

**Measuring Credibility and Trust: The Key Elements in Humanitarian-Development Peace Nexus (HDPN) Operations**

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**Abstract**

Conflict and violence are major drivers of humanitarian needs, forced displacement, extreme poverty, and hunger. Protracted crises are not just about degraded natural resources. To move the center of interest from the natural resource (land, water etc.) to the actors operating in these contexts, we think there is the need to build on the concept of credibility. Credibility can be considered as the quality of a person or of a thing that makes it credible (in the eyes of the beholder). If stakeholders of international assistance must create and invest on credibility, it has to be somehow measured. This paper proposes a measure of credibility that can be adopted in field operation to assess the potential efficacy of assistance.

**Keywords:** Credibility; Trust; conflict; violence; humanitarian-Development; poverty

**JEL Classification Codes:** D74, F51, Q34

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## 1. Introduction

Humanitarian needs continue to grow as crises are increasingly protracted and largely driven by conflict: conflict and violence are major drivers of humanitarian needs, forced displacement, extreme poverty, and hunger (IASC, 2020).<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of this article, as already recalled by FAO,<sup>6</sup> conflict is broadly defined as irreconcilable or opposing positions by two or more groups. This paper focuses on conflict around access and management of natural resources, which can range from non-violent disputes to intense armed violence between or by organized groups (FAO, 2019). The scope of the paper does not go into detail on the complexities between inter- and intra- state conflict, nor discussion over all categories and different forms of conflict. Two issues are highlighted here: the first refers to the progressive (but still incomplete) *reconnaissance* of the centrality of actors in conflict dynamics, therefore the need to switch from a natural resource to a human resource driven approach. The second, derived from the first, is the need to start exploring new venues of the problem, meaning social attitudes amongst the parties involved as well as with external players like the UN.

Protracted crises and conflicts send out a sort of alarm signal – an indication that the approaches adopted in the past have been an inadequate response: not cross-sectoral enough, not inclusive enough and, most importantly, not persuasive enough to create a sense of ownership. Renewed thinking is needed, based on concrete observations of local dynamics, efforts to understand the positions and interests of the many diverse parties involved as well as power dynamics and associated asymmetries – moving beyond a sectoral vision towards a more holistic one.

Protracted crises are not just about degraded natural resources. They also highlight weakening social cohesion. The political economy of land and other natural resources must form an integral and structural part of the discussion, starting with governance issues. In the past, governance of land and other natural resources has been willfully ignored in times of crisis. Land is recognized as one of the root causes of conflict, but has hitherto been seen as too political, complex and time-consuming, and thus as a secondary priority in the emergency context. By the time relief efforts are underway, most of the people have already been dispossessed of their land rights. Today, however, attention is shifting to interlinked dimensions such as land (and for natural resources as a whole) and the people that live or depend on it.<sup>7</sup>

FAO Land tenure and management units, in close collaboration with the Legal service and Gender division, have been working intensively over the last three decades in conflict and post-conflict (starting with the peace agreement in Mozambique in 1992 and later, 1999, in Angola) to elaborate, test and implement inclusive approaches<sup>8</sup> in different geo-political contexts. The more we got on with the field work, the more two issues gained space in our agenda: i.e., *how to analyse* local dynamics of conflict and, at a more operational level, *what to do* when asked to intervene. These issues had to be tackled in the context of the vertical structure of the main agencies of the United Nations, including FAO. This tended to favour a sectoral vision, resource by resource, without a glance ensemble that would allow to better understand the

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<sup>5</sup> General Assembly of the UN. Disarmament and International Security (First Committee), <https://www.un.org/en/ga/first/index.shtml>; General Assembly of UN. Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues (Third Committee), <https://www.un.org/en/ga/third/index.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> Corporate Framework to support sustainable peace in the context of Agenda 2030, <https://www.fao.org/3/I9311EN/i9311en.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> FAO. 2016. Land and people – Building stability on the land

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2004/11/24/land-rights-crucial-economic-agricultural-recovery>

dynamics in progress. Even worse, there was (is) a clear preference for a pure technical approach, without entering into the political economy dimension thus without considering the centrality of stakeholders.

