




# DOING NO HARM

WHEN SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE MOVE



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## WHEN SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

*By Owen Frazer*

How can working to support children and young people on the move lead to problems, and how can these problems be avoided? This question has been central to shaping the activities of a [regional project in West and Northwest Africa](#) launched in 2022. The project aims to support the young population as they navigate migration routes across Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Niger, and Tunisia.



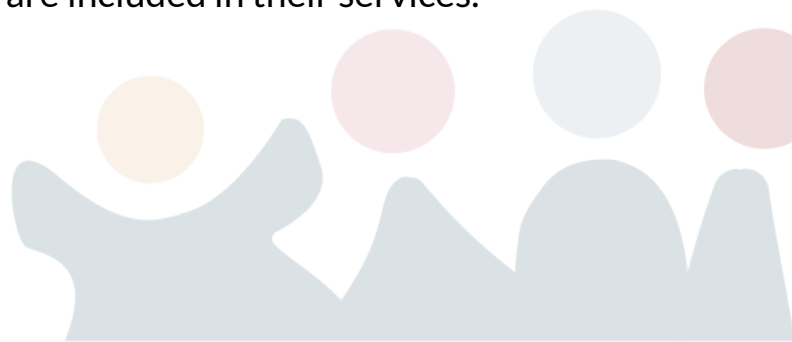
In West and North Africa, there are 40-45 million international migrants, with over 5 million estimated to be young people aged 24 or below. With a focus on enhancing support systems for children and young people on the move, the project is unquestionably striving to do good. However, as is the case with all projects and endeavors by Helvetas and its partners, there is always a risk that in trying to do something positive, unintended harm might also result. Helvetas and its partners need to be mindful of the unintended consequences of their presence and actions. They need to be conflict-sensitive.



## AVOIDING UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Conflict sensitivity entails understanding that projects and their implementation can lead to unanticipated consequences in the contexts where they are carried out. There are numerous ways in which the actions and behaviors of organizations can inadvertently exacerbate existing tensions in a specific context or even give rise to new conflicts. Conversely, there are also ample opportunities for projects to positively contribute to reducing tensions and reinforcing social cohesion. The nature of these risks and opportunities varies from one project to another. Identifying them requires conducting a comprehensive conflict sensitivity analysis, utilizing a tool like the Helvetas-developed manual, "[3 Steps for Working in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations](#)" which is based on the widely used [Do No Harm](#) approach.

The "Children and Youth on Migration Routes in West and Northwest Africa" project aims to bolster young people's access to education services, employment programs, and protection services. This project, led by a consortium consisting of Helvetas, GIZ, and Terre des hommes, is part of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM). The consortium's role is not to provide services directly, but to collaborate with existing stakeholders in Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Niger, and Tunisia to enhance their capacity to ensure that young people on the move are included in their services.



## DESIGNING A CONFLICT-SENSITIVE PROJECT

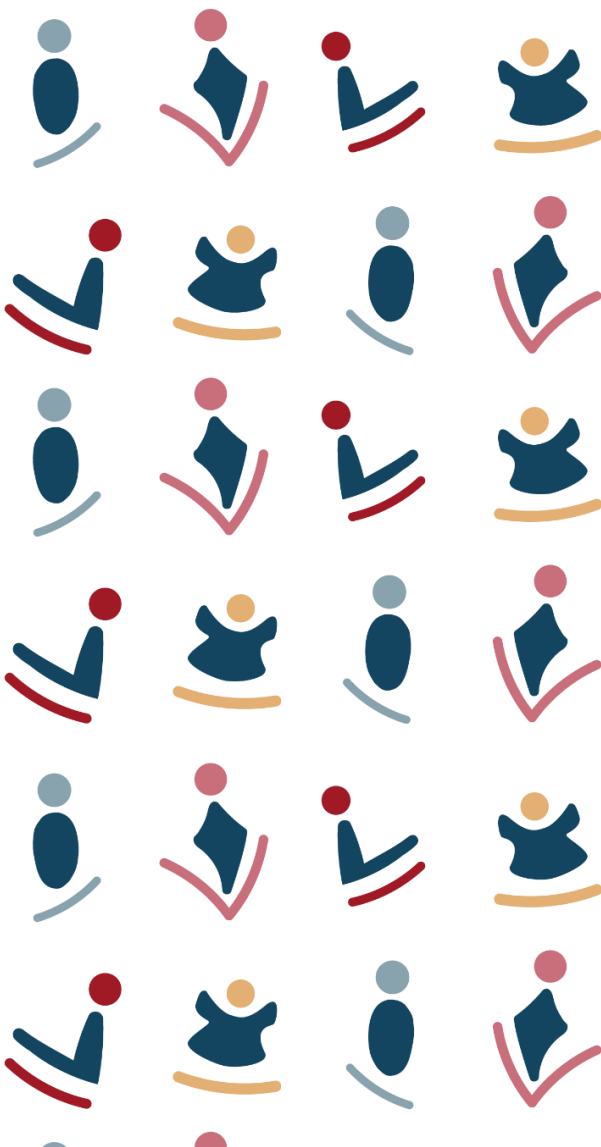
Several steps were taken to ensure the project's design and implementation were conflict-sensitive. Firstly, during the project's inception phase, a study was conducted to analyze the primary conflicts and tension points relevant to the project. This aimed to identify the main risks of causing harm and opportunities for reinforcing social cohesion. The study also proposed potential ways the project could adapt to these risks and opportunities. The study was used as a basis for raising awareness about conflict sensitivity among project partners and stakeholders during internal and public launch events. Project country coordinators underwent extensive training on conflict sensitivity and then received support from experts in conflict sensitivity to facilitate participatory workshops in their respective contexts. These workshops brought together local partners and stakeholders to further contextualize the initial conflict sensitivity analysis and identify specific measures needed in each context to address conflict-related risks and opportunities.

