

A Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation

Exploring Strengths and Limitations

Edited by Daniela Körppen, Beatrix Schmelzle and Oliver Wils

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Berghof
Research Center
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Berghof Handbook
Dialogue Series

Edited by Daniela Körppen,
Beatrix Schmelzle and
Oliver Wils

A Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation

Exploring Strengths and Weaknesses

No. 6

About the Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series:

The Berghof Dialogue Series is an offshoot of the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. Each topic in the series is chosen because it is particularly relevant to societies in conflict and the practice of conflict transformation, and because it raises important issues at the present time. In each dialogue, practitioners and scholars critically engage and debate in light of their experience. Typically, a Dialogue includes one lead article from key experts, and four commentaries from practitioners and others. Rather than presenting a single analysis, these practitioner-scholar dialogues stimulate debate, integrating different perspectives, challenging prevailing views, comparing research findings with experiences and insights on the ground. Importantly, Dialogues, as works of broad relevance, are also distributed in print version.

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Introduction

Daniela Körppen & Beatrix Schmelzle

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,¹ 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*.

¹ 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).²

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 in this volume, 12).

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., 15). 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 “archetypes” (ibid., 30 ff.) 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., 15).

² Coordinated originally by Lara Olson and Mary Anderson, and more recently by Diana Chigas and Peter Woodrow from the CDA - Collaborative Learning Projects. See Anderson/Olson 2003; for recent reports and developments, consult www.cdainc.com [accessed 12 August 2008].

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 in this volume, 44).

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., 45): 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 in this volume, *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 in this volume, 47). 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 in this volume, 56). 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 multipartial, inclusive peace process. Is systemic conflict transformation really "apolitical" because it claims to include all interests and "cover all the bases" (Saravanamuttu in this volume, 66)? 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., 67).

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 in this volume, 73). 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., 78).

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 in this volume, 86). 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, or 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
Daniela Körppen & Beatrix Schmelzle

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[All accessed 12 August 2008.]

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

Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on the Conflict and Peace Process in Sri Lanka

Norbert Ropers

*“The peacebuilder must have one foot in what is and
one foot beyond what exists”*

John Paul Lederach: The Moral Imagination

1. Introduction*

In the last 15 years, concepts of conflict transformation have been increasingly applied to address the post-Cold War conflicts. They have become core concepts in the international discourses on “soft power” which thus far have been dominated by arms control, disarmament and détente policy issues (Nye 2005). Yet while they have enriched the spectrum of measures for responding to conflict, there is still a huge gap between the grim reality of declared and undeclared wars, of frozen, latent and protracted conflicts and what conflict transformation approaches have been capable of delivering.

Much work has been done to redress this gap and improve the effectiveness of nonviolent response to internal conflicts. There has been commendable work in the areas of developing sounder conflict analysis (including reflection on its theoretical underpinnings), reflecting on the overall effectiveness of peacebuilding measures (including the link between micro measures and macro impact) and enhancing impact assessment (Smith 2004; Anderson/Olson 2003). These discussions have revitalised an interest in discourses on social change and how it could inform conflict transformation (Bloomfield et al. 2006).

* I would like to thank my Berghof colleagues in Berlin and Colombo for inspiring discussions, critical feedback and revisions of the first drafts of this article, particularly Daniela Körppen, Beatrix Schmelzle and Oliver Wils. I also would like to express my great gratitude to Cordula Reimann, Clem McCartney, Peter Woodrow, Ljubjana Wüstehube and Stephanie Schell-Faucon who have greatly influenced my emerging systemic thinking on conflict transformation. Thanks are also due to Mihiri Weerasinghe for helping to compile *Table 1*.

The majority of efforts focused on the complementarity of different levels of intervention (multi-track), the timing of interventions (multi-step), the interdependence of issues (multi-issue) – and particularly the interaction of peace-related interventions with other issue areas like relief and development, human rights and constitutional reform.¹

It is in this context that concepts of systemic conflict resolution and “Systemic Conflict Transformation” (SCT) can be particularly useful. They are nothing exceptionally new – systemic approaches have been used for conceptualising political systems and conflicts for some time (Deutsch 1963). In most cases, though, only selected elements of systemic thinking were applied and primarily used in analyzing the “intractability” of conflicts. Less thought was given to systemic ideas of how to resolve or transform them. This is now beginning to change (Coleman et al. 2006).

Systemic thinking encompasses a broad spectrum of theories, principles, methods and techniques which are all rooted in the simple observation that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. In the present article, “SCT” refers to the application of systemic thinking to basic challenges in conflict transformation, and a reflection of field practice from a systemic perspective. The goal is to explore, based on concrete practical experiences, how systemic thinking can help to make the transformation of internal conflicts more effective.

The inspiration to do so first arose in the context of a comprehensive programme of peace support in Sri Lanka. While this specific elaboration of SCT was very much inspired by insights from this one particular case, the concept is presented here with the aim of contributing to a better theoretical understanding and more effective practice of conflict transformation in general.

Three sets of observations inform this article:

- A *systemic analysis* offered important additional tools for a deeper understanding of the intractability of the Sri Lankan conflict. By starting from solutions rather than causes, this analysis brought to light new creative options.
- A *systemic perspective* offered a set of theory-guided explanations for the difficulties facing the Sri Lankan peace process from 2002 to 2007. These explanations, if generalised, offer exciting new hypotheses for effectively supporting peace processes.
- A *systemic framework* enriched the interpretation of various basic principles of conflict intervention and provided insights into their mutual interaction.

In the following section, I start with a brief summary of “systemic themes”, which were found to be particularly relevant for conflict analysis and transformation, and provide definitions of basic terms. The main focus is then on two topics: the added value of systemic approaches for *conflict analysis* (Section 3) and the utility of systemic approaches for *understanding, designing and organising peace processes* (Section 4). The article concludes with a summary of interim propositions and a series of open questions.

SCT is an emerging field of scholarly research and practice. My aim with this article is to encourage broad discussion and research on the potential, strengths and weaknesses of SCT for guiding and explaining the trajectory of peace processes. I believe that we are only at the very beginning of utilising the potential of SCT and, therefore, am looking forward to the wealth of critical responses and additional ideas that this dialogue will provide.

¹ Some key contributions to these discourses are: Diamond/McDonald 1996; Fisher/Keashley 1991; Kriesberg/Thorson 1991; Reyhler 1999; Ricligiano 2003; CDA 2004.

2. Systemic Thinking about Conflict Transformation: Themes and Ideas

This section looks at themes and principles of systemic thinking. It does not present a comprehensive *tour d'horizon* of systemic approaches, nor does it present a finalised set of principles of systemic conflict transformation. Rather, it lays out the basic concepts found useful for conflict analysis and transformation in Sri Lanka, which will be revisited in more detail in *Sections 3 and 4*.

I use the term “systemic approaches” in this article to comprise all endeavours in theory and practice which make use of “systemic thinking” (*see Box 1*).

2.1 A Short History of Systemic Thinking

Systemic thinking is rooted in a wide current of theories and practices which can be interpreted as a reaction to the early modern tendency of atomising, separating and de-constructing with the aim of controlling the course of events. The first contributions to systems *theory* were guided by the insight that such reductionism risked losing key features of the “whole”, which was more than the sum of its parts, and inspired by the wish to overcome the ensuing fragmentation of the natural and social sciences in order to jointly serve the “human condition”.

