Help or Hindrance? Results-orientation in conflict-affected situations

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List of Acronyms

DM&E	Design, Monitoring & Evaluation
FriEnt	Working Group on Peace and Development
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Society for International Cooperation)
HEKS	Swiss Interchurch Aid HEKS
KOFF	Center for Peacebuilding
MSC	Most Significant Change
OECD / DAC	Development Assistance Committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCM	Project Cycle Management
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
RPP	Reflecting on Peace Practice Project
ToC	Theory of Change

Abstract

Results-orientation, impact assessment, and value for money have been creating a growing buzz in the fields of international cooperation and peacebuilding for the last few years. But what are the consequences of an increased focus on results for practice?

Drawing on expert debates at two workshops jointly organized by FriEnt - Working Group on Peace and Development and the Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF) at swisspeace that took place in May 2012 in Bonn and Berne, this working paper argues that results-orientation in its currently practiced form is more of a hindrance than a help for achieving better results. Methodological and organizational responses to make interventions in conflict-affected contexts more focused on results are often poorly adapted to grapple with the complexity of these environments. An excessive emphasis on 'upward accountability' puts at risk the learning function of evaluation processes and testifies to the common power hierarchies in the international aid system. Against this backdrop, this working paper argues that a more thorough application of standards of good practice in this field, more experimentation with alternative methods, and the creation of learning spaces outside of institutionalized processes can offer entry points to make results-orientation a more meaningful endeavor.

1
Introduction

Results-orientation, impact assessment, value for money, and similar expressions have been creating a growing buzz in the fields of international cooperation and peacebuilding for the last few years. Almost unanimously, actors from these fields emphasize their commitment to manage and monitor for results, focus on impact, and keep an eye on efficiency. Results-orientation has become a reality in the field of international cooperation to which all actors have to adapt. Standards are set, principles are fixed, and no strategy is written without using the words 'results' or 'effectiveness'.[1]

Most practitioners would acknowledge that having a clearer idea about the results achieved by their interventions is a helpful thing. Not least because a number of evaluations have concluded that current programming practice in conflict-affected contexts suffers from several shortcomings. In addition, organizations continue to argue that measuring impact or effectiveness in their particular thematic areas or difficult working contexts creates considerable conceptual and practical challenges, and that current accountability practices can be more problematic than useful. Finding ways to strengthen results-orientation taking into consideration the differing needs of donors, implementing and local organizations, and of the people living in these situations have therefore proven to be a challenging tasks.

This working paper critically appraises the way in which results-orientation is currently understood and practiced in international cooperation and peacebuilding in conflict-affected contexts; but also to highlight prospects for improving current practice. For this aim, it draws on the content of two international workshops that took place in May 2012 in Bonn and Bern. Jointly organized by FriEnt - Working Group on Peace and Development and the Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF) at swisspeace, these workshops featured experts' inputs on methods for design, monitoring and evaluation (DM&E) of projects, institutional learning, and related topics, as well as debates among practitioners from these fields.[2]

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1   As an illustration, the strategic message on Switzerland's international cooperation in 2013-2016 cites the word 'results' 93 times, 'efficient' or 'efficiency' 135 times, while the word 'peace' is only used 33 times.

2   If direct quotation marks are used, they cite a statement of an expert in one of these two workshops. For reasons of anonymity, these quotes are not attributed to people.

2
Specific challenges for results-orientation

2.1 Conflict-affected situations

Most conventional approaches to planning and program management work best in the environment that they have been developed for. Such tools often assume a relatively stable environment, a limited number of differing perspectives and interpretations, and a relative certainty of what the problems are and the strategies that can help in addressing them. In environments where these assumptions hold, they go largely unnoticed. But in conflict-affected contexts it becomes clear that these assumptions may constitute obstacles to a meaningful use of these tools.

Conflict-affected contexts are highly dynamic, complex and interconnected, influenced by a multitude of mutually interdependent factors, and therefore highly unpredictable.[3] Social change processes are non-linear, but happen in equally unpredictable, interconnected and complex ways. How, then, can conventional program management approaches that rely on the quite linear Input-Output-Outcome-Impact logic be usefully applied to complex environments? If one takes complexity seriously, a linear influence of a program on the situation it wants to change might be more of an exception than the rule.

