

# A Sri Lankan Perspective on Systemic Conflict Transformation

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# A Sri Lankan Perspective on Systemic Conflict Transformation

## A response by Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu

Norbert Ropers' "Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on the Conflict and Peace Process in Sri Lanka" (Ropers 2008) is very much in the spirit of the quotation by Lederach cited at the outset: "The peacebuilder must have one foot in what is and one foot beyond what exists."

As such it is an acute and thought-provoking analysis of the conflict and peace process in Sri Lanka, with an identification of hitherto ignored and insufficiently appreciated avenues for further theoretical and applied research. As Ropers notes, systemic approaches have been used for some time in conceptualising political systems and conflicts, including their "intractability".<sup>1</sup> However, the challenge of *utilising* systemic approaches to conflict resolution and transformation remains. Ropers' article, accordingly, reflects this. Systemic Conflict Transformation (SCT) is in a state of "becoming", as opposed to one of "being".

Two observations that inform the article, namely the systems analysis approach of "starting from solutions rather than causes" and the systemic framework that provides insight into the mutual interaction of basic principles of conflict intervention, are of particular note. The third, pertaining to the systemic perspective and its contribution, if generalized, to effectively supporting peace processes, is important but derivative and contingent upon the other two.

## 1. Norms, Principles and Indicators: Is Systemic Conflict Transformation Apolitical?

Starting from solutions is indeed innovative. It also fundamentally assumes the definition of what is to be solved and why it has not been. Here, the "mental models" and "archetypes" of systemic conflict transformation can be especially instructive. Resolution requires an understanding and appreciation, in turn, of the different and differing drivers of the conflict, why they operate in such ways as to prevent reconciliation or resolution and importantly, the identification of drivers of a peaceful system:

Similar to the argument that "protracted conflicts" need "protracted peacemaking and peacebuilding", the systemic approach emphasises that the best conflict analysis does not offer effective ways for conflict transformation *per se*. To overcome the cycles which reproduce conflict systems, it is necessary to analyse factors and mechanisms which could become drivers of a different, peaceful system. (Ropers 2008, 19)

This is elaborated in the earlier exposition of the "tetralemma" as an interesting tool for conflict analysis:

<sup>1</sup> Deutsch's 1963 *Nerves of Government* is one seminal work in the area of political systems analysis.

The tetralemma's enlightening analytic character (...) lies in the fact that it encourages us to look at all five positions as necessary steps to explore creative ways of moving towards conflict resolution and to conceptualise the movement between the positions as necessary steps in a process of conflict transformation. In that sense, it supports lateral thinking, which is crucially important: the tetralemma *first* helps to overcome the binary logic that any solution has to be found within the space of the contentious issues as articulated by the main parties; it *secondly* encourages exploring various creative avenues of producing "A and B options" as well as "neither A nor B options"; and it *thirdly* emphasises the need for working through a process. It proposes that conflict analyses can profit substantially from models which interpret conflict transformation as continuous processes of exploring seemingly non-compatible options for change. (ibid., emphasis in the original text)

However, the full import of the last sentence notwithstanding, the logic of the approach described here raises questions with regard to its moral and normative basis – an acute concern for those engaged in both conflict transformation and peacebuilding since their exertions are based on and justified by releasing and realizing the emancipatory potential of the human beings they are working with. From this perspective, systemic conflict transformation may be challenged on the grounds that, because it claims to "cover all the bases" and include all interests, it risks being apolitical, and denying the substance of conflict at the same time as it claims to transform it.

Systemic conflict transformation does not identify a specific solution to be worked towards, it is a process through which any number of solutions are identified for their potential and eventually for their feasibility. There appears to be even a "survival of the fittest" dimension to this at any one point, which is relieved somewhat by the dynamism of the "process" nature of conflict transformation. The conflict transformation process *per se*, with its multiple models, keeps on rolling unbounded in time. Everything goes into the pot of conflict transformation, multiple mental models and all, because to exclude any one would be to risk failure and unwittingly nurture a spoiler. And each mental model is to have a parity of status with every other, not only for empowerment in a political struggle, but also with regard to accountability and respect for human rights and humanitarian standards.

Were this a correct reading of what has been described, it would potentially lead to the argument that the moral and normative elements are assumed, that they are intrinsic to and inherent in the process, *the process itself being a normative and moral exercise by definition*.

Or is it, alternatively, the case that whatever conflict transformation is achieved is by definition good in and of itself because it has transformed conflict? Is it the case that one will never know since the process of conflict transformation is an eternal conversation, or to use another analogy, like a river that keeps flowing?

At which point, for example, could the Sri Lankan peace process that commenced with the February 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) be deemed a success or failure, or more appropriately, be deemed to be *succeeding* or *failing*? Is it to be discarded as a failed attempt or to be seen as a phase of protracted peacemaking and -building, because it contains lessons to be learned that will in turn inform the next phase? Would the criticisms made against it have been met if it was allowed to continue? Was it so fatally flawed that it was surprising it survived even for the short time it actually did?

In my view, the pressing question arises: at which point does conflict transformation commence and when can it be said to be succeeding? What are the indicators – apart from the inclusion of mental models, etc. of all the stakeholders in a process? How to account for their varying

degrees of commitment and their various positions of asymmetry and influence with respect to each other and the process itself? And what of behaviour? 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?

