BENEFITS-HARMS
HANDBOOK

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Acknowledgements

The benefits-harms approach must acknowledge some conceptual debts. First, it owes much to those who have developed human rights concepts to where they are today. The ideas herein have been greatly strengthened by using the lens of human rights and human responsibilities. For those who want to integrate rights-based approaches into their work, benefits-harms offers one way of doing so. However, one doesn't need to know anything about human rights law to do benefits-harms analysis.

Second, the development of benefits-harms owes much to the *"Do No Harm"* approach pioneered by Mary Anderson and her colleagues. Although benefits-harms offers a different conceptual framework for thinking about the purpose and impact of our work, it also aims to build on the significant achievements of the *Do No Harm* approach in promoting a culture of critical analysis in relief work.

Third, the benefits-harms approach draws from CARE's Household Livelihood Security (HLS) approach, core aims of which are to promote better holistic analysis of programming contexts and impact, and a better understanding of how and why households make the important decisions that affect their livelihoods. The benefits-harms approach aims to work effectively alongside HLS and other livelihood approaches.

But ultimately, benefits-harms owes its development to a huge number of individuals who have been involved in testing and developing the approach and the tools over the last three years, and it is impossible to name them all.

CARE staff in Sudan, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia were oriented in the use of draft tools, used them in project design, monitoring and evaluation and provided huge amounts of constructive feedback. Specifically, I would like to thank my colleagues in CARE's East Africa Regional Management Unit, Jon Mitchell, Jumbe Sebunya, Abby Maxman and Dan Maxwell, for keeping the project intellectually honest, practically focused, and above all, moving forward. For bringing the Handbook and the Manual to publication, special thanks is owed to Mburu Gitu for drafting work and inspirational discussions, Charles Hill for ensuring that the project kept its soul, Andrew Jones for constant support and reflections on rights-based issues, Joyce Maxwell for helping the whole publication take on a professional look we never thought possible, and Kath Campbell for her editing genius, her conceptual guidance and practical support.

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Finally, a huge debt is owed to the United States Institute for Peace, who gave CARE a generous grant in 2000-2001 to continue the refinement of benefits-harms ideas and to publish the Handbook and the Facilitation Manual so that the tools could be used by other individuals and organizations.

Please send comments, or requests for more information or materials to Paul O'Brien, Africa Policy Advisor, CARE International at pobrien@care.org.

Paul O'Brien
Kampala, September 2001

1. The Purpose and Foundation of Benefits–Harms Analysis

A. Where did the Benefits–Harms Approach come from?

In September 1998, CARE International policy makers reviewed the organization's work in North and South Sudan. They concluded that CARE needed to understand better the real impact of its Sudan program, and committed the organization to undertake regular "benefits-harms assessments" to better understand the humanitarian, political and security impacts of all CARE's Sudan projects. With that decision, the "benefits-harms" approach was born.

For the next three years, the approach was developed, refined and repeatedly tested in projects around Africa. Based on this work, this handbook offers a simple but practical set of tools that can be used in any relief or development project context anywhere in the world to better understand and improve the overall impact of our work.

B. The Purpose of Benefits–Harms Analysis

The purpose of benefits-harms analysis is to help relief and development organizations hold themselves responsible for the *overall* impact of their programs.

Understanding the impact of our work, let alone taking responsibility for it, is not easy. The rippling effects of most programs impact human lives and livelihoods in many different ways. Most emergency relief workers know, for example, that introducing resources into conflict-torn contexts can intensify tensions or promote peace, create revolving cycles of need or move people away from aid dependency. Development workers know that their projects can substitute for or strengthen local coping strategies, subsidize or mitigate the corruption of governments, marginalize the most disadvantaged or promote equity and social justice across communities. In other words, our business and its impact are complex,

and no-one can fathom every impact of any given project.   So what is our responsibility?

Many programmers understand well the potential for unintended impacts, and they design their projects accordingly.   In the real world much of this thinking goes on organically or intuitively. The core purpose of the benefits-harms handbook is to help programmers share their experience, knowledge and intuition *creatively, efficiently and transparently.*

It offers a set of streamlined tools, designed for flexible use by programmers with different needs, resources, time and experience. The tools do not yield answers, but rely on the capacity of programmers to think, to take the time to ask questions that should be asked, and to act upon the conclusions they reach.