Furthermore, each context is unique and develops in its own, unique ways. This means that the applicability of 'best practices' is very limited. There is a considerable likelihood that what worked in one context will fail or yield different results in another context – or even in the 'same' context at a different point in time. Dynamic, complex and unpredictable contexts therefore require interventions which are thoroughly tailor-made.

Finally, the problem of unintended negative effects caused by the intervention of international actors in a conflict-affected context has to be considered. If one starts from the assumption that organizations only partially understand the context in which they intervene, the risk of unintentionally doing harm is acute in highly dynamic contexts.[4] The OECD/DAC therefore gives this issue a high priority. Their Fragile States Principle Nr.2 that also pertains to conflict-affected areas reads: 'Ensure all activities do no harm'.[5]

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3   Ramalingam, Jones, Reba, and Young (2008)
4   See, for instance, Anderson (1999), or Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012)
5   OECD (2007)

2.2 Results-orientation in peacebuilding

The particular thematic field of 'peacebuilding' adds additional challenges to results-orientation. As mentioned above, showing or even proving results in peacebuilding is not a straightforward endeavor. In particular peacebuilding results can in most cases not easily be quantified. While this also applies to many development interventions, especially in conflict-affected contexts, e.g. governance projects, this challenge is even more pronounced in peacebuilding where working on the improvement of relationships, on the legitimacy of institutions, or changing mindsets is often the central concern. All these areas elude easy quantification or even indicator identification.

Secondly, peacebuilding interventions are inherently political, taking place in contexts where important stakeholder groups disagree on key socio-political issues and where multiple perspectives exist on important questions like 'what is the problem', hat are the key priorities', or 'how do we solve this'. This means that peacebuilding results are subjected to an equally political / politicized validation by local and international stakeholders, as such eluding technocratic procedures of 'result measurement'.

Additionally, peacebuilding as a field is facing methodological evaluation challenges. While the non-linear evolution of conflict-affected contexts and the large number of contributing factors is also challenging the evaluation of development interventions, this challenge is particularly pronounced in peacebuilding. As peacebuilding interventions should be accountable to 'peace writ large'[6], the attribution gap between the project level and the intended effects on the level of national peace becomes particularly wide and challenging for results measurement. Furthermore, data for relevant indicators to build baselines is seldom available and difficult to collect in conflict-affected contexts; projects are often adapted to respond to changes in the context, which challenges pre-post intervention comparisons. Finally, peacebuilding interventions aim to trigger change processes aiming at transformations in very long timespans, which raises the question of whether these processes can be meaningfully assessed during (or shortly after) the intervention itself.

In a nutshell, the complexity of conflict-affected contexts and the necessary adaptation of programming are challenging the very basic foundations of conventional ideas about accountability, the way we implement programs, structure the aid system, and ask questions about the success of our interventions. These challenges require specific approaches and strategies in terms of results-orientation to grapple with the complexity of conflict-affected contexts. Keywords like flexibility, a certain pragmatism, improved intervention design, and a focus on learning seem therefore to gain a high priority when thinking about peacebuilding results orientation. In the next section, current practice will be critically assessed from this perspective.

6   A claim already made
     by Anderson and Olson (2003).

3
Critical appraisal of current practice

3.1 Challenges in understanding 'the problem' …

The Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP)[7] demonstrated some time ago that effective interventions must be rooted in good conflict analysis. But the findings of the RPP Project equally show that current practice is far from ideal regarding conflict analysis: good conflict analyses are too rarely performed, and if they are, they are often not taken adequately into account in program design and strategy. While this problem was identified some time ago, a recent review by GIZ which was presented at the Bonn Workshop showed that it persists in today's practice; a view that was also shared by the participants of the two workshops.

Although there are several causes for this, one aspect in particular should be emphasized: a good conflict analysis should not only be understood as a prerequisite for programming, it should also be seen as a result in itself. Achieving a shared understanding of the key issues of conflict can turn out to be a challenging task given the differing perspectives and interpretations typically present in conflict-affected contexts, the lack of trust often found in conflict situations, and questions of access to marginalized groups in order to integrate their views. In addition, building up support among partners and other stakeholders for a strategy to address these key issues is even more difficult. It is therefore evident that analysis and design of a peacebuilding project cannot be reduced to a technocratic process that can be optimized with the appropriate methods. Rather, it is a political process, which is marked by different political positions and influenced by constraints beyond methodological problems.