The workshops fostered a shared understanding of harm risks and how to navigate them. They also reinforced a sense of project ownership and a collective commitment to implementing and monitoring measures to prevent harm. During these workshops, participants identified six main harm risks.



## RISK N.1 EXACERBATING POLITICAL SENSITIVITIES

The first risk relates to the political sensitivity surrounding migration and mobility. Migration policy can be a contentious topic at both the international and domestic political levels in countries where the project operates. Attitudes toward migrants vary significantly among these countries. Care must be taken not to contribute to escalating political conflicts linked to migration. The project explicitly communicates that it takes neither a pro- nor anti-migration stance. It acknowledges that young people leave their homes for various reasons, such as escaping violent conflict, evading persecution within their family or community, seeking better education and employment opportunities, or simply wanting to explore new places.



The project recognizes that regardless of the motivation, mobility is a reality for millions of young people in the region. Like young people everywhere, they have needs and rights. Ensuring their dignified life, even while on the move, should neither endorse nor reject migration.

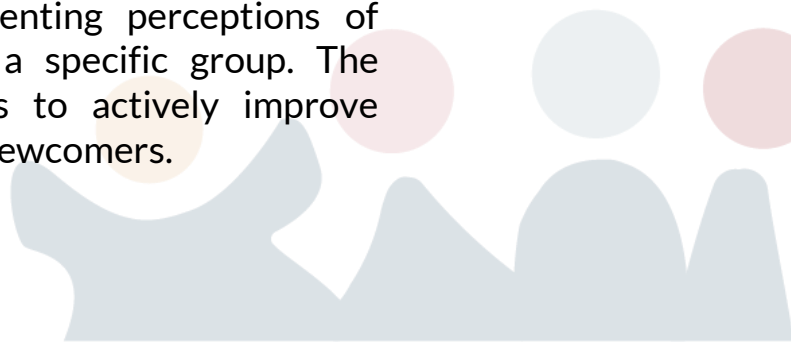


## RISK N.2

### MANAGING TENSIONS WITH HOST COMMUNITIES



The second risk repeatedly mentioned involves tensions between local residents and migrants. In some places, the arrival of outsiders is seen as straining local infrastructure and resources. To avoid fueling tensions between locals and outsiders, project interventions must be carefully designed. This ensures that young people on the move access support available to residents as well, preventing perceptions of discrimination or favoritism toward a specific group. The project team is also exploring ways to actively improve relations between local residents and newcomers.



## **RISK N.3**

### **STIGMATIZATION UPON RETURNING HOME**

A third concern revolves around the relationship between young people returning home and the families and communities they rejoin. Returnees often face stigmatization, which may stem from viewing their return as a failure, the original reasons for leaving, or experiences during their absence. The project must ensure that actors involved in returns consider the best interests of the concerned youth and provide adequate follow-up and support for successful reintegration into family and community.

## **RISK N.4**

### **MANAGING STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS**

The fourth risk is the potential for conflicts between the project implementers and stakeholders and communities they engage with. Conflicts can arise if a project fails to meet expectations. During consultations, stakeholders emphasized managing expectations through regular, transparent communication and consultations. This ensures joint goal-setting, activities that address real needs and concerns, and the avoidance of misunderstandings.



## RISK N.5

### UNDERSTANDING LOCAL NORMS AND VALUES

Another potential source of conflict lies in sensitivities related to local norms and values. Gender and sexual identity are particularly sensitive issues in nearly all contexts where the project operates. Persecution and discrimination based on identity often drive young women and LGBTQI+ individuals to leave home. Their journey is fraught with unique challenges and dangers, necessitating a tailored, sensitive approach to provide appropriate support.

However, addressing these issues requires sensitivity to local norms. The project aims to support these groups without directly challenging local norms related to gender and sexual identity. This involves leveraging local partners' leadership to define the best approach and engaging a gender and social inclusion specialist to help devise strategies that reach these specific young people groups.





## RISK N.6

### COORDINATION AND COOPERATION

Lastly, the risk of contributing to conflicts between actors working on similar issues should not be underestimated. The project is carried out by an extended consortium of multiple organizations. It also collaborates with various local actors in each country and must coordinate with national and international counterparts.



All these actors have distinct interests, cultures, structures, and approaches. The project is well-placed to mitigate misunderstandings that could lead to conflicts and enhance coordination and communication. It views the project as a supporter rather than a standalone actor, working to strengthen the existing support system for young people on the move by empowering individual actors within the system and facilitating connections among them.



## EFFECTIVE CONFLICT SENSITIVITY REQUIRES A COLLECTIVE, ONGOING EFFORT

The positive experience of integrating conflict sensitivity into the "Children and Youth on Migration Routes in West and Northwest Africa" project underscores that successful integration demands not only specific conflict sensitivity tools, training, and thematic support, but also a substantial commitment of time and resources, a well-defined process aligned with the project management cycle, and strong dedication from project leadership and staff. This experience serves as an important example and inspiration for other projects seeking to apply conflict sensitivity. For further examples, refer to Helvetas' recent publication, "[Doing No Harm & Doing More Good: Stories of Applying Conflict Sensitivity at Helvetas.](#)"