In rare cases, it may be worth using all of the tools in the handbook to do a comprehensive benefits-harms analysis. Most of the time, however, it makes more sense to pick and choose from the various tools as circumstances demand. With some initial investment of time, preferably through an orientation workshop, benefits-harms thinking may not only help organizations design more effective programs, but should also strengthen their culture of analysis and reflection generally. For organizations committed to improved performance, it can encourage constructive self-criticism and innovation, and push all staff to take responsibility for the overall impact of their organization's work.

C. A Foundation in Human Rights and Responsibilities

Increasingly, we acknowledge that the services we provide are actually helping people to achieve human rights—food, health care, education, shelter, work, adequate water and sanitation among them. We are also cognizant of the fact that people need more than these economic and social rights to live a dignified life. We recognize that people need to live without fear of physical violence. They need freedoms to think their own thoughts, to worship in the way they choose, and to determine their own political way of life. And ultimately, they need the power to fulfill

their potential by their own efforts.

A rights approach to relief and development is grounded on the belief that all people are equally entitled to claim the basic conditions for living with dignity and fulfilling our human potential, otherwise termed "human rights".

There are, however, two schools of "rights-based" thought in the relief and development world. Some see human rights primarily as legal norms, founded in international law. For them, the rights-based approach consists largely of using advocacy to promote states' adherence to their legal obligations.

There are others, however, who believe the power of human rights lies not just in the law, but in something deeper, preexisting the law—our common humanity. For them, just as human rights belong to all of us, so do *human responsibilities*. For those who believe human rights are not just legal entitlements, but are also moral norms, a rights-based approach means accepting the responsibility to work towards a world where all people have the chance to fulfill their human potential.

The moral view of human rights and responsibilities puts two fundamental questions to the relief and development community:

1.   How can *we* take responsibility for the human rights impact of our work?

2.   What can we do to ensure that *others* live up to their human rights responsibilities?

Benefits-harms analysis is an attempt to respond directly to the first question above. Its purpose is to support those individuals and agencies that want to take human responsibility for the overall impact of their work.

By so doing, it aims to lay a strong foundation for the second question. Ensuring others live up to their responsibilities means, first and foremost, treating the people we serve as rights bearers, ultimately responsible for their own development. It also means working with many state and non-state actors to ensure that the human rights of the people we serve are respected, protected, promoted and whenever possible, fulfilled.

D. Taking Responsibility for the Human Rights Impact of our Work

A rights-based approach to relief and development work raises two fundamental questions:

How can we take responsibility for the human rights impact of our work?

What can we do to ensure that others live up to their human rights responsibilities?

What happens when relief and development projects undermine people's human rights? What if an emergency food delivery attracts aggressors, putting people's physical security at risk? What if a community empowerment project unwittingly privileges one religious group over another, reinforcing discriminatory practices? What if a program to shelter displaced people encourages forced displacement? What if any of these projects focus more on project sustainability than on having a sustainable impact?

Living with dignity and self-worth requires a host of different conditions—economic, social, cultural, civil, and political among them. Good programmers know this intuitively. They know it makes little sense to improve clients' well-being in one sector if the overall impact of a project is to undermine their well-being generally. It is in fleshing out this intuition that a rights-based approach to programming has a lot to offer.

Because the aim of relief and development work can be understood as helping people to live with dignity, and human rights identify claims on the conditions for living with dignity, they provide a powerful lens for analyzing a project's impact. It can even be argued that if a project is having a positive impact in human rights terms, then the overall impact of that project must be positive—period. Similarly, if the human rights impact is negative, so must be the overall impact of the project. No other set of indicators is more relevant or comprehensive to our work.

II. The Framework for Benefits-Harms Analysis

The framework for benefits-harms analysis is based on two core ideas: (a) Human rights can be usefully organized in three categories and (b) unintended impacts can happen for three different reasons. By putting these two ideas together, the benefits-harms approach offers a set of tools to help identify and address human rights impacts that may result from any relief or development project. The next two sections explain these ideas in more detail.

A. Three Categories of Rights and Impacts

The founding document of the modern human rights movement is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948). The rights in the UDHR can be usefully organized into three categories: (a) political rights; (b) security rights and (c) economic, social and cultural rights. (See Appendix D.) This simple categorization can be used to cover comprehensively the relevant impacts a project might have. An overview of each of the three categories follows.