3.2 … in understanding 'the solution'…

Besides understanding of the context, an understanding of how one's own intervention is contributing to intended changes is often missing or not made explicit. Achieving positive change in complex, fast-changing, insecure environments is by no means a simple issue. In reality we can't possibly know from the outset how to achieve such change in conflict-affected situations. In essence this means that we have to work on assumptions and not on facts about what works and how an intervention contributes to positive change. This means that the 'black box' between an intervention's activities and its assumed results needs to be opened and made explicit. In today's practice this is too often not the case. Goals and objectives in current logframes are often formulated in unrealistic and unspecific ways. Words like 'reconciliation' or 'empowerment' are often to be found in results frameworks, without any specification of what those 'word shells' actually mean in a given context, in what ways we think that the planned activities will contribute to such change, and what this has to do with addressing key issues of conflict. In other words, peacebuilding intervention design is still too often full of gaps and vagueness to such an extent that it makes many such interventions impossible to evaluate by professionals.

7   See RPP website on: http://www.cdainc.com/cdawww/ project_profile.php?pid=RPP&pname= Reflecting%20on%20Peace%20Practice

3.3 ... and in managing partner and power relations

The recently published reports about working successfully in conflict-affected environments[8] stress the need for international actors to cooperate more among each other, to have legitimate and truly capacitated local actors in the lead, to have a clear strategic policy orientation to change key issues of fragility and conflict, and to be able to accept a higher risk of failure of their interventions. Looking at current practice one can't fail to note a big gap regarding these good practice principles.

Still all too often, local actors are made to reply to international calls for proposals which put local actors into the role of an implementer instead of a real partner. Project durations are still insufficiently short (1-3 years' planning horizons) in order to minimize risks and increase control for the funding agency. This results in a "hit and run peacebuilding" approach according to one presenter at the workshops; an approach that obviously cannot work. Funding designed to sustainably build the institutional capacities of national actors is still the exception, with the vast majority of funding being activity-driven, forcing organizations to live from overheads.

Few people would deny that a certain upward accountability is necessary; not least to provide information to funders on what has happened to their money. But if there is an excessive focus on upwards accountability, evaluations are often seen as a disempowering experience for local civil society organizations in which they are controlled by their funders. If that is the case, evaluations lose their learning function. At the workshops it was mentioned that "it takes two hands to clap". But if one of the hands – the donor – is not committed to an evaluation in the sense of really and jointly learning what works and what doesn't, then the other hand – the local organization – will always find ways to make a program look successful for the funder. This may even entail the pre-selection of interviewees who know what they have to say in order to make the program look successful and to ensure further funding of the activities.

Therefore, the relationship between the funding and the implementing partner organization is crucial. But if evaluation is understood in the way described in the workshops, as a "funding agency controlling a service deliverer" so that the funding agency can be accountable to the "tax payer" in the north, evaluation exercises will not contribute to an equal partnership. Therefore, the hierarchy in terms of power is often too much of a hindrance for really achieving meaningful results in conflict-affected contexts. Evaluations perceived as a top-down exercise of control do not encourage partner organizations to be critical in what they report, and they certainly do not create the environment in which failures can be openly discussed. In current practice, such opportunities to learn are too often missed.

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8   See, for instance, OECD (2007, 2011b); World Bank (2011).

3.4 Organizational approaches to results measurement

As mentioned at the outset, organizations observe an increasing pressure to report on their results. Given the difficulties due to the context and the thematic working area, this begs the question of how institutions try to meet such requirements. Some patterns have been identified in the workshops, and some of them seem to have brought with them undesirable and adverse effects. On a general level, administrative demands and workload has increased overall as organizations have added additional instruments and reporting criteria. This has led to overburdening and too much technical baggage, particularly on the project level. Fuzzy objectives and an absence of Theories of Change have forced some organizations to increasingly report and focus again on outputs. Others invest increasing effort in measuring minor intermediate results such as measuring to what level a training workshop has increased participants' knowledge or skill level, or how the dialogue session has indeed changed individual participants' perceptions. In other words, the measuring effort is spent on aspects and levels that should only be understood as intermediate steps, and not as the overall change which a project aims to achieve.

