



Living conflict sensitivity: how ZOA changed to better work in conflict

A BEST PRACTICE PAPER

“Making space to talk about what conflict sensitivity means in practice, really makes a difference.”



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Introduction

ZOA is an international relief and recovery organisation that supports vulnerable people affected by violent conflicts and natural disasters in fragile states by helping them to rebuild their livelihoods. ZOA has dedicated country offices and operates in challenging conflict-affected contexts across Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

ZOA realised that its work might have negative effects on pre-existing conflicts, but also that it could do more to leverage peacebuilding opportunities across its work in these contexts. This coincided with a shift in international thinking towards the **Triple Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus**, which recognises that sustainable development and durable solutions to displacement are not possible without peace, and that addressing the underlying causes of conflict is fundamental to reducing humanitarian needs. In light of this, the organisation saw the need to strengthen the integration of conflict sensitivity as part of its core ways of working.

As organisational change processes can be challenging and multi-dimensional, ZOA sought external support and applied successfully for accompaniment from PeaceNexus, a private Swiss foundation dedicated to building capacities for conflict sensitivity and more effective peacebuilding. PeaceNexus has accompanied ZOA in this journey over 5 years (2015–2020). The ultimate objective was for ZOA to do no harm, be conflict-sensitive and contribute to peacebuilding where possible through its work.

“People may think conflict sensitivity is difficult, technical, sensitive, they don’t know how to do it. But if you break it into smaller pieces, make the time to discuss at least twice a year in specific projects, that’s how you surface issues, and that’s how you really manage to identify and mitigate risks. More than the tools per se, what is important is having the space to bring up the issues and discuss what to do.”

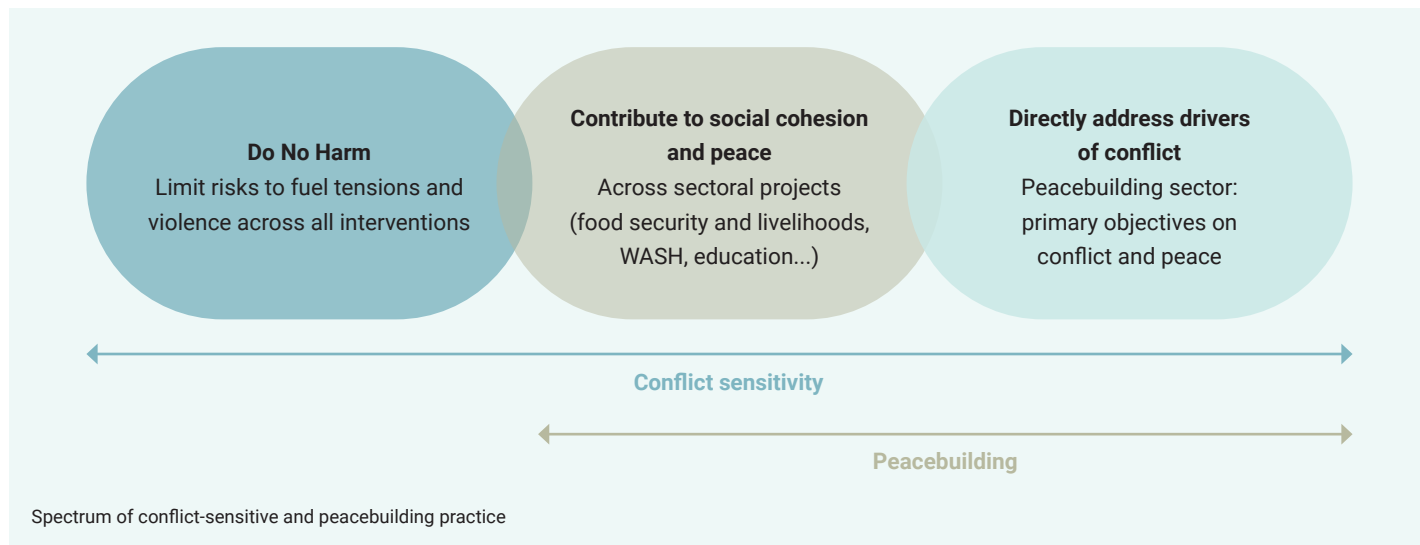
In this paper, ZOA would like to share with a wider audience the lessons learnt and the achievements of this organisational change process. The paper starts with reflections on the internal change process itself, followed by five case studies across countries and sectors. It ends with some key conclusions and take-aways for those interested in undertaking a similar process.