FAO has been extremely hesitant to expand its work on conflict/post-conflict and protracted crisis, preferring to remain into the comfortable zone of technical approaches. In spite of the attention put by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to the question since 2013<sup>9</sup> FAO Senior management decided not to capitalize on the field experiences that were being accumulated (in Bosnia Herzegovina, Colombia, Sudan, Haiti and the already mentioned Mozambique and Angola). Additional (and historical) problem is the tendency to work in isolation, agency by agency, which has had detrimental effects on the capacity of the UN to address these issues. Again beginning 2018, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon reiterated “that the fragmentation of efforts across the United Nations system undermines its ability to support Member States in their efforts to build and sustain peaceful societies and to respond early and effectively to conflicts and crises.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, FAO decided to move at higher level, issuing by the end of the same year, a Corporate Framework to support sustainable peace in the context of Agenda 2030<sup>11</sup>.

It took several years, and consistent efforts are still far from being considered as conclusive, but an attempt to move the center of interest from the natural resource (land, water etc.) to the actors operating in these contexts has started. This important point has been underscored by the FAO Office of Evaluation (OED) contribution to Humanitarian, Development, Peace Nexus (HDPN): “(recommendation n. 5), “FAO needs to promote and incentivize people-centered approaches across its humanitarian and development programmatic work, ensuring that the technical entry points of its interventions are sufficiently supported by conflict-sensitive and sustaining peace related objectives and ways of working” (FAO, 2021).<sup>12</sup>

In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, FAO,<sup>13</sup> broadly speaking, considers two programmatic areas that will have to guide future field work:

- **Working in conflicts (conflict impacts):** developing and implementing interventions to offset the impacts of conflicts on food security, nutrition, agriculture, and natural resources, by saving lives and supporting livelihoods directly impacted by conflict(s).
- **Working on conflicts (conflict drivers):** identifying ways to minimize, avoid, positively transform, and resolve conflict(s) where food, agriculture or natural resources are (or hold the

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<sup>9</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2013/09/449272>

<sup>10</sup> UN. 2018. Peacebuilding and sustaining peace. report of the Secretary General

<sup>11</sup> FAO. 2018. Corporate Framework to support sustainable peace in the context of Agenda 2030  
<http://www.fao.org/3/I9311EN/i9311en.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Visualizing the P in the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oU45k07s70I&t=1s>

<sup>13</sup> Case studies where FAO has worked on analysis of conflict over natural resources: Burkina Faso, <https://www.fao.org/3/cb6023en/cb6023en.pdf>; Liptako-Gourma countries (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), <https://www.fao.org/3/cb7446fr/cb7446fr.pdf>; Mali, <https://www.fao.org/3/cb6061en/cb6061en.pdf>; Niger, <https://www.fao.org/3/cb6845fr/cb6845fr.pdf>

potential to serve as) conflict drivers, including reducing the potential for a relapse into conflict in the context of strategic post-conflict reconstruction and recovery (FAO, 2020).

However, these two streams still do not underscore enough the importance of the central role played by actors/stakeholders in creating / maintaining / solving conflicts, thus moving towards a future that could be considered the beginning of a sustainable development.

Conflicts are by far man-made (Bruck et al. 2016). Managing and/or mitigating a conflict requires involvement of the parties to the conflict and their commitment to transform their relationships. Conflicts are inherently part of human beings and therefore, they cannot be “eliminated.” Our aim is to work to reduce them at a scale that is manageable by concerned actors without external interventions. The approach we propose is based on the principles of Dialogue, Negotiation and Concerted actions (FAO, 2005 and 2016).

This shift puts the attention on *motivations, perceptions, interests, and actions* of the various parties to the conflict (actors). Understanding the actors’ logic could also allow the scaling up of efforts into higher levels of governance, where most often the decisions on the management are taken.

