<p>Regularly update understanding of how local authorities and national authorities perceive each other's response.</p>
C5	<p>International reprioritising of assistance and reduced capacity undermines progress on key structural peacebuilding priorities.</p> <p>(Prioritisation risk)</p>	<p>There is an expectation that the current situation will see a shift in international assistance towards addressing immediate public health needs relating to COVID-19. This will be exacerbated by reduced capacity of international assistance providers to operate within Libya due to movement and convening restrictions and by the way many important donors are dealing with crises in their own countries which could see funding reallocated.</p> <p>This may mean that activities that have been designed to contribute to medium- or long-term stability and peace in Libya will be deprioritised. While it is essential to respond to immediate needs, work on addressing longer term conflict drivers cannot be stopped, or paused, without adversely affecting prospects for sustainable peace after the present crisis has been resolved.</p>	<p><i>Mitigation:</i></p> <p>Donors should ensure that reprioritisation of programming either: allows for existing programming that addresses structural peace and conflict priorities to continue, wherever possible; or supports capacity of international assistance providers to maintain relationships with counterparts and infrastructure to resume activities as quickly as possible once the emergency situation is resolved.</p> <p>Donors should ensure continued awareness of broader peace and conflict priorities and maintain the capacity to facilitate strategic responses to those during the emergency period.</p>	<p>Coordination and mapping of international assistance.</p>

C6	<p>Reduced attention by (some) international actors on conflict in Libya provides national actors with sense of impunity to use violence.</p> <p>(Recognition risk)</p>	<p>As key international diplomatic and political actors respond to the COVID-19 pandemic globally, they will be less able to give attention to the peace and conflict situation in Libya. In particular, actors in Europe and the US will likely have reduced capacity to apply diplomatic pressure on national conflict actors in Libya or to advance a political peace process.</p> <p>In this context, national conflict actors may attempt to pursue their interests using force, either because no political process is underway or because they seek to change facts on the ground before international attention on Libya resumes after the COVID-19 pandemic is over. They may be supported in this by some regional actors who are actively involved in providing support to different sides of the conflict, risking further escalation of violence.</p>	<p><i>Mitigation:</i></p> <p>International diplomatic actors should provide clear messaging to national actors, and other international actors, that using COVID-19 as a cover to pursue their own interests or change facts on the ground will have consequences.</p>	<p>Ongoing conflict tracking.</p>
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### Conflict sensitivity opportunities

C7	<p>National and public attention on COVID-19 allows for cooperation across rival authorities and communities at the national and local levels.</p> <p>(Capacity and social capital opportunity)</p>	<p>Shifting primary national attention from the political and military conflict in Libya towards an urgent public health crisis may, if managed effectively, provide an opportunity to build trust between rival national institutions and demonstrate the need to resolve political differences constructively.</p> <p>Capitalising on improved technical cooperation around health to achieve national peace dividends will depend on national political leaders to be willing to engage constructively with their rivals and a recognition that military solutions are not viable. This may appear unlikely, but the opportunity should be seized if it appears to happen.</p> <p>At the local level, the COVID-19 response could be used to bring different communal groups together and strengthen mechanisms of cooperation.</p> <p>Using a cooperative COVID-19 response to reduce tensions between neighbouring communities at the local level may be more feasible than at the national level and, indeed, not doing so may contribute to risk C3 above.</p>	<p><i>Adaptation to leverage opportunity:</i></p> <p>Include specific peace messaging into communication around COVID-19 that stresses the collective nature of the problem and of the necessary response.</p> <p>Attempt to push for joint political statements regarding COVID-19 between GNA and Interim Government.</p> <p>Attempt to use COVID-19 coordination and decision-making mechanisms at national level to bridge institutions between the GNA and Interim Government at the technical level.</p> <p>At local level, leverage existing community conflict resilience mechanisms to include different community groups in assessments and decision making around COVID-19 response without relying on municipal authorities.</p>	<p>Track narratives around COVID-19 at national level.</p> <p>Track incidents of cooperation between rival authorities.</p> <p>Include questions about community attitudes around COVID-19 response to situation updates at local level.</p>
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## Further contact

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The Conflict Sensitive Assistance in Libya (CSA) forum, funded by the Government of Switzerland and the European Union and facilitated by the Peaceful Change initiative, aims to support the ability of international assistance providers working in and on Libya to undertake their work in a conflict sensitive manner – minimising the risk of harm caused by their assistance and maximising opportunities to promote positive peace.

The CSA forum includes: a bimonthly meeting bringing together international organisations, donors and implementers to consider how the changing context in Libya affects and is affected by their programming; a Leadership Group made up of senior representatives of diplomatic missions and the UN, which aims to consider policy responses aimed at enhancing conflict sensitivity; research and preparation of resource materials relating to conflict sensitivity in Libya; and technical support to implementers, through convening discussions, provision of training, and ad hoc advice relating to conflict sensitivity.