We hope that this paper will demonstrate the relevance of conflict sensitivity and provide inspiration on how to engage on this topic. Our experience has taught us that there are many pathways to more conflict-sensitive ways of working, and that sharing our collective knowledge is a powerful element of supporting change.



Changing the organisation

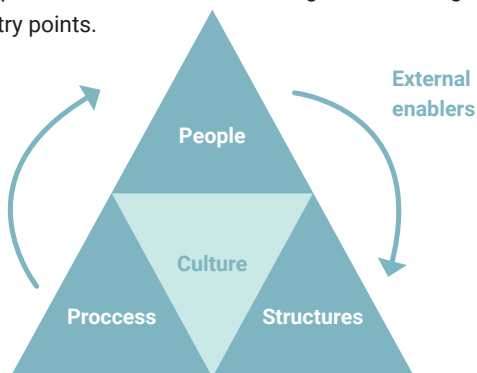
What does conflict sensitivity mean for ZOA? Across all contexts and types of interventions, ZOA strives to do no harm. It has increasingly embedded social cohesion objectives across its sectoral relief and recovery projects and also leads dedicated peacebuilding programming in selected contexts.



For ZOA, the middle section of the above spectrum has proven critical: stronger conflict-sensitive practice has helped achieve integrated programming with better results on sectoral objectives related to Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL), Water, Hygiene and Sanitation (WASH) or education, as well as on strengthening inter-group relations and social cohesion. In practice, while not labelling it in this way at the local level, conflict sensitivity has directly fed into ZOA’s ability to operationalise the Triple Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus. Concrete examples of how conflict sensitivity was applied in practice, and what difference this has made, are detailed in the case studies in Section 3 below.

How did ZOA get here?

For more than 5 years, ZOA has invested in promoting greater conflict sensitivity practice at all levels and through different organisational change entry points.



Organisational change diagram

People: ZOA supported staff knowledge and capacities on the conflict sensitivity agenda through different training formats, cross-learning between countries and sectors, and practical accompaniment. It also worked on encouraging, discussing and managing staff diversity, particularly with teams in polarised country contexts.

“ZOA has established basic social services such as water points at strategic locations which are jointly used by both conflicting communities and this is re-establishing social cohesion.”

Structures: ZOA incorporated conflict sensitivity as a cross-cutting principle in its organisational strategy and invested in peacebuilding as a specific intervention sector. ZOA’s leadership strongly supported the agenda and dedicated staff were given lead roles and time to develop the work.

Processes: Conflict sensitivity was built into sectoral tip sheets, project proposal guidelines and country annual plan templates to prompt reflection and inform decisions about whether to and how undertake activities or projects if there were significant conflict sensitivity risks. Monitoring and team meetings also included conflict sensitivity reflection, which helped keep the issue “alive” in daily practice and ensure quality project management.

External enablers: Further momentum was added by for instance the demands from some donors to incorporate conflict sensitivity in ZOA's work, opportunities for specific peacebuilding funding and collaboration with new partners and networks on conflict and peace.

“The biggest achievement is probably that when you now say conflict sensitivity, everybody agrees this is an important factor for our work and you don't need to explain it anymore.”

Organisational culture: Taken together, these efforts fed into changes in **organisational culture**, embedding conflict sensitivity at the core of a shared set of organisational values. Adopting this lens institutionally cultivated self-awareness and internal dialogue on sensitive issues, while incentivising quality in ZOA's projects. It also made it more likely that staff would look out for conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities to contribute to peace and social cohesion.



What lessons did ZOA learn along the way?

Integrating conflict sensitivity organisationally means going beyond projects: ZOA discovered that internal staff diversity and culture, critical selection and engagement with partners, donors and suppliers, and ZOA's external communication about conflicts and violence are all equally important for ZOA's conflict-sensitive way of working.