1. Political Rights and Impacts

Traditionally, relief and development agencies have expertly used political agnosticism so as to avoid the stigma of "political partisanship". Not surprisingly therefore, we treated poverty as an *economic* problem, requiring *economic* solutions. In recent years, however, we have been forced to abandon the sanctuary of political ignorance. As political opportunists, both in the donor community and in host countries, have used us for their own ends, we have learned hard lessons about the price of blindness. Today, agencies increasingly recognize that when their aim is to reallocate resources or decision-making power to marginalized populations, their work is profoundly political. As a consequence, political "impacts" are moving from the unintentional and misunderstood to the deliberate and clearly recognized.

These tools are designed to help programmers consider and then strengthen the political impact of their work. A project's presence

in an area, or its work with a particular counterpart may empower a political actor or institution or legitimize a political viewpoint. It may strengthen or diminish the protection of political rights. It may also change the ability of community members to participate in determining their own political identity and well-being.

What is our responsibility when we witness political rights violations? Local activists increasingly challenge aid workers to speak out about political oppression.

Examining political rights and impacts asks relief and development actors to think about issues of political identity, protection, freedom, and participation. They include (a) rights to nationality and equality and recognition before the law; (b) rights to a fair trial and innocence until proven guilty; (c) the freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, opinion, and expression; and (d) the rights to assembly, association, and political participation in the power structures that affect people's lives.

2. Security Rights and Impacts

In human rights terms, perhaps the most troubling consequence of relief and development work occurs when projects endanger people's lives, liberty or personal security. Yet, in complex emergency work, it happens all the time. It is almost impossible to introduce life-saving goods (e.g. food, health goods and shelter) into resource-starved conflict settings without impacting people's security rights. Aid resources are simply too valuable to be ignored by violent actors on all sides.

In development settings, projects can also affect security rights dramatically, creating tensions between different groups, focusing jealous attention on marginalized communities or on individuals within households.

Examining security rights and impacts asks relief and development workers to think about how projects can either weaken or strengthen people's physical security, by creating or defusing ten-

sions between communities or individuals within communities.

Security rights include all those rights relating to people's physical security, both in peace time and in conflict. They include the rights to life, liberty, security of person, movement and asylum, as well as freedom from slavery, torture, forced displacement, degrading treatment, sexual assault of any form, and arbitrary arrest and detention.

In Sudan, some aid organizations buy back slaves from marauding militias. Many fear that these purchases are fueling the slave trade, and indirectly increasing insecurity in southern Sudanese communities.

3. Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Impacts

Economic, social and cultural rights include all those rights essential to livelihood security, such as economic well-being, nutrition, food security, water, health, education, a clean environment, shelter, and the right to participate in one's culture. Whether or not they frame their work in rights terms, most relief and development actors aim to positively impact these human rights.

Many agencies have developed tools and approaches to help them think holistically about how to optimize the overall positive im-

Providing only survival services to displaced populations in camps may undermine coping skills and capacities, create further incentives for forced or voluntary displacement, while doing nothing to address the root causes that are causing the displacement.

pacts of their work on people's livelihoods. Rather than focusing on one particular human right (e.g. food, education or health), programs offer synergistic projects which aim to engage across an array of rights. Even with these new approaches, however, the possibility of unintended and negative impacts on people's livelihood rights remains significant. Resource injection projects can unintentionally affect economic markets and earning potential; health projects often come face to face with issues of cultural respect and integrity; income generation projects can undermine educational attendance. And so on.

Used in tandem with other livelihood approaches and strategies, benefits-harms tools can help programmers better account for and address the overall impact of projects, both positive and negative.

B. Three Reasons why Unintended Impacts may Occur

Three major reasons why projects have unintended consequences are (a) a lack of knowledge about the contexts in which we work, (b) a lack of thought about the unintended impact of projects, and (c) a failure to take action to mitigate unintended harms or capitalize on unforeseen potential benefits. To help address these three challenges, this handbook offers three different types of tools.

Three types of tools to address unintended impacts:

Profile Tools aim to help users strengthen their understanding of the contexts in which they work or plan to work.