Box 1: Characteristics of “Systemic Thinking”

- *Thinking in network structures*: Mapping patterns of feedback loops, e.g. the solution to a problem for one party (arming itself in an environment perceived as insecure) is the problem for the other one (perceived security threat) which leads to reinforcing the first problem (i.e. the famous “security dilemma”).
- *Thinking in dynamic frames*: Integrating time delays (e.g. counter-armament happens only later) and understanding that causes and effects in social systems do not follow a simple linear logic but are connected in a rather complex way and can be separated substantially by distance and time. This draws attention to the fact that human beings can be driven by grievances and traumas caused a long time ago, and that small catalytic events can cause profound changes in systems.
- *Thinking in (mental) models yet acknowledging perspective-dependency*: Accepting that all analytical models are a reduction of the complex reality (and are necessarily perspective-dependent) and are therefore only ever a tool and not “the reality” as such.
- *Concentrating on human beings and their learning processes*: Respecting the human beings within the system as the core reference point. Focusing on individual and collective learning processes and problem-solving skills to understand and influence the system dynamics.

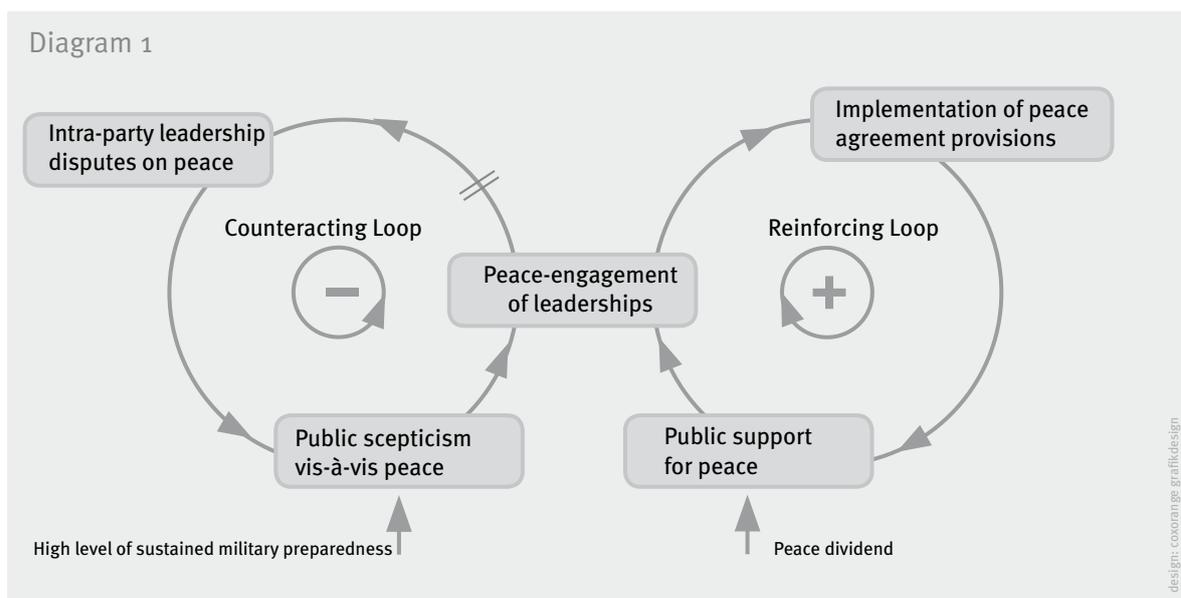
(Source: based on Ossimitz 1998)

The idea of developing a general systems theory motivated a large group of scholars from the 1950s to the 1980s. So far, however, no generally accepted theoretical framework has been developed. Instead, several strands have emerged. Some focused on the complex interaction between different factors in specific areas (i.e. systemic thinking in a narrow sense). Others explored the conditions in which mental processes concerning these interactions lead to knowledge, reasoning and judging (now primarily defined as “constructivism”). In its most radical form, the

two strands are merged to imply that there is no “reality” as such, but only constructs of reality (which has implications for the interaction between different “realities”). For the purposes of this article, a pragmatic approach has been chosen which accepts two basic assumptions of applied systemic thinking, namely that (1) all statements have to be seen in the social context of the persons making them, and that (2) explanations for social phenomena are most often complex and of circular character.

Since its inception, the theoretical systems discourse has taken place both in meta-disciplines, as in complexity sciences or cybernetics, and in single disciplines, for example biology, engineering or the social sciences (with famous proponents such as David Easton, Anatol Rapoport and Niklas Luhmann). The impact of these contributions has been mixed. On the one hand, they have established continuous discourses of experts. On the other hand, only a few of them have had a spill-over effect that attracted larger audiences. Often they were described as being too abstract, or were criticised for their emphasis on system reproduction, in-built conservatism or perceived technocratic implications. Much more influential are the systemic approaches which were developed in the context of applied (social) sciences, for example in technological, business and organisational management and in psychotherapy (Forrester 1968; Senge 1990; Boscolo et al. 1987; De Shazer 1988; Retzer 2006).

Of particular influence was the approach of “system dynamics”, first developed in the 1960s by the management and engineering expert Jay W. Forrester (1968).² It can be seen as a



specific methodology to understand, and simulate, the behaviour of complex systems over time. It makes use of diagramming interactions within systems in the form of interconnected feedback loops and time delays, emphasising the fact that the growth of one factor in a system rarely develops in a linear way *ad infinitum*. More often, this growth is “balanced” or “controlled” by other factors. In the following, this is illustrated with an ideal-typical example of two extremely simplified factors influencing the sustainability of peace processes (see *Diagram 1*).

² I use the term “system dynamics” in this article, building on but also expanding Forrester’s concept.



At the centre of the diagram is the level of support for a pro-active peace policy by the involved leaderships of two conflict parties. This support level is influenced by two loops, one reinforcing and one counteracting (or “balancing”), which makes it highly unlikely that it will grow in any unilinear way. In other words, peace processes under the influence of these two loops tend to be highly fragile or are in permanent danger of eventually breaking down.

The positive reinforcement loop³ on the right indicates that the stronger this support, the more likely it is that peace agreement provisions will be implemented, and that this will then enhance public support for the future peace process. This effect can additionally be nurtured if a peace dividend is generated for the constituencies of both parties.

The negative reinforcement loop on the left (also called counteracting or balancing) indicates factors which work against a sustained pro-active peace engagement of the leaderships. The first of these factors is the fact that in most protracted conflicts there are differences *within* the parties about the policies to be pursued vis-à-vis “the enemy”. The implication of a serious peace effort is that opponents of this policy will be tempted to work against it as part of their strategy in the internal power struggle (in Sri Lanka often described as “ethnic outbidding”). In the diagram, the double stroke indicates that it might take some time before this strategy is pursued because it might not be opportune for the affected parties to express their opposition at a time of peace euphoria. But when it is expressed with whatever arguments (e.g. an imbalanced peace dividend for the parties), it can reduce public support for a sustained peace engagement.

In most cases peace processes will be influenced by many more factors, but this basic diagram illustrates that also in most cases it is too simple to envision peace efforts as linear processes in which “more of the same”, i.e. consecutive and courageous initiatives of two determined conflict parties, will lead to sustained de-escalation. This is one of the most substantive arguments of system dynamics: Because of the complexity of causal interactions, of time delays and various in-built resistances, systems do not function in the way a linear expectation of “the more the better” would assume.

This simple model can be complemented with other variables, whose weight and causal interactions can also be qualified and then exposed to simulation exercises. Obviously, the results of such simulations depend on the variables used, the model structure and the causal assumptions. This is why critics of system dynamics have argued that the models might produce exactly the results one wants to see. This can be the case, but it is not an argument against the method as such because it is always possible to compare the assumptions of alternative models, and elaborate various more accurate and fine-tuned models (*see Box 2*).