Perhaps most importantly organizational approaches to results measurement have in many instances become seriously tilted towards 'upward accountability'. This tendency means that there is less space available for 'downward accountability' or general learning about what works. The learning and accountability moments foreseen in standard Project Cycle Management (PCM) such as monitoring and evaluation have therefore become overburdened by data collection for upward accountability, ultimately to prove to donors that tangible value can be achieved for the money which they invested.[9] This then prompts the following two questions: 1.) whose results (or results for whom) are we talking about when we say 'results orientation', and 2.) where and how do we actually learn in safe and self-critical ways when monitoring and evaluation are tweaked to serve predominantly upward accountability needs?

Consequentially, many practitioners have stated that they don't perceive current practice of accountability as appropriate for reaching its stated goal, namely to improve practice in terms of results. The findings of RPP and discussions at the two workshops illustrate this well: while practical steps to improve peacebuilding were outlined nearly a decade ago, many of them have still not found their way into practice. This is especially the case with regards to linking project design to the findings of conflict analysis. This crucial step is still far from being a standard. Current activities do not seem to encourage organizations to integrate previous lessons learned in their practice.[10] Participants at the workshop agreed that this lack of learning is in itself a very costly thing.

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9 Natsios (2010) saliently calls the tendency to count results as "obsessive measurement disorder", which according to his analysis characterizes large parts of international cooperation.

10 See also (OECD, 2011a).

4
Making results-orientation a meaningful endeavor: entry points

The broader objective of results-orientation, namely to improve programming practice by going beyond outputs as a reference point for accountability, is generally acknowledged and agreed upon by practitioners. However, the challenges which results-orientation faces in conflict-affected contexts are manifold. In response to such challenges there exist different strategies which can, at least partially, overcome potential issues and ensure that results-orientation is a constructive endeavor. This section outlines the concrete approaches taken by different organizations to highlight what can be done.

4.1 Apply good practice minimal standards

In terms of methods for programming, the RPP findings - and especially the link between conflict analysis and project design - have to be emphasized. To put it bluntly, there is no way around doing a conflict analysis for effective working in conflict-affected contexts. Although this might be considered a very basic standard, experience shows that many interventions still lack adequate and updated conflict analyses in which to ground their project design. What sort of conflict analysis is performed can be adapted to the skills available and the needs of the project; of greater importance is to actually link the project design to the findings of the conflict analysis. For effective programming, the design phase is pivotal: if the project fails in terms of relevance because the design phase did not get enough attention, even the most sophisticated evaluation methodology won't be able to show results achieved by the project.

4.2 Strengthen application of adapted methods

One approach could be the adoption of a new set of evaluation methods, which are better suited to dealing with the dynamic environment of conflict-affected contexts. However, continuous, flexible adaptation of programming does have implications for other aspects of accountability practice. Conventional approaches to evaluation – meaning in the first place experimental or quasi-experimental methods – rely on the comparison of a pre-intervention situation with the post-intervention situation. If the intervention logic is constantly and flexibly adapted according to changes in context, such comparisons are not feasible. There are other approaches to evaluation which can overcome this problem: approaches inspired by systemic thinking like developmental evaluation[11] and outcome mapping[12], or approaches relying more on an assessment of program theory like contribution analysis[13]; to cite just a few. But while these approaches are designed to deal with dynamic contexts, they cannot offer attribution of effects to a specific project. Even though 'contribution' seems to be a good enough alternative given the properties of conflict-affected contexts outlined above, there are concerns that these approaches might not be seen as convincing as methods focusing on attribution. When the general debate is mostly focusing on how to ground policy in evidence produced by 'rigorous' methods (e.g., randomized controlled trials), these alternative approaches do not seem to enjoy the same support by policy makers and donors as approaches promising more 'rigor'.[14]

11 See Patton (2011).
12 See Earl, Carden, and Smutylo (2001).
13 See Mayne (2001).
14 There is a lively debate around the pros and cons of randomized controlled trials (RCT): while RCTs are considered to be the 'gold standard' of impact assessment by some actors (for instance, see Center for Global Development, 2006), they have attracted a lot of criticism on the methodological and applicability level (for instance, see Scriven, 2008). As an example of these criticisms, Bamberger and White (2007) state that they are only applicable to a share of 5 percent of all development interventions. On the more general question of what evidence counts as credible evidence, see Donaldson, Christie, and Mark (2009).

