

# Introduction

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Does integrating systemic thinking into conflict transformation strategies contribute to a better understanding of the non-linear development of complex conflict situations and peace processes? In concrete terms, what is, for example, the added value of including feedback loops in conflict analysis methodologies? Is the tetralemma – a concept used in systemic constellation work in the context of family therapy or organisational development – helpful when it comes to visualising the complexity of protracted conflicts?

Both the Berghof Research Center and the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS) have been puzzling over questions like these for a while. In 2005, BFPS published the study *The Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation* as a first attempt to spell out its understanding of systemic thinking and to start investigating to what extent the application of systemic concepts and instruments proved to be useful for peacebuilding strategies (Wils et al. 2006). As highlighted in this study, the integration of systemic thinking promised an inspiring potential to develop further existing approaches and to enrich the current debate on how to develop adequate approaches to transforming violent conflicts. Therefore, we decided to initiate several follow-up projects, which focus on the further exploration and development of a systemic approach to conflict transformation, such as two international expert workshops,<sup>1</sup> an edited volume on systemic thinking and conflict transformation, to be published in 2009, and this current issue of the Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series, *A Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Exploring Strengths and Limitations*.

<sup>1</sup> The first of these workshops took place in June 2007 in Berlin; the second is scheduled for September 2008.

Whereas there is a growing consensus that protracted and complex conflicts require equally long-range and multi-dimensional concepts of conflict transformation, it is still an open question how best to develop adequate strategies for identifying entry points for such peacebuilding interventions. Integrated and holistic approaches to peacebuilding underline the need for complementarity between security-related, political, socio-economical and cultural factors. In addition, they emphasize the necessity of engaging with issues and people from different backgrounds on various levels within a society, as is shown, for example, by the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP).<sup>2</sup>

As became apparent in our last Dialogue on *Social Change and Conflict Transformation*, a proper elaboration of “theories of change” is crucial in order to fully assess the impact of peacebuilding interventions in a macro-political environment (Bloomfield et al. 2006). But to what extent can systemic thinking be useful in developing adequate theories of change for transforming violent conflicts? What difference does it really make to apply systemic approaches from family therapy and organisational development in the peacebuilding field?

This Dialogue consequently sets out to explore the strengths and limitations of a systemic approach to conflict transformation along these lines. We have gathered renowned scholars and practitioners representing diverse professional and geographical perspectives, to help us work through the current state of affairs and to point to areas of tension and useful next steps.

As is customary for the Berghof Handbook Dialogues, we start with a lead article that, in this case, assesses systemic thinking and practice in the context of a multi-year programme to support conflict analysis and transformation in Sri Lanka. This lead article presents lessons learned and open questions, and advocates several “values added”. The article is then discussed by a set of respondents who take up many of the concepts, ideas and challenges raised. The Dialogue ends with a brief reflection by the lead author on the responses gathered.

**Norbert Ropers**, Director of the Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation (RNCST) in Sri Lanka and Director of the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support, took up the challenging task of reflecting on the development of a more systemic approach to conflict transformation in Sri Lanka. After a brief overview on the history of systemic thinking and its integration into peacebuilding concepts to date, he delineates three observations that form the baseline of his article: a *systemic analysis* includes important additional tools for a deeper understanding of the Sri Lankan conflict and offers creative options for addressing the conflict by starting from solutions rather than causes. A *systemic perspective* provides theory-guided explanations for the increasing difficulties and setbacks of the Sri Lankan peace process between 2002 and 2007. In addition, a *systemic framework*, which has been developed by the RNCST, enriches the interpretation of various basic principles of conflict intervention (Ropers 2008, 3).<sup>3</sup>

Ropers points out that one of the main benefits of a systemic approach is that “it offers a practical tool to understand (...) non-linear developments and complex social and political change” (ibid., 6). It can explain how protracted conflicts become intractable over time through a set of reinforcing loops. Besides this, systemic methodologies can help clarify why peace processes have an in-built tendency to be fragile and ambivalent. In this context, Ropers proposes seven so-called

<sup>2</sup> Coordinated originally by Lara Olson and Mary Anderson, and more recently by Diana Chigas and Peter Woodrow from the Collaborative for Development Action (CDA). See Anderson & Olson 2003; for recent reports and developments, consult [www.cdainc.com](http://www.cdainc.com) [accessed 12 August 2008].