Conflict sensitivity is most practical and impactful when built in as a core principle of programme quality and impact: ZOA found that the biggest changes in practices were made possible by adjusting its project cycle management. This meant building in time for stakeholder engagement as part of project design; budgeting for conflict analysis and capacity-building of staff and partners; and using conflict-related questions and indicators in monitoring and evaluation.

Building capacity meant investing in people beyond one-off trainings: Formal trainings were complemented by informal sessions, practical accompaniment and exchange and learning about conflict sensitivity practice, thereby going far beyond “technical knowledge”.

Strategy, policies and tools matter but working on organisational culture has been the game-changer: Informal and organic processes helped create space for self-reflection and raising and

addressing sensitive issues. Time is a top challenge, and staff face multiple competing demands as well as pressure to spend. ZOA staff flagged two particularly impactful positive practices: having the space to speak to colleagues about the context and the implications for their work, which enabled them to raise dilemmas; and listening more to partners and communities at the frontline of conflict. Wide ownership of the agenda across the organisation and beyond those with specific conflict/peace elements in their job descriptions further enabled this process.

Adapting to who ZOA is and how it functions has helped organisational uptake of conflict sensitivity: ZOA is decentralised with autonomous country offices. The change process approach created demand for conflict sensitivity by working with country teams on their specific challenges, recognising how they already applied good practices even if not labelled as conflict sensitivity, and fostering learning between country offices. Efforts are also ongoing to streamline other key approaches alongside conflict sensitivity, such as protection and gender.

Conflict sensitivity has to be kept alive: From ZOA's experience, it is a way of working that requires continuous organisational commitment. Sustaining practice requires embedding adaptation to context in projects as well as in organisational structures and processes, and keeping questions on the organisation's interactions with conflict alive and current for people in their daily work.



CHANGING ZOA'S PRACTICES | CASE STUDY 1

Integrated Water Resource Management at a large scale in Sudan

The Aqua4Sudan partnership, managed by ZOA, provides Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) support in Darfur and Eastern Sudan. Water and land are crucial for people's livelihoods. In Darfur, nomadic pastoralist groups move south into agricultural areas during the dry season because of insufficient water sources in the animal corridors. Yet, agri-farmers sometimes grow food in the fertile animal corridors rather than the degraded farmland areas. Conflicts between pastoralists and agri-farmers are therefore common, especially when cattle cause damage to crops. Decades of repeated conflict and displacement also fuelled land-related conflicts.

ZOA recognised that implementing a water-focused project in this context could aggravate existing tensions, but also provided opportunities to reduce conflict. The project focused on 28 catchment areas (areas where rainfall ends up in the same stream or underground water source) across 6 states in Sudan with known water-related tensions between users.

The team emphasised stakeholder engagement as a key element of their conflict-sensitive approach. To ring-fence the necessary staff time and resources for conflict analysis and community consultations, they included stakeholder engagement as part of a specific project output.

During implementation, staff identified the different groups living in each area. They involved relevant people in working on water, agriculture and land - selecting Catchment Committees and developing Catchment Plans. Sometimes government officials wanted to dictate the process or work in single-sector ways, for instance focusing only on agriculture with farmer groups. But the project team pushed for communities to lead and to identify interventions that address everybody's needs holistically, involving women and both farmers and nomadic pastoralists.

This was the first time such an approach was applied in Sudan at that scale. Sometimes people were impatient about how long it took before they saw any water points or dams. But once everything was in place, the reaction of communities and government officials, and project staff, was very positive.

Monitoring stakeholder engagement as a project output helped track progress. Communities reported that conflicts between nomadic pastoralist and agri-farmer groups have reduced. Having more water available in northern areas delays the migration southwards until after crops have been harvested. With water points closer to the migration routes, cattle stay further away from the fields, while those living in villages use their new village wells.

"We talk water but we bring peace."

The project's approach helped reconcile some communities who previously fought each other. In a few places, the project team decided not to proceed with physical IWRM work when it was clear that it would make conflicts worse - instead switching to advocacy activities. For instance, one displaced community complained that providing water resources to people currently living on their land would legitimise a change of ownership.

For ZOA, this experience illustrated that successful IWRM requires a "technical side", but also a "social side" that takes the time to work with all stakeholders in setting up committees, resolving existing conflicts, and in ongoing water management. Supporting them in building positive relationships is a crucial way to avoid doing harm and reducing conflict.

