

Perspectives for the Further Development of Systemic Conflict Transformation

A Concluding Reflection

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1

The five response articles indicate the multiplicity of perspectives from which the value and particularly the “added value” of Systemic Conflict Transformation (SCT) can be discussed. I am grateful to all my colleagues for their critical comments, reflections and ideas on using systemic thinking for the further development of theory and practice of conflict transformation. Because there is not enough space in this concluding reflection to engage with the wealth of feedback in detail, I would like to focus instead on four topics which my colleagues have mentioned as being either in need of deeper analysis, or as being especially promising for further elaboration.

- The very basic implications of conflict parties living and acting in their own systems, whilst together constituting a system which they cannot control: what does this mean for persons and groups who see themselves as “drivers of peaceful change”?
- The understanding of peace processes as “learning processes”: how can this learning lead to “turning points” for the disputing parties?
- The insights into the importance of intra-party differences for the success of peace processes: what can our field learn from Organisational Development?
- The interaction between process- and structure-related issues in peace processes: to what extent can systemic thinking inspire sustainable and just peace processes?

1. Conflict Systems as Constituted and Transformed by Conflicting and Collaborating Systems

One of the basic features of protracted conflicts is the fact that all stakeholders, as well as many other people involved, have their own and mostly quite different narratives about the conflict, the reasons behind it and how to settle, solve or transform it – a point stressed and illustrated with several examples by Günther Baechler. The points of view of others seem to be either completely wrong, absurd or at least highly biased. But tragically, it is exactly these differences that are key drivers of the conflict. And, even worse, the more one or the other party tries to “control” the conflict by resorting to violence or its escalation, the more the system seems to get “out of control”.

What does this mean in the framework of systemic analysis? The conflict dynamic might be out of control for the individual parties, but it still follows a logic and dynamism of its own, as I outlined in *Section 3* of the lead article to this Dialogue.¹ Therefore, the overall conflict system can be highly predictable. The conclusions for peaceful intervention are twofold. On the one hand, its proponents have to engage with the different parties, to build trust and confidence with them and to understand the way these parties perceive the conflict. On the other hand, they have to work towards transforming the conflict perception into one of “shared understanding” and “joint control”.

Too often, third parties – in their understandable drive to find concrete steps forward – emphasise too early, or give too much weight to, the second approach: focusing on cross-cutting dialogues, negotiations and agreements *per se*. The danger there is that the importance and depth of internal resistances and scepticism are sidelined, which I see as one of the drivers of the “archetypes” of fragile peace processes. A very practical conclusion, as stressed by Baechler and supported by Friedrich Glasl, is to focus much more strongly than is the dominant practice on engaging with the individual parties about their ideas and resources for solutions and settlements – an aspect which I would like to come back to later in the context of process and structure.

Having said that, the second task is still one which needs more creative contributions from the field of conflict transformation. Mechanisms like permanent support structures for negotiations and dialogues, peace secretariats, joint advisory boards or meetings, interim administrations, etc. can help to create a kind of “intermediate system” with a bridge-building function. Crucial for the relevance of these mechanisms is that they are clearly mandated and linked to the leadership of all parties, and that they create spaces and incentives for joint learning.

2. Peace Processes as Learning Processes

From a systemic perspective, all peace processes are processes of collective learning. The conflicting parties explore the possibilities of changing or transforming the conflict system they share with each other, and third parties explore what they can do to engage with relevant persons at the right time on the most critical issues. Dekha Ibrahim Abdi gives a good example for the latter.

As I mentioned in the lead article, the conflict resolution pioneer John Burton has already emphasised that in this field (he would most likely see no conceptual difference between conflict resolution and transformation), “second-order learning” is crucial, i.e. learning that questions the

¹ All references (to “the lead article”, as well as Baechler, Glasl, Saravanamuttu, Ibrahim Abdi and Smith) are to the 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. A print version is forthcoming.

order which created the conflict in the first place and that searches for reference points to create a new, inclusive system. So far, the conflict transformation movement has been guided by the optimistic assumption that a common framework could be found through dialogue. More recently, some authors have argued that this assumption has to be challenged in light of the current global phenomenon of “radical disagreements”.² This is a highly relevant issue for systemic thinking; its exploration unfortunately has to be postponed to later publications.