As outlined above, one of the main benefits of this approach is that it offers a practical tool to understand and explain non-linear developments and complex social and political change.⁴ The advantages are twofold: such an approach can explain how protracted conflicts develop their “intractability” over time through a set of reinforcing loops, and it can help explain why peace processes have an in-built tendency to be fragile and ambivalent. Conflict transformation can, in this context, 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.

³ Which loops are described as “reinforcing” and which as “counteracting” is a matter of definition and depends on the perspective of the researcher. In this case, the focus is on the reinforcement of pro-peace attitudes and behaviour.

⁴ Complexity in this context does not mean “detail complexity” (i.e. the existence of many variables), but “dynamic complexity”, drawing attention to the fact that causes and effects may not be closely connected and that reinforcing and counteracting loops co-exist and interact with each other.

Box 2: Basic Steps of Conflict Analysis using a System Dynamics Approach

- Defining the *boundaries* of the system. It is important to reflect on the main variables which have an impact on the particular area under study, e.g. the peace process in a crisis region. The world outside this area is framed as *environment* which influences the system through certain parameters.
- Identifying *key issues*, the “*flows*” and *time delays* between them and the way in which they affect the “stock levels” of issues. In a next step, information on these factors is collected to determine their reliability and validity.
- Conceptualising the main *feedback loops* (patterns of interaction with a strong dynamism of their own) and other causal loops in a comprehensive “architecture” – and drawing an adequate diagram or simulating it in a computer model.
- Discussing and reflecting the *composite causal interaction* as a starting point for identifying entry points for intervention.

2.2 Applying Systemic Thinking to Conflict Analysis and Transformation

An application of systemic approaches to understand conflicts and to conceptualise interventions can be found in several contributions to conflict resolution in the 1980s and 1990s. But in most of these cases, only a few elements were used and sometimes the differentiation between “systemic” and “systematic” – in the sense of holistic and comprehensive efforts for interventions – became blurred. Also, the main focus was on making use of systemic insights for the *analysis* of conflicts.

One of the early exceptions was John Burton, an influential scholar of conflict resolution since the 1960s (Ramsbotham et al. 2005, 43-47). Influenced by general systems theory, he emphasised that to address protracted conflicts, not only “first-order learning”, i.e. learning *within* a given order, was necessary, but also “second-order learning”, i.e. learning which questions the values, principles and structures of this order (Burton/Dukes 1990).⁵ Another exception is the concept of *multi-track diplomacy* developed by John McDonald and Louise Diamond (Diamond/McDonald 1996). It emphasises that to transform protracted conflicts it is crucial to address them on several “tracks” of engagement at the same time and to ensure either their complementarity, or to strategise how difficulties on one track can be balanced by activities on other tracks.

Peter Coleman was one of the first authors to introduce explicitly what he calls a “dynamical systems” approach to *address* protracted conflicts in a comprehensive way (Vallacher et al. 2006; Coleman et al. 2006). He argues that the key goal of conflict intervention should not be to foster one particular *outcome* (e.g. a peace agreement or a strong peace constituency), but to alter the overall *patterns of interaction* of the parties. Only such changes in interactive patterns could ensure that social change becomes sustainable (Coleman 2006, 2004, 2003).⁶

A promising contribution to further develop the potential of SCT, particularly in the field of assessing and evaluating peace-promoting interventions, is currently being undertaken by the US-based organisation CDA within their “Reflecting on Peace Practice” project (Woodrow 2006).

⁵ Unfortunately, the “problem-solving approach” which he helped establish was later primarily interpreted as a tool for linear conceptions of social change (Coleman et al. 2006, 62).

⁶ Coleman also argues strongly in favour of developing a “Meta-Framework” to respond to protracted conflicts and elaborating a “Dynamical Systems Theory” (DST).

████████████████████

Their entry point is to use systemic conflict analyses to identify promising strategic variables for conflict transformation.

Finally, a further recent initiative to explore the potential of systemic thinking was undertaken by a team from the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (Wils et al. 2006). Their report focused less on using system dynamics for analytical purposes, and more on outlining key elements for applying systemic thinking to designing and implementing peaceful interventions. The identified elements were organised in five clusters:

- Systemic Conflict Analysis and Monitoring
- Strategic Planning of Systemic Interventions
- Engagement with Key Stakeholders
- Mobilisation of Agents of Peaceful Change
- Creativity in Imagining Alternative Peaceful Futures

In the following sections, I now want to focus on several aspects of SCT which turned out to be most useful in reflecting and guiding peacebuilding work in the case of Sri Lanka: developing more systemic conflict analysis scenarios (*Section 3*), and using systemic thinking to analyse and support peace processes (*Section 4*).

3. Developing a More Systemic Conflict Analysis: The Example of Sri Lanka

Conflict analysis is the starting point for most efforts in conflict transformation. In the academic literature as well as in practice-orientated methodology there is now a wealth of concepts and tools which try to systematise the understanding of conflicts and facilitate constructive responses (Wehr 1979; Ramsbotham et al. 2005, 74; Leonhardt 2001).

The Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation (RNCST) in Sri Lanka (*see Background Box A*) started its work based on careful analysis of four aspects which feature in nearly all comprehensive conventional conflict analysis:

- 1) Who are the conflict *parties* (and stakeholders), what characterises them and what are the relationships among them?
- 2) What are the conflict *issues* (with respect to the positions, interests, values and needs of the parties)?
- 3) What is the *history* of the conflict and to what extent can its features explain the genesis and dynamics of hostilities?
- 4) What are the *structural and contextual features* which influence the conflict and determine its dynamics?

With hindsight, two additional aspects emerged as important and thought-provoking factors during the course of the RNCST:

- 5) What is the *parties' understanding* of the conflict and what are their needs for conflict resolution?
- 6) How can various *conflict resolution preferences and options* be framed in a way that supports constructive transformation of the conflict?

Background – *Box A: The Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation (RNCST) in Sri Lanka*

The Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation (RNCST) was launched in 2001 with the conventional goal of strengthening peace constituencies in Sri Lanka through engagement with civil society partners. After a brief phase of confidence-building, the commencement of peace negotiations between the government and the LTTE and the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 2002 provided the opportunity to focus on direct engagement with major political stakeholders and address almost all the key issues of the peace process.

RNCST's mission is to create an inclusive, broad-based critical mass of organisations and individuals who are empowered to play an active, informed and influential role in the Sri Lankan peace process. It works to enhance and develop local conflict transformation capacities, as well as to strengthen interaction and cooperation among local actors and institutions.

The aims are three-fold:

- 1) to help transform the mindsets and attitudes that impede the political will for change among leaders and decision-makers from all key stakeholder groups
- 2) to promote strategic and long-term visions of the peace process, principled negotiation practices and a future of peaceful coexistence
- 3) to support the institutionalisation, professionalisation and capacity-building of local organisations and individuals engaged in promoting peace

The work concentrates primarily on three thematic areas:

- the support of peace initiatives through providing opportunities for dialogue and broadening the knowledge base for creative and inclusive negotiations
- institutional and personal capacity-building in the areas of constitutional reform, power-sharing and federalism
- institutional and personal capacity-building in collaboration with organisations close to all principal stakeholders

Over the years, three guiding principles of engagement have evolved as most helpful in guiding this work: “multipartiality”, “critical-constructive engagement” and envisioning “multiple peaceful futures” (*see Section 4.2*).

The project is implemented by the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS) and co-funded by the Swiss and German Governments. For more detailed information about RNCST, see www.berghof-foundation.lk.

All of the aspects mentioned above are important to achieve a sufficient understanding for any kind of intervention. The first four are crucial irrespective of whether one attempts a systemic or non-systemic analysis, but I argue that for sustainable conflict transformation it is essential to have good tools for the fourth, fifth and sixth aspects in particular. And it is in this respect that systemic approaches can substantially deepen analysis and offer a different, enriching perspective.