Irrigation and Land rights in a conflict area of the DRC

In the Luberizi area of the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, decades of conflict have contributed to poverty and mistrust between different ethnic and community groups, particularly the Barundi and Bafuliuro. Recognising this context, ZOA worked in a consortium to stimulate economic opportunities in a way that improves relationships between the communities living there.

The project focused on rehabilitating and constructing irrigation systems to support people from all the different groups to produce rice and maize. But there was a risk that wealthy, powerful people would try to take over the land once the infrastructure was in place. Amidst complex and overlapping land title systems, ZOA and its partners developed an innovative group titling system to protect people's land rights. Each of these groups was multi-ethnic, which provided an opportunity to improve relationships and collaboration between them.

Working in a conflict-sensitive way meant taking more time for community consultations on every project element. The project team did an initial conflict analysis to really understand the local context and issues. They engaged with all ethnic groups from the start, particularly the Barundi and Bafuliuro and their chiefs. They asked permission from both chiefs for project visits and shared information with all communities.

The mapping process for establishing the land titles took about 6 months as multiple conflicts had to be resolved, such as competing claims on the same land. But this approach meant that everybody was on board with the final results and the communities' feedback to the project staff has been very positive.

Young men from the area were hired to work on the infrastructure – an important activity since they have few opportunities and can be manipulated by politicians to fuel unrest. The local knowledge and personal contacts of project staff and partners from the area helped inform project decisions in this sensitive context. ZOA also involved

authorities at different levels to make sure that decision-makers support the local efforts.

Working transparently and impartially was crucial: people did not trust each other and sometimes accused project partners of taking sides. Equally, really listening to the views of everybody – including marginalised people like women and those from excluded ethnic groups who do not speak up easily – was very important to avoid fuelling divisions.

“Without this approach, the project would have been shut down long ago.”

In order to handle any conflicts that may arise from the project, the team supported communities to elect an ethnically representative Committee of the Wise, based on criteria agreed with the chiefs and community members. The Committee receives and assesses complaints about the project, resolves them if possible, and if not, involves ZOA or its partners in resolving them. This mechanism and monthly meetings between project staff and communities have worked well to handle emerging issues and manage expectations about what the project could achieve.

The project has successfully rehabilitated the irrigation system and trained the farmers in modern agriculture techniques, which has increased people's rice harvests from about 4 to 7 tons per hectare. Relationships between the ethnic groups have also improved, so that everybody benefits economically from the irrigation and participates in the maintenance mechanisms for the future.





CHANGING ZOA'S PRACTICES | CASE STUDY 3

Food security in a border village in Sri Lanka

Mangalagama is a border village in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka, that was known as a highly sensitive area during the civil war and therefore used to be on high alert to prevent unexpected attacks towards civilians. The Sinhalese and Tamil communities on either side of the border line both engaged in agriculture and livestock rearing. After the war, people and animals were free to move around and local-level conflicts emerged between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities about sharing available resources. Both communities depend on the same resources for their livelihoods, yet resource-related regulations are unclear.

During the planting season, the government orders all free-ranging animals to leave the cultivation area to protect the crops, so Tamil farmers send animals to the nearby forest for grazing, with a herder guarding them. At night, the herders are not allowed to stay in the forest due to government forest protection policies, and they go to their villages that are quite far away (more than 10 kilometres). By the time they return the following morning, the cattle have often strayed into farms and damaged crops.

This situation led to loss of crop-related revenue for the agri-farmers and fines being imposed on the livestock keepers by the authorities for the damage caused by their animals. As most of the cattle were not marked, it was sometimes difficult to know who the owners were, and also made it easier for the cattle to be stolen.

ZOA undertook a **livelihood problem assessment** and found that over 9 years (2008-2016), crop revenue loss because of cattle damage was about double the amount of damage by elephants or climate change factors. Livestock keepers also lost significant revenue because of the fines and the cattle theft. ZOA worked with both communities and the local authorities **to share information about the situation and to find solutions.**

A **Committee** was created in the village with members from both communities – although the Tamil members tend to attend less

frequently because of the distance between villages. They were **trained on non-violent communications**, collective problem-solving and engaging with the appropriate government authorities. The two communities also visited each other during “tea cup sessions” and exposure visits to understand each other’s practical and livelihood challenges.