Impact Tools aim to help users consider the causes and effects that may lead to unintended impacts.

Decision Tools aim to help users choose a course of action to minimize unintended harms or maximize previously unforeseen benefits.

1. Profile Tools

Every community is home to a rich tapestry of different realities. All have economic assets and vulnerabilities, social groupings, cultural norms, political ties and tensions, purveyors of power and victims of abuse. Such realities may be manifest to the attentive, but often they are masked to the less inquisitive outsider. Upon this tapestry, relief and develop-

Profile tools can help programmers get a richer, more holistic understanding of the hopes and concerns of the individuals and communities we serve.

ment projects aim to weave their stories of success. And often we do, but in so doing, we remain unaware of deeper, unintended impacts of our projects on other spheres of community life.

Profile tools aim to facilitate brief but focused analysis of those spheres of community life that must be considered if projects are to maximize their potential for positive impact and avoid undermining rights simply for lack of knowledge. They can help programmers consider critical questions of fact with respect to political, security, and economic, social and cultural rights and responsibilities in any community.

2. Impact Tools

Relief and development workers are experts at describing the *intended* causes and effects of our programming. Such analysis is crucial to our economic survival (if you give us $X, we will make Y happen), and our evaluation methods (we did X, and therefore Y occurred). We are not so good, however, at understanding the *unintended* consequences of our work, particularly if those effects are negative and outside the area of our intended impact.

There are obvious reasons for this: (a) Issues of economic self-interest and institutional reputation push us to focus on intended positive impacts—donors and bosses often don't want to hear how much harm projects have done; (b) our expertise and our baselines

Impact tools can help programmers think about and identify unintended impacts caused by a project.

for evaluation are usually in our area of intended impact—health project staff, for example, are expected to be health professionals, not political pundits and security analysts; (c) time, resources and prioritization—when time for analysis comes at a premium, projects rarely see exhaustive review of "unrelated areas" as worthwhile; and (d) there were simply no widely available tools to help programmers think through the unintended impact of their projects on people's human rights. With benefits-harms analysis we hope at least to have addressed this last constraint.

3. Decision Tools

Perhaps the most important distinction between rights-based and needs-based approaches arise because rights always trigger responsibilities, whereas needs don't. Rights-based approaches focus both on rights *and responsibilities*, and decision tools aim to help rights-based programmers think through the responsibility side of the "rights = responsibilities" equation.

They aim to strengthen our ability and willingness to respond

Decision tools can help programmers to make principled decisions when faced with internal and external pressures.

when we are the problem, and they aim to push us towards rights-based action when others are responsible, either for causing human rights problems or for addressing them. Thus, decision tools aim to push us not only to take immediate action to address unintended negative consequences, but also to situate future action within the wider matrix of rights and responsibilities within which we work.