An important point with respect to conflict analysis is *who* are the persons or institutions doing it, which is also – as pointed out before – an essential aspect of systemic thinking. While most conflict analyses used to be prepared by more or less detached “outsiders” striving for “objectivity”, conflict analysis methodology is now also used to help conflict parties to engage with each other and find common ground in joint efforts of analysis. This makes analyses rather contentious, hence the need to have the fifth category as a fundamental dimension of any proper understanding of conflicts.

The concept of “mental models” can be seen as a focal point of this added dimension of systemic analysis (*see below, Section 3.1 (3), (4) and (5)*). It is generally used quite broadly, capturing how an individual or a group makes sense of its environment. For the purpose of this article, it is useful to narrow it down to encompass only those interpretations and beliefs which motivate and drive actors to prefer certain courses of action, e.g. “we have to defend the unitary character of our state because otherwise there is the danger that our country will be divided” or “we need a significant political autonomy for our homeland because otherwise we will continue to suffer discrimination as second-class citizens in this country”. Drawing on *Section 2, Box 2* above, it also becomes obvious that in any conflict analysis (and conflict transformation effort), different sets of mental models will need to be taken into account (and dealt with constructively).

In the remaining part of this section, widely used instruments for analysis will be discussed with respect to their value for conflict intervention planning and assessment. Specific emphasis is placed on systemic tools and their usefulness or added value. Basic elements of the Sri Lankan conflict, summarised along the six dimensions introduced above, are presented in *Background Box B* for the reader less familiar with this particular conflict (*see also* Goodhand et al. 2005; Rupesinghe 2006; Richardson 2005).

Background – Box B: Key Elements of the Sri Lankan Conflict

(1) Who are the parties?

The main conflicting parties are the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL), or rather the parties forming the government, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and all other political parties and movements who define themselves as stakeholders in the conflict. The Muslim parties, as the third group with a distinct ethnopolitical (and not only religious) identity, should be mentioned in particular here.

Overall, Sri Lanka is multiethnic in character, comprising a Sinhala majority of nearly 75% and three substantive minorities (Sri Lankan Tamils, Muslims, Indian-origin Tamils) that form regional majorities in different parts of the country (e.g. 68% Tamils in the Northeastern Province).

The main conflict parties are strongly marked by their ethnopolitical identities. These identity concepts are the result of the two competing projects of Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism, which have made it difficult to embrace a unifying Sri Lankan civic identity. They are also influenced by the proximity of India, particularly the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu with 62 million inhabitants, i.e. three times the population of Sri Lanka (leading to the often quoted statement that the Sinhalese are a “majority with a minority complex” and the Tamils a “minority with a majority complex”). Muslims and Indian-origin Tamils have their own ethnopolitical identities, but the parties which primarily represent them have not been directly involved in the military conflict.

(2) What are the issues?

The key conflict issues are the recognition of the Tamils (and the Muslims) as ethnonational communities in their own right and their access to state power and territory, as in most “protracted ethnopolitical conflicts” (Azar 1990). Because of the decades-long conflict – with its marginalisation, confrontational politics, militarisation and violence – there are now also several other issues, such as the acknowledgement of actors as “legitimate representatives”

of their constituencies (e.g. the LTTE), security, humanitarian standards, human rights, social and retributive justice and development. The parties have different positions and interests on all these aspects.

(3) What are the historical dimensions of the conflict?

The conflict cannot be understood without taking into account the colonial history of disempowerment (“divide and rule”), of Christian missionary campaigns, and a plantation-driven political economy and its implications for the formation of competing socio-political and ethnopolitical groups, particularly the politicisation of Buddhism.

The establishment of the post-colonial state, from 1948 onwards, was rooted in the liberal Westminster tradition and led to a *de facto* Sinhalese hegemony, consolidated further in the (Republican) constitution of 1972 and the (Presidential) constitution of 1978. The Tamils were not invited to become a co-constituting state community, but were only accepted as a co-habiting community.

During two decades of war (since 1983), the conflict penetrated the social fabric of the entire society: more than 70,000 people died, many more were left maimed or lost close relatives, and hundreds of thousands were forced to seek refuge outside of the battle zones or abroad. A host of grievances was created among all communities and the country separated into the war-devastated Northeast and the rest of the country trying to pursue “normalcy”. At the end of the third “Eelam war” in 2001, the LTTE had managed to take over *de facto* control of more than 60% of the territory they claim as “Tamil homeland” in the Northeast (which means that in this territory there is a dual administrative structure: all security-related activities are under LTTE control, while substantive parts of the civilian administrative structure are still (formally) run (and financed) by the government of Sri Lanka). In 2006/7 the East was re-conquered by the government, which has confined the dual structure to the North for the time being.

(4) What are the structural and contextual factors?

Numerous overlapping processes shaped the emergence and escalation of the conflict: development failures, deprivation of marginalised communities in the Northeast and South, majoritarian politics and structures of governance, exclusion of non-Sinhalese communities from participating in and getting services from state institutions, appeals to ethnicity and religion for the sake of electoral mobilisation, mob violence, state-sanctioned violence and the rise of anti-state militant movements, particularly in the form of the LTTE and their use of terrorist methods.

There is relatively broad consensus in the historical and social scientific discourse on key factors and turning-points, such as the “Sinhala Only Act” from 1956 (which established Sinhala as the single official language), the constitutions of 1972 and 1978 (which gave prominence to Buddhism and established the “Unitary State” respectively) and various waves of anti-Tamil riots culminating in those of July 1983 after the LTTE attack on a group of soldiers in Jaffna. Differences in opinion relate to the early history (who has which legitimate claims on the “ownership” of the island?), the role of religion and the responsibility of the governments of the day for the various outbreaks of mob violence.

(5) How do the parties interpret the conflict?

Far less consensual than the scholarly discourse are the interpretations which have captured the imagination of the general public and which are shaped by the opinion makers of different societal and political groupings in the country. Some would even question the notion

of “conflict” in the Sri Lankan case, arguing that the core issue is one of terrorism by a “fascist organisation” (the LTTE) and not one of more or less legitimate claims by two or more groups.

Two dominant, opposing discourses can be identified (Frerks/Klem 2004). They have been developed over decades by the ruling political and intellectual classes and are now part of the collective conscience and focal points for the media:

- The primary discourse among Sinhala Buddhists would argue that it is the historic mission of Sinhala Buddhism to preserve the character of the island (based on the Mahavamsa chronicles) and redress the grievances of the Sinhalese people (firstly because of their unfair treatment by the British colonialists and now because of the “terrorism of the LTTE”).
- The primary Tamil discourse centres on neo-colonialism, state terrorism and the claim for a “homeland” in the Northeast. This discourse is in itself bifurcated between the supporters and sympathisers of the LTTE and their Tamil opponents who question the LTTE’s claim to be the “sole” or “authentic” representative of the Tamil people.

(6) How can conflict resolution options be framed?

The polarisation of discourses about the conflict has also led to a polarisation of the ways in which the parties envision a solution to the conflict. While the primarily Sinhala mainstream parties in the South emphasise the need to prevent any division of the island and want to preserve the “unitary” character of the state or at least ensure a “united” Sri Lanka with moderate levels of power-sharing, the majority of the Tamil parties argue for genuine power-sharing in the form of asymmetric federalism or secession. The other minority parties take positions in between, but also plead for some kind of substantive power-sharing arrangement. The gap between the two positions has widened during the course of the conflict and is increasingly framed as a win-lose scenario.