<sup>3</sup> All references to Ropers 2008 – and subsequently Glasl 2008, Baechler 2008, Saravanamuttu 2008, Ibrahim Abdi 2008 and Smith 2008 – are to single contributions in Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 6, *A Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Exploring Strengths and Limitations*, Berlin: Berghof Research Center. They are available online at [www.berghof-handbook.net/std\\_page.php?LANG=e&id=232&parent=5](http://www.berghof-handbook.net/std_page.php?LANG=e&id=232&parent=5). A print version is forthcoming.

“archetypes” (ibid., 20ff.) which, he suggests, can be considered important underlying patterns of such fragility. A systemic approach to conflict transformation should therefore be seen as a process which rarely leads to a stable reference point but rather to a corridor of different kinds of mitigation, settlement and re-escalation (ibid., 6).

This process orientation is seen as a strength by the first respondent **Friedrich Glasl**, who teaches Organisational Development and Conflict Management at the University of Salzburg and is a visiting professor at several international universities. Glasl stresses that an added value of systemic conflict transformation methodologies lies in admitting that causal research is futile, and that the dynamics of escalation tend to induce further problems which have little to do with the original conflict. It is therefore more important to use conflict analysis to gain insight into the dynamics of a conflict, rather than searching for causes to fix (Glasl 2008, 2).

However, Glasl argues that more attention must be paid to the individual conflict parties, and the key people involved in particular. He regards the following questions as crucial for any conflict analysis (ibid., 4): how do system dynamics play out within the individual conflict parties? Which internal forces are the leaders exposed to? How do they view their dependency on voters, and other legitimising factors?

Although Glasl sees the mapping of relationships between the various stakeholders as an important step (e.g. Ropers 2008, *diagram 2*), he underlines that at the same time the actors’ “mechanisms of unconsidered reaction patterns” must always be analysed. It is crucial, for example, to think about what is likely to go on *inside* the leaders if voters reject the de-escalating measures that they may have proposed: “I will lose my mandate,” or “I will be seen as a weak leader” are imaginable reactions. Therefore, a crucial role of conflict transformation strategies must be to identify these “secret rules” of such unconsidered reaction mechanisms and disable them by making the actors aware of them (Glasl 2008, 5). To this end, Glasl proposes an additional range of methods of inquiry and relationship-building.

**Günther Baechler**, former Special Adviser for Peace Building in Nepal, who now serves as a Special Adviser for Peace Building in Sudan for the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, agrees with Glasl that the individual matters. Since systems are built by actors and not by abstract structures, he stresses that it is the role of the individual which must be central to all conflict transformation approaches. As he highlights in the second part of his response, some of the archetypes seen at work in Sri Lanka proved to be useful for the Nepali context, too. However, in Baechler’s opinion it is not the description of the archetypes which distinguishes systemic from non-systemic approaches, but “the way of addressing the archetypes, or the type of relations a third party has with those actors who are behind such emerging patterns” (Baechler 2008, 5). Overall, Baechler stresses that the value added of SCT, as we have come to abbreviate systemic conflict transformation, must be seen in practical terms rather than in developing a new meta-theory or overarching framework.

**Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu**, Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) in Colombo, adds a Sri Lankan perspective on the potential advantages and shortcomings of systemic conflict transformation. He considers the systemic methodology of starting from solutions as innovative, as it assumes the definition of what is to be solved and why it has not been. For this, he concedes, mental models and archetypes can be especially instructive.