C. Putting the Tools and Categories of Rights Together

The handbook is structured by offering one profile, analysis and decision tool for each of the three categories of rights. Under the "Political" category, for example, there is a Political Profile Tool, a Political Impact Tool and a Political Decision Tool. Altogether, there are nine different tools that programmers may want to use in any given context, and which can be organized in a triangular chart.
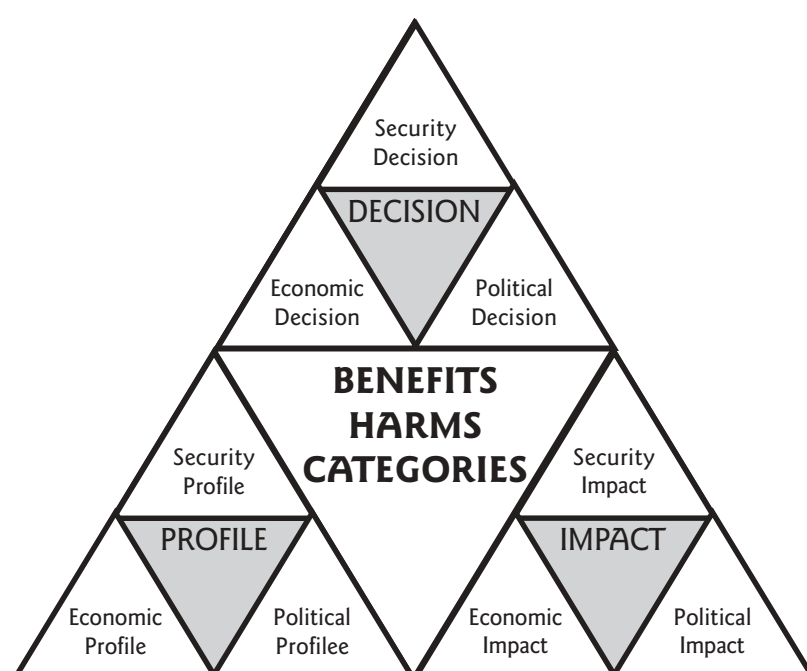
The appendices offer a profile, impact and decision tool for each of the three categories. The front side of each page provides examples of the type of information being sought, and also contains ideas and/or questions. The back side of each page is the tool itself—a blank form. Each tool can be used to stimulate discussion or to gather information and ideas from different sources.
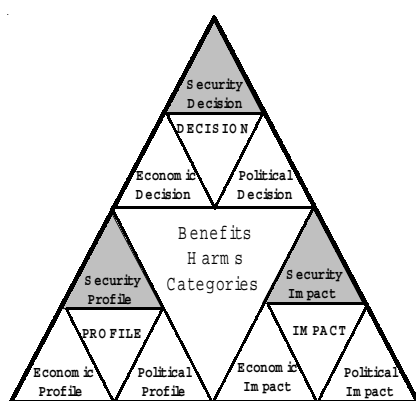
Appendix A contains the Profile Tools, Appendix B the Impact Tools and Appendix C the Decision Tools. More specific guidance on possible methodologies is included at the beginning of each.

## III. Methodology for using the Benefits-Harms Tools

A. Tools are Just Tools

Benefits-harms tools aim to help strengthen a culture of analysis and thoughtful interaction between individuals and agencies working in the same environment.   They can be used in a wide variety of ways, depending on the time available, the agency's resources and capacities, and the operating environment.

Focusing on one impact category

In some situations, it may make most sense to consider only one of the three categories of impact. For example, a complex conflict setting may call for using all three security tools.
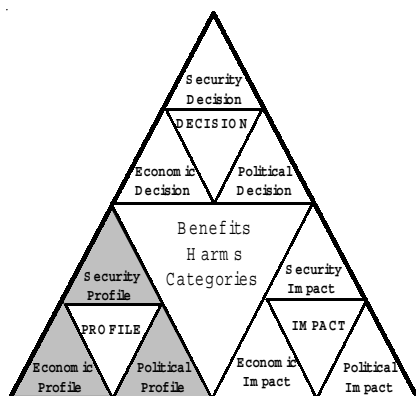
Using only one type of tool

Sometimes, only one type of tool is called for. For example, a project or agency starting up in a new operating environment may find it useful to develop profiles in all three impact categories.
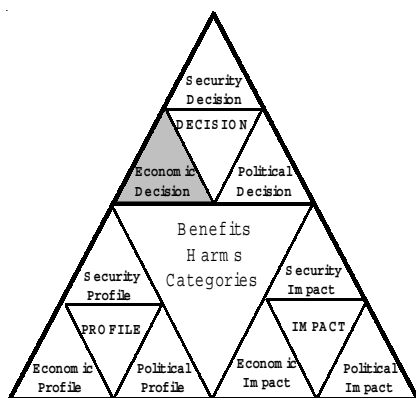
Stimulating a focused discussion on a particular issue

When time and resources are in short supply, or if a lot of work and thinking has already been done, you can use just one of the tools to stimulate a focused discussion. For example, where you know a project is having an unintended negative impact on an economic right, but there is heavy internal or donor pressure not to change, you could use the economic decision tool to help you think through the issue.