3.1 Tools for Conflict Analysis and their Use in Planning Intervention

(1) Tools for Identifying Parties and their Relationships

Two of the most widely used tools for identifying parties and stakeholders are (a) the listing of “primary, secondary and tertiary parties” (Wehr 2006) and (b) the drawing of a “conflict map” (Fisher et al. 2000). Both tools are not “systemic” *per se*, but are necessary to lay the ground for a systemic analysis.

The categorisation of parties as primary, secondary and tertiary reflects how close various actors are to the conflict and how they are affected by its transformation. It also brings into view the external actors involved. To identify the relevant actors, it is first necessary to qualify the conflict “system” in which they operate. The main Sri Lankan conflict can in this respect be differentiated into a military, an ethnopolitical and an ethno-societal (sub-)system (*see Table 1*).

The agencies, groups and entities mentioned in the boxes of this matrix serve merely as examples to demonstrate the multiplicity of actors who have to be taken into account. Some of them play a role on several sides, and there is obviously a big difference between sectors as well as organisations on the one hand and individuals on the other. Nevertheless, this exercise indicates that conflicts permeate different systems of interaction.

The key shortcoming of this tool is that it says little about the weight of actors in the conflict system (apart from the three “systems” they constitute) and nothing about their relationship

Table 1: Actors within the Three Conflict (Sub-)Systems in Sri Lanka

| | Primary Parties ⁷ | Secondary Parties | Tertiary Parties |
|--------------------------|--|--|--|
| Military Conflict | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GoSL SLAF • LTTE Military • Karuna Faction • Paramilitary forces | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected populations • Media • Intelligence agencies from India, Pakistan and USA • Diaspora organisations • Arms-dealing countries and organisations • States providing military training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) • India • UN • INGOs • Individual eminent person/s • Diplomatic community • Strategic analysis institutions |
| Ethno-political Conflict | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GoSL • LTTE • All political parties | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected populations • Media • Front organisations of all political parties • Diaspora organisations • Business community & external investors • Religious organisations • Civil society organisations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norway as facilitator • Co-Chairs • India (GoI) & Tamil Nadu • UN • International financial institutions • Diplomatic and donor community • INGOs • Individual eminent person/s |
| Ethno-societal Conflict | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All ethnic groups in Sri Lanka; Sinhala, Tamil, Muslims, Indian-origin Tamils, Burgers, others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational institutions • Law enforcement institutions • Media • Cultural organisations • Religious organisations • Civil society organisations • Diaspora organisations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • Clergy • Journalists • Intermediary organisations • Community-based organisations/ discussion groups • Women’s groups |

⁷ As Wehr points out, parties in a conflict differ in the directness of their involvement and the importance of its outcome for them: “Primary parties are those who oppose one another, are using fighting behavior, and have a direct stake in the outcome of the conflict. Secondary parties have an indirect stake in the outcome. They are often allies or sympathisers with primary parties but are not direct adversaries. Third parties are actors such as mediators and peacekeeping forces which might intervene to facilitate resolution.” (Wehr, 2006, available at [www.beyondintractability.org/essay/conflict_mapping/.](http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/conflict_mapping/))

with each other. The “mapping” method was therefore introduced for this purpose. Conflict mapping is done in a similar way to a geographic map. The map visualises the actors, their “power” within the overall conflict system and their relationship with each other in order to gain a “bird’s eye view” of the interactions. The layout of such a map obviously depends on who prepares it, and from which point of view. It can therefore easily represent a partisan view, but it can also be used as a tool to give different party representatives an opportunity to “negotiate” a fair picture of the actors’ landscape.

Ideally, the two tools should be combined because the mapping approach tends to marginalise the secondary and tertiary actors. But this has rarely been done – even though the latter parties are often those with whom moderate forces can engage more easily and who can help to overcome the polarising dynamism of most conflicts. An unresolved challenge for practice-guiding conflict analyses is how to integrate these secondary and tertiary parties into a relationship- and interaction-focused approach without overstressing the complexity of the mapping method. For this purpose, it seems promising to envision conflicts as concentric circles of overlapping systems and to adapt the tools accordingly.

(2) A Comprehensive Tool for Qualifying Conflict Issues

The next step is to elaborate in more detail the contentious issues at stake. One way of doing this is to list all issues (horizontally), e.g. governance, security, development, etc. It is also necessary to reflect on the (vertically depicted) “depth” of the positions/interests/needs and fears of the parties with respect to these issues.

One specific method is to differentiate the parties’ manifestations with respect to interests, values, facts, relationships and needs. *Table 2* uses this scheme to summarise basic differences between (ideal-type) Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist perspectives on governance issues (Reimann 2002). In the perception of the conflict protagonists, these manifestations are often so closely linked that they appear as one “mental model” in which the different elements support and reinforce each other. An example of this are the manifestations captured below which could also be interpreted – according to the level on which they coincide – as the “depth” of the respective mental models. But this tool does not only offer insight into the self-reinforcing character of these manifestations, it can also be used as an entry point for a critical engagement with the conflict parties because some of the categories (like fact- and relationship-based statements) lend themselves more easily to exploring common ground than others (like value-based convictions).

The advantages of issue-centred tools are that they help to clarify the essence of conflicts and can support the parties in reaching a common understanding of where exactly the differences (as well as commonalities) lie. They encourage the recognition and mutual understanding of different perceptions and can facilitate the exploration of deeper-rooted manifestations of needs and fears.

(3) Historiographies of Conflict

In the scholarly literature, the historical approach to conflict analysis is the most prominent one. It details the specifics of the conflict history and offers the most comprehensive explanations for complex and unique developments. In order to understand conflict, many refer to historical case-analyses and try to identify the “root” and “proxy” causes. There are fewer comparative studies which make use of a similar set of tools to analyse the dynamics of conflict development across cases. Promising in this respect are models of escalation (e.g. Glasl 2002; Keashly/Fisher 1991) and recent studies that attempt to link processes of escalation and de-escalation more systematically (Dudouet 2006; Mitchell 1999).

Table 2: Perspectives of Main Parties on Governance Issues in Sri Lanka

| Issues | Sinhalese “Mainstream” Conflict Parties | Tamil “Mainstream” Conflict Parties |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Interest-based | Competition over limited resources; land, natural resources (oil, deep sea minerals, harbours), education, employment, trade/economy, foreign aid | |
| Value-based | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sovereignty • Territorial integrity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy • “Homeland” • Self-determination |
| “Fact-based” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original settlers • Descendants of Vijaya • Only Theravada Buddhist country, thus custodian of Theravada Buddhism • Whole island was united under Sinhala kings • East part of Kandyan Kingdom | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Original settlers • Descendants of Mohenjadaró and Harappa civilisation of India • Independent kingdoms in North and East |
| Relationship-based | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Tamils are a majority in the Indian subcontinent.” • “Giving Tamils a part of Sri Lanka will never satisfy them, they will look for ways in which they could get the whole country.” • “Sinhalese will have nowhere to go.” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sinhalese are the dominant numerical majority.” • “Sinhalese will always discriminate against Tamils.” • “Tamils can’t expect the Sinhalese to understand Tamil grievances.” • “Sinhalese cannot be trusted to devolve power.” |
| Needs-based | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language: Sinhala predominant • Religion: Buddhism given supremacy • Identity: Sinhala Buddhist, pure identity, retain identity supremacy, promote and protect Buddhism, security, ability to reach potential. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language: Tamil to be used in predominant Tamil areas. • Religion: Hinduism • Identity: Tamil Hindu, pure identity, self-determination, is a part of the decision-making process, have equal rights, security, cultural freedom, and ability to reach potential. |

For many practitioners, however, as well as for a “systemic thinker”, the search for “causes” is problematic because it provokes arguments about who to blame (which can easily re-fuel the conflict) and because it risks missing the interdependencies driving the conflict. Yet for those involved in conflict, the acknowledgement of “their” history (and suffering) is in most cases an important precondition for any sustainable peace process.