As a concrete approach for project design, RPP proposes working with theories of change (ToC)[15], which link the issues identified in the conflict analysis to concrete activities. The basic idea behind this approach is to make explicit the assumptions behind a project, i.e. how the proposed activities are thought to trigger the expected changes. Working with ToC aims to open up the black box between activities and impacts by specifying small steps that have to occur along the results chain if the project is to be successful.

It is on these grounds that the monitoring system for the project is designed. The focus of monitoring activities is not whether outputs were delivered in a timely manner, but whether they have triggered the changes envisaged. By the (continuous) collection of evidence on the different pivotal points in the ToC, the organization gains a better understanding of how their project affects the context, and how it can be adapted and improved. This also helps to mitigate the problem that many projects aim to trigger change processes which take place over longer timeframes than usual project duration. Defining intermediate steps in the ToC provides indications of whether these larger processes are likely to take place, even if these contributions to 'peace writ large' cannot be observed during the project's timeframe.

While working with ToCs has increased in popularity in recent years with a wide range of organizations, other approaches are more marginal in use. Two approaches which were discussed in the course of the workshop address problems related to conventional approaches to DM&E caused by the complexity of conflict-affected contexts: most significant change and scenario planning.

Most significant change (MSC) is a participatory monitoring approach in line with systemic thinking.[16] Based on the assumption that complex environments cannot be fully understood and disentangled, MSC focuses on the perspective of change according to people on the ground. The method collects stories from participants in projects (and other stakeholders) about significant changes in their life in a specific time period, and selects the most significant changes – hence the name – in a discussion process. The purpose is to refine the idea of what changes are targeted by the project in question through the discussion process, but equally to identify unexpected changes in the environment. With questioning being detached from the specific project in the first place, MSC offers an approach of monitoring change in the broader context to guide program management in complex environments, and also to understand intermediate steps in a project's ToC. Although integration into more conventional monitoring systems is challenging, experiences by organizations using MSC presented at the workshops are encouraging:[17] MSC was presented as a starting point for important reflections on an organization's role in social change processes, and on different understandings of how change occurs.

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15 Working with ToC has known an impressive upsurge in interest in the last years, and is recommended by a range of actors and authors as a way of grappling with complex environments.
16 See Davies and Dart (2005)
17 See Swiss Interchurch Aid HEKS (2011).

Scenario planning is another way to adapt program management to the particularities of conflict-affected contexts. Rooted in strategic management, scenario planning aims at anticipating upcoming changes in the context in which a project is located, and to develop strategies to act accordingly. In the classic version of the approach, three scenarios - a best case, a worst case, and a most likely case - are developed along with strategic plans for each of the scenarios. While this method is closest to conventional approaches of management compared to the other approaches presented here, it offers a way of being prepared for situations that might come up, and it may also be an approach that is easier to 'sell' and explain, as it has been widely applied in for-profit-management.

4.3 Bring learning back into results-orientation procedures

The challenges of working in conflict-affected contexts cannot exclusively be addressed by better suited methods and tools. To make results-orientation a worthwhile effort, not only the tools, but also the institutional setting in which they are applied needs to be rethought. Processes of institutional learning need more attention, especially given that some lessons to improve practice have been known for some time but are not yet implemented as standard. In addition, as discussed above, current accountability practice is skewed towards control, instead of supporting learning processes which would contribute to a wider integration of these lessons.[18]

The reasons for this might be manifold, but one aspect hampering the creation of more learning spaces has been repeatedly emphasized throughout the workshops: power hierarchies. Although most evaluations and similar accountability practices in the donor - implementer relationship emphasize that they should focus on learning instead of control, they are often perceived as the latter. Even if accountability practices are framed as oriented towards improving projects and learning, the power to provide, maintain, or cancel funding still resides with the donor organization. The creation of protected learning spaces where projects can be frankly discussed is in most cases hampered by this power imbalance.