This handbook will be of greatest value to those who treat it like a tool box.   Rarely would one ever want to use all the tools herein. Once familiar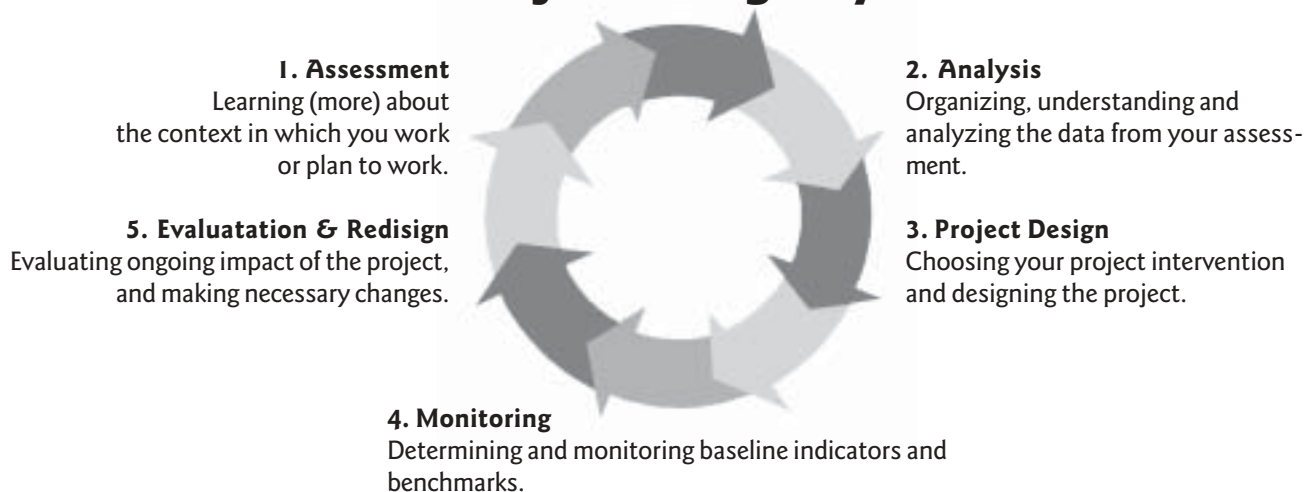 with those tools, however, a programmer should be able to determine which tools are worth using in any given situation.

B. How the Tools can be used During the Project Design Cycle

The benefits-harms tools can be used in any relief or development project.   Strategies for using these tools should vary, depending on the type, timeline and scope of the project, the external environment, available time and resources, and of course the style, needs and experience of the organization and programmers involved.

A Project Design Cycle

1. Assessment
Learning (more) about the context in which you work or plan to work.

2. Analysis
Organizing, understanding and analyzing the data from your assessment.

5. Evaluatation & Redisign
Evaluating ongoing impact of the project, and making necessary changes.

3. Project Design
Choosing your project intervention and designing the project.

4. Monitoring
Determining and monitoring baseline indicators and benchmarks.

This diagram and the explanations that follow draw (in a loose and somewhat simplified way) on CARE International's Household Livelihood Security approach. In most organizations, similar project or program cycles are used, albeit under different names and perhaps ordered differently.

Still, most organizations go through a similar project design cycle, and it is useful to consider generally when and how the tools can

be integrated into that cycle.

1. Opportunities for using the Profile Tools

Increasingly, even in emergency settings, aid workers recognize the need to better understand the contexts in which they are working or planning to work. They know that assessments should be as holistic as time, resources and skills allow.   Profile Tools are designed to help programmers think holistically by asking them to consider, in an efficient way, the political, security, economic, social, and cultural rights environment in any given context. Working with people knowledgeable about that environment, a few hours talking through the Profile Tools can radically change one's knowledge of and communication about a context or a community. While Profile Tools can never substitute for grounded field experience, they can help contextual discussions and assessments to be focussed and efficient.

During the analysis phase, Profile Tools can also offer a useful framework for synthesizing and organizing your information. Many have found it useful to have "livelihood securities" (food, nutrition, health care, water and sanitation, education, shelter, income and employment) in one category, while newer areas of inquiry (i.e. security and political rights) are captured separately.

Finally, once a project design is complete, Profile Tools contribute to coherent information systems for monitoring the impact of any project.   One simply can't monitor a project's unintended impact on people's rights unless one has a "baseline" understanding of the rights situation before the project begin. Profile Tools help to ensure projects have that baseline understanding, across a comprehensive range of rights.

2. Opportunities for using the Impact Tools

During project design, Impact Tools can help us to capitalize on previously unforeseen benefits, as well as mitigate potential unintended harms. By getting programmers to consider how a given project might significantly impact different human rights, Impact Tools aim to help offset programming shortsightedness.