It therefore seems crucial to emphasise that all “histories” are “mental models” (i.e. re-constructions of historical developments). While it might be useful for a detached observer to use the historical approach to understand the conflict, for the primary and secondary conflict parties this becomes more difficult the closer the “causes” are linked to the contentious issues. From a systemic perspective, the history of the conflict should rather be addressed through the (historical) narratives of the parties (*see below, (5)*).

(4) Conflict Analysis from a System Dynamics Perspective

The methodology of system dynamics was made use of relatively late, even though it offered a convincing explanation for intractability (i.e. the multiple and amplifying effects of diverse conflict dynamics on escalation). One of the first authors who did apply this model to analyse the emergence of the Sri Lankan conflict between 1948 and 1988 was John Richardson, in his monumental work *Paradise Poisoned* (2005).

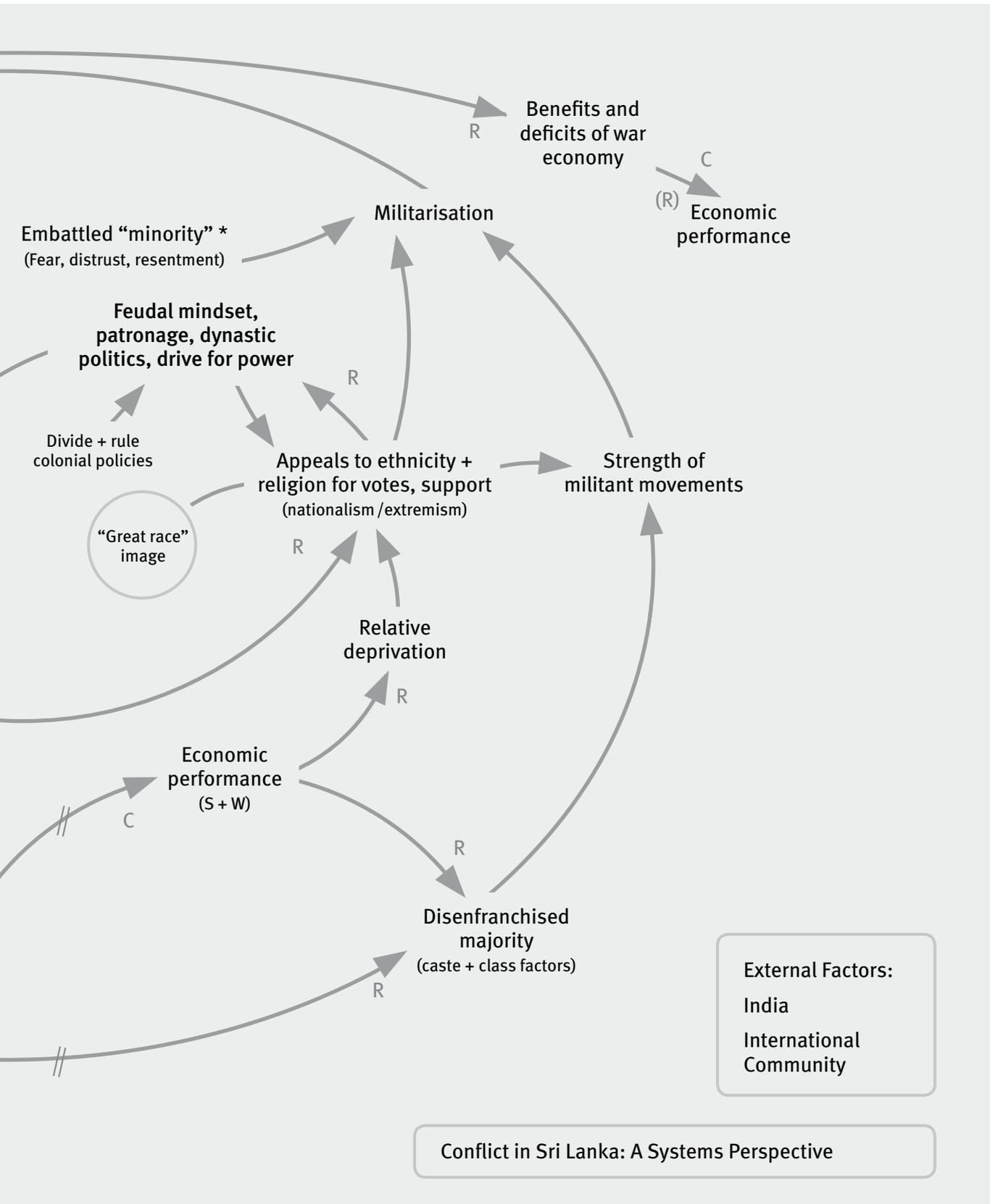
Inspired by this work, the RNCST team also used the system dynamics approach to identify key driving forces of the Sri Lankan conflict. Under the guidance of Peter Woodrow they came up with a diagram which is slightly simplified and expanded here (*see Diagram 2*).⁸

The diagram uses reinforcing and counteracting feedback loops (*see Section 2*) to identify the pattern responsible for the intensity of violence in this specific protracted conflict. The centre box contains the key driving factors of several loops on both sides of the divide between the Sinhalese and Tamil society and polity: majoritarian politics and structures, exclusion of communities, inequitable development schemes and the centralisation of power and administration. As mentioned above, the variables within this diagram, as well as its ‘architecture’ or ‘landscape’ and the identification of the key driving factors, are open for debate. Such debate indeed arose in the multiethnic team working on it.

This type of systemic analysis was one of the main discoveries and learning moments within the RNCST. At the beginning of the project, the guiding notion of “protracted social conflicts” (Azar 1990; Ramsbotham et al. 2005, 3-54) had already focused attention on the main need to support processes of democratisation, state reform and respect for human rights. The systemic reflection drew attention to underlying causes and resistances and the need to find ways of addressing the mindsets connected with the dominant attitudes in polity and society.

The added value of this system dynamics analysis is not the listing of the driving factors as such. Those have been widely discussed in historical and socio-political studies. The advantage of this type of mapping is the detailed contextualisation and visualisation of linkages between these variables that fuel the conflict, e.g. the “embattled minority complexes”, relative deprivation on both sides as well as self-fuelling cycles of militarisation and feudal or secessionist mindsets.

⁸ Peter Woodrow visited Sri Lanka in August 2005 (together with Sue Williams) to assess the work of the RNCST in the context of a “Project Progress Report” and shared with the team insights from CDA’s “Reflecting on Peace Practice” project.



(5) Narratives on Conflict and Conflict Transformation and their Implications

As mentioned above, all parties have developed their own narratives, or “mental models”, of the conflict, as well as of options and possibilities of conflict resolution. These narratives and models have tremendous impact on the way parties communicate and interact with each other. They often develop a life of their own and are deeply ingrained in the attitudes and behaviour of the respective collectives, even though there is also a multiplicity of individual narratives at the same time.

In Sri Lanka, it can be observed that party representatives can more easily agree on key reasons or drivers of the conflict in the past than agree on proposals to resolve or transform the conflict in the future. Glasl (2002) calls this the “conflict about conflict resolution”.

The debate in Sri Lanka centres around two issues:

- (1) the possibilities and likelihood that the Sri Lankan state can be transformed from a centralised state into one accommodating the aspirations of the non-Sinhalese communities;
- (2) the possibilities and likelihood that the LTTE can be transformed from a primarily military outfit into a political movement respecting principles of democracy, pluralism and human rights.