Besides this, he wonders about the implications and limitations of a multi-partial, inclusive peace process. Is systemic conflict transformation really “apolitical” because it claims to include all interests and “cover all the bases” (Saravanamuttu 2008, 2/3)? Saravanamuttu points out that the process itself has a normative and moral quality, since the moral and normative elements are inherent in it. The challenging question in this regard is who defines the rules which constitute the normative framework of such a process. Who decides whether a peace process is succeeding or failing? Who decides about the turning point at which conflict transformation starts to succeed? Saravanamuttu ultimately points to a real dilemma: “Do the principal actors always remain a part of the process irrespective of their behaviour within it, since without them there cannot be a process and the risks of turning them into spoilers by chastising them for bad behaviour are too great?” (ibid., 4).

The fourth contributor to this Dialogue is **Dekha Ibrahim Abdi**. She is currently an independent consultant focusing on the development of peace education material, and has gained much recognition for her mediation and conflict resolution efforts in Wajir, as well as for her role in working towards a resolution of the violent post-election political crisis in Kenya in early 2008. The interview she granted our Dialogue co-editor, Oliver Wils, illustrates the adoption of a systemic approach in practice, taking Ropers’ lead article and reflections as an inspiring reference point and reinforcement of her own insights. Ibrahim Abdi reflects on inclusive ways of carrying out conflict analysis, stressing that two stages need to be integrated – one of story telling and one of diagnosing patterns (Ibrahim Abdi 2008, 3). The systems she is working with are manifold: systems of influence, of meaning, of people, of processes and stages, as well as systems of support. She stresses in particular the necessity of working with “networks and networks of people” (ibid.), and through such networks of working and strategising on different levels, which in Kenya were labelled “upstream”, “middlestream” and “downstream”. Asked where she finds the energy to sustain such involvement, she points out that it is important to be grounded, among other things, in a good team: “...to voice that you’re not carrying the whole world by yourself, that everybody is carrying a little bit of the world together” (ibid., 8).

**Dan Smith**, Secretary General of International Alert and based in London, comes last but not least, and engages again with more conceptual issues. In Smith’s opinion, the key value added of the systemic approach lies in reaching a clearer understanding of the skills and qualities required both to analyse and to act as a third party in conflict situations. Therefore, he sees the most important next step not so much in developing a better approach, not even in achieving a better use of the approach, but in investing into creating a *better user* of (systemic) conflict transformation methodologies.

In addition, he questions whether the complexity of a conflict situation truly reflects the absence of a linear logic between causes and effects in a social system, or whether it simply reflects the fact that many things do happen at the same time. Non-linear effects and developments in peace processes could result from the interaction of strategies and projects which are simultaneously underway in various sectors, such as education, security and the economy. While education left to itself might have linear effects, he argues, influences from other fields also come into play. Thus, due to the multiplicity of linear effects working at different speeds in different areas, peace processes develop in a non-linear manner (Smith 2008, 4). In order to grapple with this phenomenon, he suggests that additional inspiration can be found in the field of chaos theory.

So what can we glean from these responses with respect to the utility and value added of systemic conflict transformation and its multi-disciplinary set of tools and methods? Which insights and areas of further investigation or development present themselves? Here is a first collection of points that caught our eye:

- The vision behind SCT addresses a real and shared need to become ever more skilful in deep analysis, joint strategy development, creative implementation and principled process design in order to make a difference – this is implicitly acknowledged by all respondents. At the same time, they also did reveal that some methods and parts of a systemic approach are already out there (Ibrahim Abdi, Baechler, Smith).
- SCT is seen as inspiring and thought-provoking, especially since it aims to combine and connect theory with action in a true loop of planning, implementation and reflection.
- The systemic methodology of starting from solutions is seen as innovative. In addition, some respondents consider the mental models and archetypes to be especially instructive.
- One of our respondents finds SCT to be geared towards practice rather than formulating a meta-framework or theory (Baechler).
- Other respondents find SCT to be more powerful in diagnosis than prescription (Smith, Saravanamuttu).
- One respondent points out that SCT might need to be presented using simpler language and a more accessible format in order to be engaging for some practitioners (Ibrahim Abdi); also that people will most likely use those bits and pieces they might find useful and leave others aside.
- Several respondents strongly emphasise the role and importance of individuals: people who create structures and shape processes through their experience, integrity, relations and predispositions (in particular Baechler, Glasl).
- Many point also to the critical importance of working *with* the conflict parties in order to have an impact (Ibrahim Abdi, Glasl, Baechler).
- Two comments, finally, reveal an interesting difference in the way one underlying pattern or “archetype” – that of “mutual disappointment” – played out in the contexts of Nepal and Sri Lanka, which invites further investigation of the factors responsible for this difference (Baechler, Saravanamuttu). Among them might be the role of prior agreements on principles, the quality of third-party relationship-building and the flexibility of process design and management of expectations.

As usual with the Berghof Handbook Dialogues, we do not end with certainties or recipes, but rather with a refined set of questions and suggestions of where to focus our attention. After all, the *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation* aims to provide a platform for the exchange between different experiences, cultures and organisations, and to present diverse perspectives. Our next Dialogue, which is due towards the end of 2008, will open with a provocative article by Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina, who take the peacebuilding community to task for its apparent lack of effectiveness. There, we will be sure to explore further what it takes to create better users who might – jointly – have more of a positive, transformative impact on the continued violent state of our world.

We want to conclude by thanking all the contributors to this Dialogue for sharing their thoughts, ideas and experiences. Now, we encourage our readers’ reactions and reflections, which can be addressed to the editors via the Berghof Handbook website ([www.berghof-handbook.net](http://www.berghof-handbook.net),

or [info@berghof-handbook.net](mailto:info@berghof-handbook.net)). Furthermore, and for this edition in particular, we would like to thank all of our colleagues – SCT converts and sceptics alike – who have accompanied us during the reflection and production process of this Dialogue, through all feedback loops, time delays and “none of this – but also not this” moments as we encountered them. Finally, we once again gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies, which allows us to continue the Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series, as a forum for exchange between scholars and practitioners concerned with conflict transformation, development cooperation, humanitarian aid and human rights work. Our mutual, and also systemic, learning thus continues.

Berlin, August 2008  
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## References

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All references to Ropers 2008, Glasl 2008, Baechler 2008, Saravanamuttu 2008, Ibrahim Abdi 2008 and Smith 2008 are to contributions in Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 6, *A Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Exploring Strengths and Limitations*, Berlin: Berghof Research Center. They are available online at [www.berghof-handbook.net/std\\_page.php?LANG=e&id=232&parent=5](http://www.berghof-handbook.net/std_page.php?LANG=e&id=232&parent=5). A print version is forthcoming.

[All accessed 12 August 2008].

### See also...

This article has been published as part of the Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 6 *A Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Exploring Strengths and Limitations* (2008).

The complete version includes the following articles:

- Daniela Körppen and Beatrix Schmelzle, *Introduction*
- Norbert Ropers, *Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on the Conflict and Peace Process in Sri Lanka*
- Friedrich Glasl, *Enriching Conflict Diagnosis and Strategies for Social Change: A Closer Look at Conflict Dynamics*
- Günther Baechler, „*Emerging Archetypes*“: *A Comparison of Patterns of the Peace Processes in Sri Lanka and Nepal*
- Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, *A Sri Lankan Perspective on Systemic Conflict Transformation*
- Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, *Working for Peace in Conflict Systems in Kenya: Addressing the Post-Election Crisis 2008*
- Dan Smith, *Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on Utility*
- Norbert Ropers, *Perspectives on the Further Development of Systemic Conflict Transformation*

Hardcopies of the complete version can be ordered at the Berghof Research Center (order@berghof-center.org). All articles, as well as the complete Dialogue, can also be downloaded for free from our website (www.berghof-handbook.net).