“These activities helped to start building positive relationships and cross-cultural understanding between the two groups. ZOA hired both Sinhalese and Tamil staff to increase trust and collaboration.”

The situation improved significantly as a result of all the above activities: the agri-farmers have had complete harvests and the livestock keepers have received veterinary services and had more of their cattle tagged, which have reduced the fines they received from authorities. They also monitor their cattle more carefully.

ZOA staff feel that their conflict-sensitive approach has **contributed to better livelihood outcomes for both communities**, which was important to **support positive relationships**. The team also collaborated with, and raised the awareness of, government officials and structures of the problems both communities experienced and of the responsibilities of government to help address the situation.

WASH and food security for displaced communities in Nigeria

ZOA has been supporting people displaced by the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in North-Eastern Nigeria, focusing on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and cash support to help people buy food.

When ZOA first arrived in the project area, they realised that existing interventions prioritised displaced people and caused tensions with the host community. The displaced people arrived with almost nothing and needed access to water and land on which to build shelter and grow food. Since resources in the area were already scarce, tensions increased between those who were displaced and those who were already living there. In some cases, local land owners refused to make land available to the newcomers and some host community members would use the water hand pumps first before allowing the newcomers to get water for themselves.

The ZOA team in Nigeria decided to target both host and displaced populations with its assistance, making sure that the most vulnerable people from both groups benefit from cash distribution and WASH activities. They also noticed malnutrition among both communities – particularly the children. They therefore initiated group education sessions for women from both communities, who were pregnant or breastfeeding, on diet diversification, nutrition, infants and young child feeding and hygiene. Even though they speak different languages, there were enough people who spoke Hausa in addition to their mother tongue and who could be trained as facilitators and translate as needed.

These groups have proven transformative. Not only have the women reported that they are gaining important knowledge and skills that help them and their families, but they have also developed friendships among group members – across the host/displaced dividing line. In one case the husbands of two participating women became

friends too, and the host family eventually shared their land with the displaced family. The women say the groups have helped them relieve the stress of being displaced and having nothing positive to do. The groups have been so popular and the information so useful that women who are not being targeted by the ZOA project have also asked to join the sessions.

ZOA staff feel that this approach has not only made interventions on WASH and cash distribution more effective, but has also helped create social cohesion between the communities. The tensions between the host and displaced communities have reduced significantly and people now share their resources more willingly. ZOA's support is welcomed, and ZOA staff feel like they are being accepted as part of the community – not only as an organisation working there.

"We see these people as not just on the receiving end of humanitarian assistance, but as people with skills, ideas and potential who can play a "teacher" role in their families."

The financial investment made by the ZOA team to develop and implement this approach was small as it required a change in ways of working rather than an increase in resources. Yet the impacts were significant both in delivering on the project objectives and in expanding the social and peace-promoting impacts of the work.





CHANGING ZOA'S PRACTICES | CASE STUDY 5

Education in refugee-hosting areas of Uganda

Uganda is host to refugees from several neighbouring countries, including South Sudan and the DRC, and takes a progressive approach to refugee assistance. Refugees may self-settle in urban areas, or in designated settlement areas where they receive support and services from international and national agencies and live side-by-side with Ugandan communities.

While host community members generously welcome and share social services with refugees, the enormous scale of displacement, including high numbers of children, strains already overstretched services in refugee-hosting districts. Assistance that only targets refugees can create resentment from the local population, especially where host community needs are high as well. To support peaceful coexistence and improve services for all, the Ugandan government's Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) policy requires that non-food humanitarian assistance supports both populations, with a minimum of 30 percent Ugandan beneficiaries.

"Many people say: "These people [the refugees] are our brothers and sisters. They welcomed us when we were displaced. Now it is our turn to welcome them." But the needs are also high in the Ugandan communities."

ZOA supports education services in and around refugee settlements in the West Nile Region. ZOA takes great care to implement this policy across its activities in a bid to make sure that both Ugandan and refugee children receive equitable support.