Shifting the focus from *resource-centered* approach to *people-centered* approach requires some methodological adaptation with the support of social sciences to answer the core question: ***how to build confidence and credibility to approach increasingly challenging levels of difficulty concerning access to, use and management of natural resources.***

In a people-centered approach that considers the power asymmetries and the relationships between actors, its methodological adaptation requires the identification of a set of indicators which help in measuring the trust among the parties and their credibility. While this topic seems to be pertinent to the largest part of actors involved in humanitarian and development interventions, there seems to be a knowledge gap on how to approach institutional and individual credibility. This paper aims to describe the aforementioned indicators.

## **2. Credibility**

Following Gili (2005), credibility is now considered something recognized by others: a subjective factor and therefore not objective. *Credibility* is always a relationship between sender and receiver. It represents the quality of a person or of a thing that makes it credible (in the eyes of the beholder). This relational nature explains why it can happen that those who are credible to a part or to the public for a certain reason, may not be credible to other parties for the same reason.

**Credibility** comes from belief. A person, a group or an institution is credible if they can align over time different trustees’ outcomes. They have a credibility capital built in their history. The emphasis is often placed on the coincidence between words, actions, and outcomes of the actor: a person who says A, acting on B and gets C effect, inevitably sees a drop of their own spendable capital of credibility in the public space.

We work on the credibility to turn it into influence, understood as the art of making things possible, with the help of others (Owen, 2015), with the aim of finding a peaceful *modus vivendi* between the various interests at stake, compared with limited resources, that is acceptable to all parties.

We think measuring credibility is an urgent task for a raft of reasons. First, we believe that in order to assess an actor (e.g.: an agency) probability of successfully implementing a policy is associated with its credibility (Rubin 2020). Consequently, we believe that if an actor wants to assess its potential in an area, self-assessing its credibility could be key. If the actor has lost its credibility in the past, it might be extremely complicated to successfully accomplish its mission; otherwise, if the actor comes with a record of success and credibility-building initiatives, then most likely it will succeed.

Second, measuring credibility is also important in front of the donors. They might be willing to allocate additional resources to credible partners. It is in fact a common practice in the private sector to associate greater resources to more credible firms/corporates.

Third, assessing credibility might enable an internal control/evaluation process that favors a conducive environment supportive of best practice in the field.

Measuring credibility is not an easy task. Often credibility is adopted by management studies to explore corporate reputation (Cuomo et al. 2014). In fact, the idea of the relevance of credibility (and, therefore, of measuring credibility) can also be found in Marshal (1923) when the author mentions that “*a producer, a wholesaler dealer, a shopkeeper who has built up a strong connection among purchasers of his goods, has a valuable property*”. This paper builds up on the work by Lim and Van Der Heide (2015).

## **2.1 The Credibility Index (CI): initial elements**

Credibility is progressively built during the peacebuilding process through the proposed route of dialogue, negotiation, and concerted actions. FAO is increasingly aware of the importance of building peace beyond emergency interventions by supporting the sustainable resolution of local conflicts. In this respect, FAO has included “technical diplomacy” in its humanitarian and development agenda.

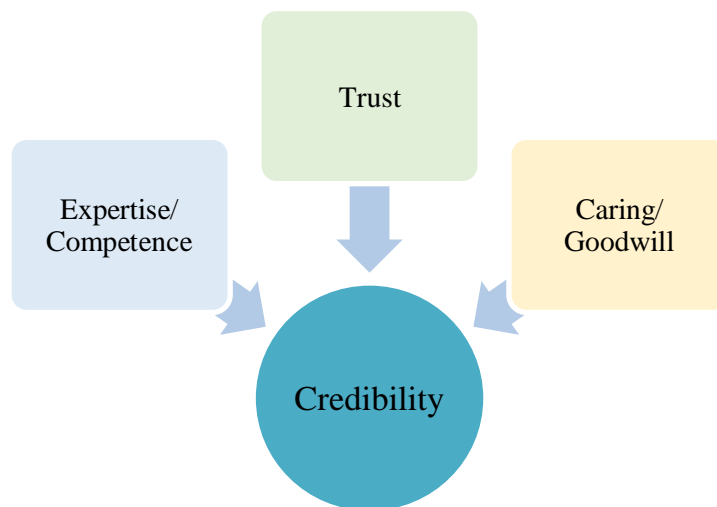
Two main areas of concern can be identified in FAO’s peacebuilding/conflict resolution process:

- A. Credibility of FAO as a possible neutral facilitator of the post-conflict dialogue-negotiation process. The credibility in this case is measured with respect to each party of the process, including government counterparts and it might imply several sub-specific indicators for each main stakeholder.
- B. Credibility amongst the (many) parties involved in the conflict and in the peacebuilding process. In this case, the credibility is measured considering a specific additional element, the power asymmetries.

This initial CI is about the first component: credibility of FAO as possible facilitator.

There is no definition of credibility that relates to an institution such as FAO. However, we can build on what exists in literature. Pero and Smith (2008) propose a framework for institutional credibility (and leadership). In their work, institutional credibility is based on people’s perceptions of institutions’ accountability, representation, legitimacy, transparency, fairness, and justice. The authors lay down the theoretical foundation of those six dimensions, building up on existing literature. We otherwise build on Lim and Van Der Heide (2015) identifying three main dimensions of credibility: expertise/competence, trust, and caring/goodwill. In our view and considering the use we aim at making of the credibility index (especially in fragile

and conflict areas), we consider expertise and competence as key elements for every work and negotiation in the field.



**Figure 1: Credibility Index Conceptual Framework**

The above represented conceptual framework can be measured by combining different indicators that can be collected over time in the daily work in the field. A very preliminary and tentative example can be made using the below table of indicators.

**Table 1: Credibility Index - Questionnaire**

Expertise and Competences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you believe FAO will deliver effectively and on time the project they are implementing?</li> <li>Do you remember if FAO ever withdrew from a project they were implementing in your area?</li> <li>Do you think FAO’s staff has adequate competency for delivering their work?</li> </ul>
Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do you have any record of evidence of FAO being alleged with charges of fraud or misconduct?</li> <li>Do you have any record of evidence of FAO not having completed what they committed to do?</li> <li>Do you have evidence of FAO not having behaved impartially? To what extent do you trust FAO?</li> </ul>
Caring and Goodwill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In your experience, is FAO open to suggestions and listening to local communities?</li> <li>Do you think the work of FAO is sufficiently contextualized to your area/culture?</li> <li>To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “I believe that the personal information I provide will be kept confidential.”</li> <li>Can you say that the support provided by FAO and partners was aligned with your household’s food security and agriculture priorities?</li> </ul>

### **3. Aggregating a credibility index**

An initial stage of quantitative methods for measurement involves using a set of analytical tools to translate concepts into numerical form. The question posed here is: “*What procedures can be used to define the set of indicators that represent credibility?*” Answering this question requires estimating a measure of the credibility of a specific unit at a certain time. Ultimately, an aggregative rule must be adopted to combine different dimensions of the theoretical framework discussed.

One solution can be that we let the various parts separate. This means credibility must be considered a function of several dimensions (D) or characteristics that can be context and time specific. In other words, credibility is a multidimensional concept (Lim and Van Der Heide, 2015). The selection of the individual dimensions should be informed by empirical work and theory.

An alternative might be that we can represent credibility as clusters of indicators and look at each of the  $n$  clusters separately. Thus, if we relax the multidimensionality assumption and consider just a sub-set  $m$  of the  $n$  clusters, it is possible to hypothesize a measure of credibility which includes 1 to  $m$  (where  $m < n$ ) clusters. Under the extreme assumption of the mono-dimensionality of resilience, it is therefore possible to estimate resilience directly. However, this dramatically reduces the scope of a credibility analysis.