I agree with Dan Smith that a key test for the added value of systemic thinking is indeed that third parties and insider activists become increasingly capable of applying systemic knowledge while supporting peace processes. In this context, the archetypes of fragile peace processes are meant to encourage intelligent multipartial and multi-track strategies to reduce or contain the expected resistances against conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

3. Inspirations from Organisational Development

Friedrich Glasl was one of the first academics and practitioners to systematise, in a very rich way, how conflict transformation in general can profit from insights gained in conflicts within and between organisations. His contribution to this Handbook Dialogue is a good example of that. Significant organisational change can only happen with an explicit mandate and backing from the top leadership level. On the other hand, staff (or followers, voters, etc.) can resist changes in various ways. This interaction, and also the need of leaders and other representatives for “selling inwards” (to the negotiation partners) as well as “selling outwards” (to their constituencies), is a crucial element of system dynamics. I agree wholeheartedly that the leader-constituency link is a crucial dimension. Here, SCT can benefit substantially from Organisational Development.

In this context, Glasl argues that “radicals” can only be accessed through “moderates” (understood here as those who support nonviolent as opposed to violent methods of political struggle), i.e. through engaging with persons who have already softened – or never hardened – their position in this respect. While this is surely true in most cases, my experience is that there are also other cases where violence is used in a rather “rational” way, based on a cost-benefit analysis and that in these cases it is not impossible to engage with these activists in a “critical-constructive manner”.

Glasl also emphasises “community development” as a crucial element of peacebuilding and remarks that it should be located between the poles of a problem-based and a vision-led approach. This is a position which matches my understanding of how SCT could be most effective as a diagnostic tool, as well as a practical one. (However, I see systemic thinking primarily as an additional instrument for guiding good conflict transformation, and not as an enterprise for substituting the current body of knowledge about community development.)

4. Process and Structure

Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu raises several critical, moral and normative questions about the parameters under which constructive processes of conflict transformation can and should take place. Referring back to my explanation of the tetralemma, he argues that it can give the impression that all proposals and ideas for responding to a conflict – for example the one in Sri Lanka about access to and sharing of state power – are seen as equally valid, e.g. with respect to human rights

² See Ramsbotham, Oliver, Tom Woodhouse and Hugh Miall 2005. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Polity Press, 288-301.

and humanitarian standards. He further suggests that the process itself seems to have a normative and moral quality, and that one could reach the conclusion that whatever comes out of this process is by default good.

I believe this to be a fundamental misunderstanding. What the solution-orientated approach of the tetralemma is meant to achieve is to encourage all stakeholders to broaden the search for creative solutions, and to acknowledge the four plus one tetralemma dimensions as legitimate avenues for exploring common ground. Importantly, it also considers the parties as being legitimate participants in this discourse. To what extent these avenues can live up to the requirements of existing international regimes of human rights and humanitarian standards, or the criteria of just, inclusive and sustainable solutions, is something which is open to discussion. (And this is exactly where Glasl recommends the use of creative methods to “appeal to people’s imaginative and intuitive capabilities”).

The linking of a principled approach to peacemaking with an effective procedure and time-line of confidence- and relationship-building, of ceasefire agreements and demilitarisation, of peace dividends and a roadmap for political settlement is indeed one of the key challenges in conflict transformation. In my understanding, it is here that SCT must prove its essential added value.

Baechler points out the need to look at the resources and energy within the respective countries, and expresses his doubts regarding the extent to which system change of this nature can be initiated and controlled from the outside. Glasl emphasises the importance of “turning points” which encourage key persons in macro-social conflicts to pursue new political strategies. I think that these two remarks capture core elements of systemic thinking: on the one hand, they acknowledge the limited possibilities for influencing protracted conflicts from the outside, especially if the timing is not right. On the other hand, they reaffirm the knowledge that it is possible to find turning points which can have a substantive impact on the course of events. Maybe this is encouraging enough to develop the systemic approach of conflict transformation further.

See also...

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

The complete Dialogue 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).