Similarly, once a project is up and running and the time has come to reflect upon and evaluate its impact, Impact Tools help to ensure that unintended impacts are also considered.
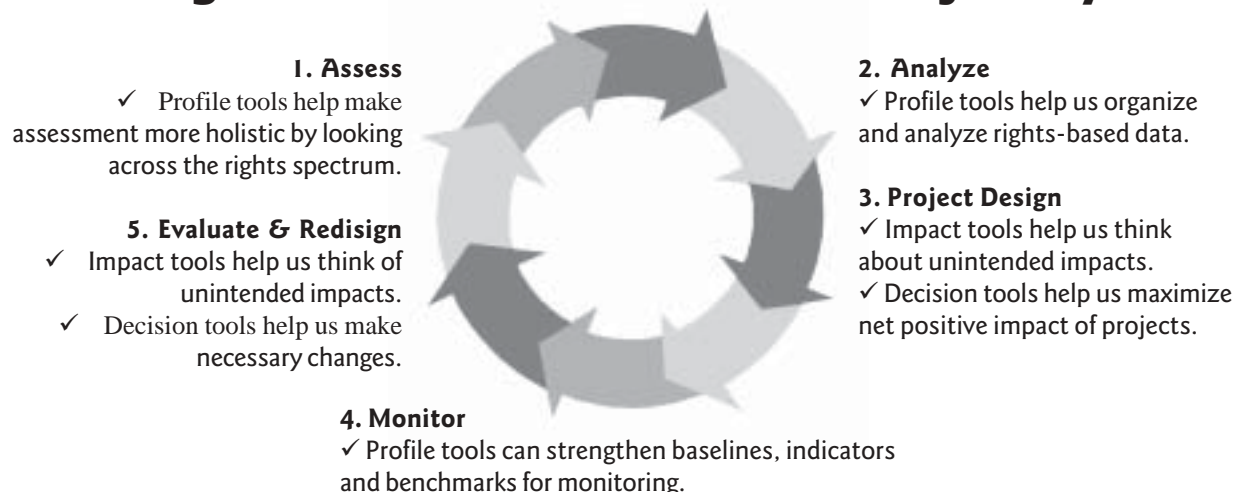
3. Opportunities for using the Decision Tools

There are two key phases in the project cycle where Decision Tools can help programmers strengthen their "response ability". During the project design phase, Decision Tools can help programmers identify and respond to the key internal and external constraints to principled decision-making. While Impact Tools help to identify a particular unintended impact, Decision Tools help one respond accordingly.

Second, Decision Tools can strengthen evaluation processes by spurring programmers to make the necessary changes when new opportunities or unintended negative impacts are identified. They help programmers move from awareness to action when reflecting upon their work.

The following chart summarizes some suggested areas for using benefits-harms tools during the project cycle. Note, however, that these are *only* suggestions to spark your own thinking. In the real world, decisions get made as opportunities and concerns arise, not in clearly defined phases. Hopefully these tools will prove useful *whenever* programmers need to know more about the contexts in which they work, think more about project impact, or make principled decisions on difficult issues related to project impact.

Using Benefits-Harms Tools in a Project Cycle

1. Assess
✓ Profile tools help make assessment more holistic by looking across the rights spectrum.

5. Evaluate & Redisign
✓ Impact tools help us think of unintended impacts.
✓ Decision tools help us make necessary changes.

2. Analyze
✓ Profile tools help us organize and analyze rights-based data.

3. Project Design
✓ Impact tools help us think about unintended impacts.
✓ Decision tools help us maximize net positive impact of projects.

4. Monitor
✓ Profile tools can strengthen baselines, indicators and benchmarks for monitoring.

IV. Closing Comments

The benefits-harms tools in the appendix of this handbook are designed for programmers who are overburdened with process requirements, and almost always short of time and resources. They could easily have been (and in fact once were) much longer and more detailed. But testing and experience has shown that we need to aim for the absolute essentials if we want these tools to be used regularly and useful to a wide array of programmers.

The introductions in each appendix provide some basic guidance on the use of the tools. That said, the tools will be of greatest value to those who adapt them to their needs and styles. The underlying goal remains the same: We need constantly to learn more, think more, and make better decisions in our work. That is the unavoidable consequence of taking genuine responsibility for the impact of our work on people's ability to live with dignity.