Alternatively, we could aggregate the various dimensions of credibility into one single index. There are advantages to using an index to represent a complex multidimensional construct: it allows for more concise description, and it may facilitate comparability, ranking, targeting and aggregation across settings. An index is also easily incorporated into other modelling procedures.

If credibility is to be conceived as a multidimensional index, an aggregative procedure should be defined. There are two broad categories of aggregative procedures: those that seek to explain the role of each variable when defining the final index, and those that do not. The most commonly used procedures in the former group are multivariate models; the latter typically adopt a moment-based approach.

For the credibility index we will employ factor analysis. Factor analysis is used to estimate a construct not directly observed (Bollen, 2002). It reduces a set of observed variables used as proxy indicators for the latent variable into a single variable, the component of interest. The data reduction mechanism relies on finding cross-correlations between the observed variables, identifying the number of (unobservable) factors reflected in the correlations, and predicting the latent outcome as a linear combination of underlying factors. If all the variables defining the latent variable are closely correlated, they may be represented by a single factor. When variables cluster into a few groups of closely related variables, they can be represented by more than one factor. The number of factors should be chosen so that at least 90 percent of the total variability is explained. More formally, and building up on other similar approaches (see D’Errico et al. 2020), we can write:

$$Credibility_{i,t} = f(\beta X_{i,t}^k, \varepsilon)$$

Where a credibility index for the Actor  $i$  at time  $t$  is a function of  $K$  components (where  $k=1, \dots, K$ ) for the Actor  $i$  at time  $t$ , plus the error term.

### 3.1 Case Study from Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

FAO implemented the questionnaire presented above in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The data have been collected during an endline for monitoring and evaluation purposes. FAO interviewed refugees (Rohynga) and host (Bangladeshi) communities after the implementation of a project that included farming field schools, seeds distribution, and the establishment of savings groups. The data collection took place in January 2023, reaching 898 households, implemented by a group of 21 enumerators trained and supervised by FAO, using tablets and ODK software. Data has been collected in the areas where Rohynga communities are hosted by Bangladeshi people.

The questionnaire was quite long and the credibility module was placed at the middle of the interview; people participating were part of FAO's activities, therefore we acknowledge that this might bias the responses. Another source of bias may derive from the hope of being advantaged in case of positive feedback. Eventually, an additional bias may derive from the enumerators' pressure on the respondents. Initial scoping regression analysis did not show, however, any of those aspects as being affecting the behavior of the credibility index. Consequently, although we cannot be 100% certain on the sincerity of the responses, we might be sufficiently confident on those data to present those as early results.

The results show consistent confidence toward the work and reputation of FAO. Overall, and looking at the results of the 10 variables collected, 91 to 99% of people showed confidence in the expertise, trustworthiness and good will of FAO actions. To summarize the results of the interviews into a more easily understandable format, we created the credibility index combining the 10 dummy variables with factor analysis.

While we present details of the analytical work in the annex, we want to mention here a summary of the results achieved. Using the iterated principal factor analysis, we noticed that the first two factors explained 88% of the variance of the variables. Therefore, we performed factor analysis retaining and predicting the first two factors, and estimated the credibility index as a weighted sum of the factors. The credibility index is then rescaled to range between 0 and 100. We do so for easing the readability and use of the index. The rescaled variable behavior is shown here:

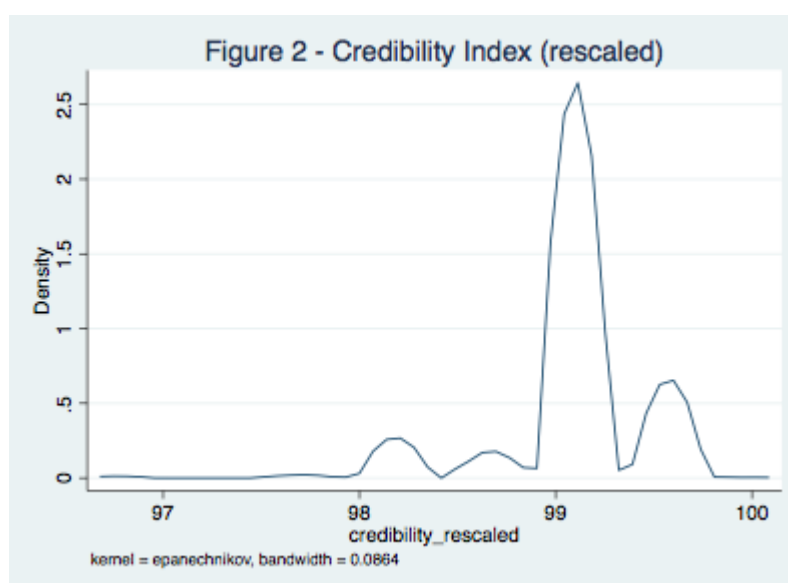


Figure 2: Credibility Index (rescaled)



Mean and Median are basically overlapping (99.07 and 99.09 respectively); standard deviation is .37. Results are therefore homogeneous and thoroughly going in the same direction. There is no geographical or population<sup>14</sup> heterogeneity, nor any other deviation when disaggregating the results by treatment received or participation in saving groups.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

Conflicts, largely, are man-made; they are part of the human being. The role and work of international agencies on conflict spans from conflict mitigation to reduction to post-conflict assistance. Especially if referred to conflicts linked to natural resources, management and mitigation policies largely depend on the involvement of the actors and their commitment to transform their relationships. To play an active role, therefore, international agencies need to expand or invest on their credibility.

This calls for the identification of a solid analytical framework that can be adopted for assessing the credibility of an international agency. There is no such a framework, to the best of our knowledge. Therefore, this paper builds on an already existing and well adopted analytical framework developed by Lim and Van Der Heide (2015). Expanding what has been proposed by the authors, this paper presented an approach at measuring the credibility of an international agency to play a leading role in conflict mitigation. This is, to the best of our knowledge, the first attempt to establish a credibility index.

As can be seen in Graph 1, the responses are quite skewed to the right, showing great confidence in FAO's work. At the same time, we believe that those results, as explained above, may have many potential sources of bias.

In an ideal setting, this module should have been captured *before* and *after* FAO's work, to assess whether people's opinion has changed. We believe that the most valuable contribution of this paper is to show the relevance of the credibility index, not the values emerging from the Cox's Bazar case.

While we recognize the limitations of our proposal, we think this is a credible first step toward the understanding of an important precondition: is an international agency invested with enough credibility to act effectively in a conflict or post-conflict situation? Knowing if an actor is credible is key to coordinating the efforts of the UN in fragile contexts.

Further avenues of research stem from this paper, in particular with reference to case studies, fine-tuning of the indicators adopted, and framing the relationships with national governments into the credibility index.

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<sup>14</sup> Rohingya vs Bangladeshi

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Annex - Details of the factor analysis

**Table 2** Matrix of Eigenvalues and cumulative explanation

Factor	Eigenvalue	Difference	Proportion	Cumulative
Factor1	240.656	178.699	0.8676	0.8676
Factor2	0.61957	0.56192	0.2234	10.909
Factor3	0.05764	0.03732	0.0208	11.117
Factor4	0.02032	0.01641	0.0073	11.190
Factor5	0.00392	0.00392	0.0014	11.204
Factor6	-0.00000	0.02835	-0.0000	11.204
Factor7	-0.02835	0.04631	-0.0102	11.102
Factor8	-0.07466	0.15638	-0.0269	10.833
Factor9	-0.23104	.	-0.0833	10.000

**Table 3** Matrix of Factor Loadings

	Factor1	Factor2
cred_var_01	.23705893	-.03170168
cred_var_03	.4004855	.4034662
cred_var_04	.99752591	-.07915147
cred_var_05	.44324994	-.06631084
cred_var_06	.99752591	-.07915147
cred_var_07	.04715158	.4972885
cred_var_08	.00662978	.33570093
cred_var_09	.03281568	.25411517
cred_var_10	-.00649436	.11951331