While Sinhalese tend to be more optimistic about state reform and more sceptical about the LTTE’s transformation, there is a reverse assessment among many Tamils. Significant numbers of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims are, furthermore, sceptical about both perspectives. The result is that proposals for compromise solutions, for example the introduction of federal structures, provoke fears of being the first step to secession on the one side and fears of being annulled at the first possible opportunity following a shift in power on the other side; or worse, that both sides would just use them to improve their baselines for the next round of the conflict. Below, a tool is presented which has the potential to overcome the binary logic of these three sets of attitudes and fears.

(6) Framing Options for Conflict Transformation: Emphasising Solutions

One of the innovations of applied systemic thinking, particularly in organisational development and psychotherapy, is to approach problems in a solution-orientated way rather than starting by analysing its causes (Retzer 2006). By focusing too much on the problems, it is argued, interventions risk helping to reproduce the conflict system instead of mobilising resources for transforming it.

An interesting tool for looking at conflicts from this perspective is the “tetralemma”, which is used frequently in systemic constellation work (Varga von Kibed/Sparrer 2005). It is rooted in traditional Indian reasoning and was further elaborated by the influential Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (Kalupahana 2006). Different from the binary logic of the European tradition, the concept postulates that four alternative views exist on any controversial issue: Position A, position B, the affirmation of A and B (“both A and B”), and the negation of A as well as B (“neither A nor B”). Nagarjuna introduced a fifth position, called “none of this,... but also not this”, sometimes also called “double negation” (Murti 2006, 129-143). To illustrate the meaning of these categories, *Table 3* presents an application to the issues of state power and power-sharing in Sri Lanka.

Position A captures the (current) government’s position as well as that of the majority of Sinhala mainstream parties: only a sustained unitary state or a moderate version of devolution is an acceptable solution to the conflict. Position B is expressed by Tamil nationalist parties and particularly the LTTE: only a high level of (internal) self-determination or the creation of a separate state is acceptable. The majority of parties and actors who try to build a bridge between these two



positions (i.e. “Both A and B”) plead for a compromise in the form of a genuine power-sharing arrangement, e.g. a “federal structure within a united Sri Lanka”, which was the formula the GoSL and the LTTE agreed upon in their negotiations in December 2002 in Oslo. The fourth position (“Neither A nor B”) is adopted by some groups, particularly in civil society, who argue that the “real problems” are not connected to the issue of how to share power among the political elites of the country, but to the lack of democracy, good governance, effective development, etc.

The fifth position (“None of this, ... but also not this”) is not easy to understand. At the same time, it is exactly this position which captures a similarity between the Buddhist philosophy and systemic-constructivist thinking (Murti 2006; Varga von Kibed/Sparrer 2005). The key argument is that things derive their being and essence from mutual dependence (which is also one meaning of the loops in system dynamics). One consequence might be to avoid choosing any of the positions. Another might be to engage the parties in a different manner, which can either be in a “positive” way (e.g. the emphasis on other aspects of commonality) or a “negative” one (e.g. the most extreme one, going to war with each other). But the fifth position does not stop there. The second part of the sentence (“but also not this”) expresses that this is not meant as a final response, indicating that from here the path through the four other positions might start again.

| Table 3: The Tetralemma of the Conflict on State Power (and its Double Negation) | | |
|---|---|--|
| “None of this – but also not this” Avoid any of the solutions; emphasise other dimensions of mutual engagement; or go to war. | Position A Pro unitary state or moderate devolution only | Both A and B e.g. compromise (genuine power-sharing, federalism, etc.) |
| | Neither A nor B e.g. power-sharing is not the key issue, more important are genuine democracy, development, good local governance, etc. | Position B High level of autonomy or separate state |

The tetralemma’s enlightening analytic character (in its full understanding of the “tetralemma and its double negation”) 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.

3.2 The Added Value of Systemic Tools for Conflict Analysis

All efforts to analyse protracted conflicts face the challenge that they try to reduce the complexity of multiple interacting factors. Systemic approaches accept right from the start that all analyses are *per se* mental models which cannot be separated from the persons preparing them. They emphasise the need to make this as transparent as possible. The way the parties conceptualise the conflict is therefore at least as important as any sophisticated analysis by outsider-observers and has to be integrated in conflict analysis.

The first added value of the systemic approach to conflict transformation, though, is not that the different perspectives of parties are explicitly acknowledged and addressed in intervention efforts (this is by now standard operating procedure in mediation and conflict resolution work). The key point is that the third party has to reflect on its own analytical “constructions”, also with respect to its role in the “conflict system”, and has to find ways to integrate the different mental conflict models of all parties, including itself, into a potential “conflict transformation system”.

The second added value of using systemic tools, particularly in the tradition of system dynamics, is that it provides a convincing conceptualisation of the self-reproducing character of protracted conflicts. Instead of the traditional differentiation between “root” and “proxy” causes, the focus is on the interaction and interdependence of the variables and the main “loops” connecting them – which capture, in essence, the intractability of these conflicts.

The third added value relates to the emphasis systemic analyses put on addressing “solutions” alongside reflecting on “problems”. 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. This is easier said than done, particularly because peace processes are driven by factors belonging to the still dominant system as well as by the new forces of moderation, inclusion and transformation. How these ambivalent processes could be effectively analysed with insights from systemic thinking will be the topic of the next section.

4. Using Systematic Thinking to Analyse and Support Peace Processes: On Archetypes

In February 2002 the GoSL and the LTTE signed a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) and engaged in what some still (August 2007) call a “peace process” – notwithstanding the fact that the parties have been sliding towards an undeclared war since the second half of 2005. In this section, the main explanations for the failures of this process are interpreted from a systemic perspective. This interpretation introduces the concept of “archetypes” to the study of peace processes.

4.1 Archetypes of Fragile Peace Processes

“Archetypes” explain certain patterns of behaviour which recur time and again in a system, typically patterns which are perceived as “problems” that seem to appear without an apparent “rational” explanation. The “systems archetype” concept was popularised by Peter Senge and his team, who identified a series of recurrent patterns in management contexts, e.g. “limits to growth”, “shifting the burden” and “tragedy of the commons” (Senge 2005). They argue that identifying such archetypes is a useful diagnostic and prospective tool to alert managers (or in our

case conflict interveners) to the unintended consequences of actions which are initiated without sufficiently taking into account the complexity of factors influencing their impact (Braun 2002). The identification of “archetypes” cannot be a substitute for a detailed analysis of the factors which have contributed to derailing a specific peace process. Still, they can help to draw attention to patterns which time and again hamper the success of peace processes.

The impact of some archetypes can also be described as “resistances”, i.e. forces which prevent the actors in a system from adapting their behaviour according to proclaimed goals like promoting peace, justice, reconciliation and moderation. This concept was first developed in psychoanalysis to unravel the hidden dimensions and “secondary gains” at play when human beings seem to act “irrationally” (Freud S. 2005; Freud A. 1984; Mitscherlich 1963). In the context of social systems, it was also used to explain why collective learning is often confronted with a similar set of difficulties. Systemic thinking allows us to make more transparent some of the dynamics of such resistances.

The following seven “archetypes of fragile peace processes” are based on a systematic analysis of the main discourses in Sri Lanka regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the peace process from 2002 to 2005.⁹ While the first four archetypes follow a rather simple logic, the last three are more complex and are presented by way of asking questions rather than exploring answers.