Is there an argument to be made, then, for a prior (and explicit) agreement on the principles of the process of conflict transformation entered into by all stakeholders, thereby fulfilling the multipartiality requirement of this approach and constituting a point of entry for operationalisation? Such an agreement would meet the requirements of “critical-constructive engagement” as well as of the “envisioning of multiple peaceful futures” (Ropers 2008, 9) by enhancing legitimacy through the explicit inclusion of humanitarian standards and human rights criteria as binding for all actors in the conflict transformation process. Yet this too has to contend with the question of *who* will ensure adherence to the prior agreement on principles and *how* adherence will be secured.

## 2. The Sri Lankan Case

In the Sri Lankan case there was and continues to be a compelling argument for a prior agreement on process principles. With an emphasis on the substantive content of a political and constitutional settlement, the architecture of the post-2002 process suffered because of its relative neglect of the principle and process issues. This neglect undermined the legitimacy of the exercise. It opened it up to attack on a number of fronts and left it with few, if any, defenders amongst the local stakeholders. Even constructive criticism at that point came to be seen more as criticism than as constructive. Consequently, the exercise was, in effect, politically orphaned.

The CFA of 2002 was catalysed by and constructed upon a particular balance of power. On the side of the United National Front (UNF) government it was meant to get the war out of the way rather than actively serve as the basis for a political settlement; for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) it was the formal basis for the political consolidation of military gains. In this respect, and the differing understandings of the two signatories notwithstanding, there was a common, though not shared, realpolitik expectation which made the CFA possible in the first place. It was “common” in the sense that they were to leave each other alone in the sense of not openly interfering in each other’s basic realpolitik priorities – LTTE control over the north and east and the UNF government’s prioritisation of the economy as the assurance for its retention of power in the south. This gave rise to others’ expectations that it could be the bedrock of a process of conflict resolution, even transformation. Yet once the necessary interdependence between them – each side’s belief in the other’s behaviour as demonstrating the common realpolitik expectation – became unsustainable, a peace process founded upon the CFA, for all intents and purposes, ceased to be.

The absence of multipartiality – here Ropers’ point about intra-party differences is especially pertinent as well, since even within the UNF few if any came forward to mount a consistent and coherent defence of the CFA – ensured that there was no stakeholder in a position to salvage it in a situation of crisis, and restore faith and confidence in it as a *sine qua non* for conflict resolution and eventual transformation. Once the two sides left the high table, there was no one at any other table to keep it alive and relevant. Likewise, the absence of critical constructive engagement on the basis of principle, particularly the constituent elements of a democratic peace with human rights, allowed the CFA itself to be sapped of legitimacy from the moment of the ink drying on the agreement, or perhaps even from the moment of its conception.

Were the idea of an explicit agreement on principles for a process of conflict transformation to be taken on board, the earlier questions regarding the monitoring of adherence to them, and the modalities of doing so, would have to be seriously thought through. This invariably, and finally, focuses the spotlight on third parties and international third parties in particular.

A key challenge in the Sri Lankan situation is how to interest internationals in peace in a country which is of little strategic interest and significance to them. In the post-2002 process, the high degree of internationalisation was evinced in a belief that the process was going to reach a successful conclusion. As it became clear that this was not to be the case, very little was done to salvage it beyond the rhetorical; to the point that the co-chairs of the Tokyo Donor Conference of 2003 – Norway, the US, the EU and Japan – were in serious danger of losing their credibility in terms of the influence and leverage they could exert on the conflict parties. In the current Sri Lankan context, changes in the international balance of power have a bearing on the likelihood and limits of international leverage and influence on local actors. Key internationals – as far as the Government of Sri Lanka is concerned and by virtue of the military and economic assistance they provide – are the Chinese, the Iranians and the Pakistanis: countries closely associated with the passionate defence of national sovereignty and strenuous objection to the role of internationals – bi- or multilaterals – in the affairs of sovereign states.

Ropers mentions this dimension but does not probe it further, on account of it being beyond the scope of his article. He does however recognize its significance, and an extrapolation of a systemic conflict transformation process that may be relatively insulated from external participation would be illuminating and instructive for the Sri Lanka case.

In conclusion, Systemic Conflict Transformation as laid out by Ropers is a rich, thought-provoking and multi-layered approach which may at the moment provide greater diagnostic value than definitive instruction for conflict transformation. As such, it is well positioned to outline principles and processes. It is a work well in progress and as Ropers notes:

One of the most promising areas of research might be based on the conceptualisation of peace processes as learning processes, and focus on the parameters and principles through which insider and outsider peace actors can most effectively support lateral and creative learning to move from the existing system to the one beyond. (Ropers 2008, 27)

This certainly holds for Sri Lanka and others in a similar predicament.

### 3. References and Further Reading

- Deutsch, Karl 1963. *The Nerves of Government. Models of Political Communication and Control*. New York: Free Press.
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- Ferdinands, Tyrol, Kumar Rupesinghe, Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, J. Uyangoda and Norbert Ropers 2004. *The Sri Lankan Peace Process at a Crossroads: Lessons, Opportunities and Ideas for Principled Negotiations and Conflict Transformation*. Colombo: Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies.

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#### See also...

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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*
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