One proposition to deal with such power imbalances is peer reviews. The basic idea is simple: if typical evaluations prescribed by the account-ability frameworks of donor organizations are perceived as control, organizations may be more open to being reviewed by peer organizations from another context that do not have direct stakes in the project. By decoupling learning from control, peer reviews aim at fostering a protected environment conducive to sincerely reflect an organization's practice. In particular it is hoped that the problem of inflating results, or reserves towards learning from failure would be less pronounced in a peer-review process.

18   See Campbell (2008).

Peer reviews are not necessarily a panacea. As an approach, peer review is more of a way of circumventing the core problem rather than a method by which to address imbalances in power in the typical donor-implementer relationship. Peer Reviews are a well-known instrument for improving development practice. For the past 50 years bilateral donors have been regularly reviewed by their peer agencies in the framework of the OECD/DAC peer reviews. But to conduct peer reviews to improve programming practice in conflict-affected contexts has not been very common so far. There are a few experiences we can draw on when assessing their use and impact. The African Transitional Justice Research Network has piloted a peer learning initiative, where organizations peer reviewed similar organizations in other contexts. They concluded that peer learning is more likely to foster an environment where participants are open to receiving constructive criticism, compared to conventional evaluations[19]; a finding that was equally stressed in the discussions in the workshops. On the other hand, whether the lessons drawn from such processes are more likely to be actually used to improve practice, and what the role of such processes might be in relation to already existing accountability systems, has yet to be determined. In any case, the horizontal accountability promoted by peer reviews seems to offer an interesting complement to conventional upward accountability.

19   See Mncwabe (2010).

5
<u>Better results through results-orientation?</u>

This working paper has shown that results-orientation in conflict-affected contexts is far from straightforward. Although the topic has attracted an impressive upsurge in interest, the complexity of highly dynamic environments constitute challenges that are not easily overcome, as they demand adaptations that go beyond the introduction of a few new tools. What this paper has identified as key in developing a constructive way of handling results-orientation is the partner relationship between different organizations. In environments that are difficult to understand, let alone to predict, a partnership fostering open exchange and learning is needed in order to effectively adapt to changing circumstances and to integrate lessons on the institutional level. In this regard, power relations between donor and implementing organizations are an important aspect and must be critically reflected upon.

Some topics still require further exploration. While there are a number of entry points to address the challenges of conflict-affected contexts – for example, the application of different methods or a focus on institutional learning - their use is still marginal in the field. The pressure in terms of accountability seems still high to show quantifiable or 'tangible' results, even if this entails the application of a framework poorly adapted from another field, or the implementation of a blueprint solution detached from the local context. But if this pressure is perceived by all actors (including donors), and all actors express concern that they have to comply with this pressure, where does this pressure come from? And are there ways to re-frame the discourse on results-orientation in a way that is more constructive for practice?

Furthermore, while power relations in international cooperation have been addressed in this paper in terms of a criticism to an excessive focus on upward accountability, and horizontal accountability in the form of peer reviews has been presented as a practical entry point to complement current accountability practice, the question of downward accountability has been conspicuously absent from the discussion. If we want to make results-orientation a constructive endeavor, possibilities to strengthen accountability towards local populations must also be further developed. Otherwise, programming in conflict-affected contexts still risks being detached from the realities of local populations.

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About swisspeace

swisspeace is an action-oriented peace research institute with headquarters in Bern, Switzerland. It aims to prevent the outbreak of violent conflicts and to enable sustainable conflict transformation.

swisspeace sees itself as a center of excellence and an information platform in the areas of conflict analysis and peacebuilding. We conduct research on the causes of war and violent conflict, develop tools for early recognition of tensions, and formulate conflict mitigation and peacebuilding strategies. swisspeace contributes to information exchange and networking on current issues of peace and security policy through its analyses and reports as well as meetings and conferences.

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