Refugee and Ugandan children go to school together and build positive relationships that can help work against stereotyping and distrust. However, the issue of language is a major challenge to delivering quality education. Government policy requires children in lower primary to be taught in their mother tongue, but this standard is difficult to meet where refugee learners speak several different languages and dialects and Ugandan children may speak different languages too – one school in Arua reported 12 different languages

among its learners. Most schools teach in English and all teachers are Ugandan, as the majority of refugee teacher diplomas are not recognised in Uganda. While many Ugandan teachers try to learn the languages of the learners, the refugee children often have difficulty understanding the teachers. In addition, there are up to 300 learners in each class, making it impossible to address the needs of each child.

ZOA constantly works to minimise discrepancies between the education support and materials that host and refugee learners receive. ZOA hired teaching assistants from the refugee communities to help translate and manage the large classes. They also rolled out a literacy programme in early grade reading, focusing on phonics instruction (letter-sound relationships) in English, to help both refugee and Ugandan learners who need additional literacy support. While this approach cannot reach all children – as the needs are so high – it has significantly improved the reading ability of those involved.

Acknowledging the difficult social contexts of most of the learners, ZOA and local partner PALM Corps also supported Gender Empowerment Movement (GEM) Clubs that worked with more than 500 refugee and Ugandan girls and boys on their rights, child protection and reporting mechanisms. As a result some protection and abuse cases were reported, and teachers observed that GEM Club members attended school more regularly than other learners. Supporting both refugee and Ugandan children in this context has been crucial to improving their life chances while avoiding the risk of fuelling conflict and resentment between the broader communities.

Conclusions

ZOA's organisational process on integrating conflict sensitivity into its work, and embedding it across the organisation, has seen some important achievements across many spheres. The detailed lessons and examples of this process have been set out above. In addition, there are a few headline lessons that ZOA thinks are useful to highlight for other actors seeking to really institutionalise a conflict-sensitive way of working.

Conflict sensitivity should be about the organisation, not just about the projects:

Adopting this agenda is not just about better projects – although it clearly improves project outcomes across multiple sectors. It is also about organisational values and culture; staff attitudes and diversity; processes, structures and incentives that promote conflict sensitivity thinking; and increased knowledge and practical skills to work in a conflict-sensitive way. Approached like this, it goes far beyond doing trainings and ticking boxes on a checklist. Instead it requires reflective practice and time and space to ask and answer the important questions.

Conflict sensitivity is necessary and feasible – not optional – when working in conflict-affected contexts:

As the case studies show, projects needed more time to do their work in order to be conflict-sensitive, but did not require significant additional resources. Teams recognised that without this approach, their projects would have failed – not just from a conflict and peace perspective, but also on their core objectives relating to education, WASH, nutrition, land rights and food security and livelihoods. Through this approach, they were also able to show that the **Triple Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus** is both needed and realistic.

Conflict sensitivity is not just for conflict experts:

Even though ZOA's core mandate is relief- and recovery-focused, its work over the last 5 years has shown how much value can be added by adopting a conflict-sensitive approach and seeking peacebuilding opportunities where possible. This has illustrated how doing no harm sets the minimum standard, but many further options are also possible and impactful to “do some good”.

Conflict sensitivity is never done:

Despite the progress ZOA has made on this agenda, the organisation recognises that working in a conflict-sensitive way is an iterative process. Not only is it important to keep some momentum on the agenda, but also renewed efforts may be needed to refresh the focus, tools and capacities for this work in the future. For instance, context shifts such as the Covid-19 crisis may create new energy around conflict-sensitive WASH interventions. And institutionally, a change in staff who champion the agenda or a new strategy could trigger a need for fresh thinking on ZOA's contributions from a conflict sensitivity perspective.

ZOA is committed to continue with “keeping alive” the conflict sensitivity agenda in the organisation and to protect and expand the day-to-day reflective space that is so crucial to a conflict-sensitive way of working – and to good quality programming overall.

COLOPHON

ZOA
Sleutelbloemstraat 45, Apeldoorn
PO Box 4130, 7320 AC Apeldoorn
The Netherlands
T: +31 (0)55 366 3339
I: www.zoa-international.com
E: info@zoa.ngo

Text
Corita Corbijn, Hesta Groenewald, Heloise Heyer

Photography
Marianne van Elst-Sijtsma, Jaco Klamer, ZOA

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