(1) “Ethnic Outbidding”

The pattern of “ethnic outbidding” describes intra-party resistance fuelled by the political calculation that appealing to ethno-nationalistic sentiments will help the opposition to replace the government which is trying to embark upon a peace path. It has a long history in the Sri Lankan conflict and played a key role in the deterioration of the peace efforts between 2002 and 2005 (Goodhand et al. 2005; Rupesinghe 2006; Uyangoda 2007).

The implication of this archetype is that any sustainable peaceful settlement needs parallel efforts to accommodate intra-party resistances in one way or the other. A key insight from systemic thinking is that this factor is often underestimated, because its effects may only appear after a delay and can thus easily be sidelined by the dominant political attitude of “first things first”. A better strategy would build in intra-party accommodation right from the start of any peace process.

(2) “Mutual Disappointment”

Initiatives addressing protracted conflicts have to be initiated, implemented and sustained in an environment characterised by mistrust and scepticism, if not hostility, on both sides. First agreements, such as the CFA in Sri Lanka, are always documents of compromise, often made possible only because of creatively ambiguous wording. Therefore it is not surprising that the signatories interpret the agreement in different ways: For the GoSL, for example, the CFA was primarily a measure to end the war and to engage the LTTE in a political process, hoping that it could moderate its positions step by step. The LTTE, on the other hand, saw the CFA as recognition of its military might and the starting point for a “normalisation” of the life of the Tamil people, hoping to gain further legitimacy and power as their “authentic representative”.

During the following year, both sides found several of their expectations and hopes dashed. The GoSL was frustrated because, notwithstanding the CFA, the LTTE was blamed for being involved in the killing of informants and for showing no willingness to engage in any de-militarisation without political agreements. The LTTE was frustrated because the “normalisation” happened at a

⁹ It is still an open question how useful it is to classify these patterns as “archetypes” (leaving aside the question whether the term itself is not “tainted” because of its use by C.G. Jung). To answer this question, a broadly based comparative analysis of peace processes will be necessary. A better term might therefore be “emerging archetypes” (Woodrow 2006). Another question is whether these archetypes should be located on a level close to the observation of specific failures and fragility (which I have chosen to do in this article) or use more generic forces of interaction, like those deployed by Senge and his team (e.g. Stroh 2002).

much slower pace than expected and the GoSL seemed to be in no hurry to make any concessions regarding substantive co-administration of the Northeast.

Such mutual disappointments are normal in peace processes. What is needed, therefore, are mechanisms which help to identify them right from the start and deal with them in the same problem-solving manner that led to the agreement in the first place. To achieve this, the parties have to consider some kind of institutionalised structure, not only for monitoring the agreement's implementation, but also for addressing grievances and sorting out differences.

(3) “Avoiding Core Issues”

The archetype of “avoiding core issues” is based on the observation that it will be difficult to address the key contentious issues in the first place. Most conflict parties will therefore be tempted to shift them to later stages in the peace process. In Sri Lanka, it was explicitly agreed that first there should be a set of interim arrangements to prepare the ground for dealing with the “ultimate issues”. A closer analysis of the interim arrangements, however, shows that even within these mechanisms the dominant trend was to avoid addressing the core issues, which meant avoiding the key question about who should share power over what and with whom (Rainford/Satkunanathan 2008).

To address this archetype in an effective way, it may be helpful to make use of the analytical tool of the tetralemma (*see Section 3.2*). One of the reasons for avoiding core issues is the perception among parties that only a win-lose constellation is possible with respect to what they see as their inalienable preferences. The tetralemma logic works against this either-or perception and emphasises that the parties' preferences are just one dimension in a multidimensional setting. The parties are encouraged to look at processes which allow all possible solutions to be tested and to accept that “solutions” are never “final” but always steps in a process of accommodating different views.

(4) “Limits of Bilateralism”

One of the driving factors in many ethnopolitical conflicts is the fact that the peace process is shaped and dominated by two parties and that these two actors may have diametrically opposed views on how to solve the conflict. The pattern is not limited to the polarisation between two content-related positions; the archetype “limits of bilateralism” emphasises, furthermore, that the interaction between just two parties implies the general danger of a win-lose dynamism.

In Sri Lanka, where the dominant parties are the GoSL and the LTTE, this issue has been discussed primarily under the term “lack of inclusivity”, i.e. the lack of involving the non-negotiating parties into the peace process, namely the Muslim, Indian-origin Tamil and anti-LTTE parties. This exclusion, it was argued, hindered just and sustainable solutions. For principled and ethical reasons a predominantly bilateral peace process was therefore unacceptable. The archetype under discussion is based on a slightly different observation, namely the risk of prolonging a bipolar conflict into a bipolar peace. If the peace process is only shaped by the parties who have been the main drivers of the conflict, they are tempted to frame it simply in terms of achieving their aims with non-military instead of military means. The inclusion of one or more third parties enhances the likelihood that other perspectives are brought into the process, that cross-cutting alliances emerge and that the search for peaceful solutions is broadened (Ferdinands et al. 2004).

The conclusion need not be that in peace processes all stakeholders have to be assembled for all purposes around one big table. What is needed are intelligent combinations of various arrangements, tracks and layers of interaction which allow all of them to become co-owners of the process of transformation.

(5) “Dilemmas of Asymmetry”

A characteristic of most protracted conflicts is their asymmetric structure with respect to the status of the parties (e.g. internationally recognised state vs. non-state armed group or non-recognised entity), their powers, resources and means of warfare. When it comes to organising peace processes, two of the immediate challenges are: first, how to legitimise (and/or legalise) the participation of the non-state party in the process (after often having been proscribed as “terrorist outfits”); and second, how to define their status in the context of negotiations (Petrasek 2000; Ricigliano 2005; Rainford/Satkunanathan 2008).

The issue of status is closely linked to the question of legitimacy. For the LTTE, being acknowledged on the basis of parity of status was one of the pillars on which the peace process was built. Their goal was to gain more legitimacy in this process vis-à-vis their own constituency as well as with respect to the international community. For them, parity of status was not confined to the negotiation table but a basic feature which all the other actors should respect accordingly. The dilemma they faced, though, was that while they wanted to be acknowledged as an equal-status partner, they had difficulties giving up features of their militant struggle (e.g. with respect to the presumed killing of informants and other human rights violations). The GoSL, on the other hand, faced the dilemma that it wanted to engage the LTTE in substantive negotiations, yet was determined not to allow the recognition of the LTTE as a partner in the peace process to lead to a significant legitimisation in other contexts or in the international arena. Neither the LTTE nor the GoSL managed to find convincing answers to their dilemmas. Instead, in the end, the unresolved dilemmas undermined the legitimacy of the process itself.

For meaningful negotiations and interactions to take place, the parties therefore have to move towards some kind of parity of status. The issue of legitimacy should be used in a constructive way to address the two dilemmas mentioned. This could be done by explicitly addressing and dialoguing on the interests and implications connected with legitimacy. Finally, a more “legitimised status” cannot just be used for empowerment in the political struggle, but also as a means of insisting on accountability and respect for human rights and humanitarian standards.

(6) “Repercussions of Even-Handedness”

While the previous archetypes mainly relate to the behaviour of the conflict parties, “repercussions of even-handedness” focuses on the contribution of third parties (i.e. outside support for peace efforts through facilitation, mediation and other services; or support from internal actors, like civil society groups or others not directly involved in the peace process). In their efforts to appear “neutral” or “impartial” they often subscribe to the attitude of “even-handedness”, meaning that they try to “balance” their comments and judgements so that no one conflict party is criticised significantly more than the other. This may be well-intentioned, but can undermine the legitimacy of the peace process if it leads to a superficial equalisation of parties’ violations of core principles on which the success of the process is built. This point was made, for example, with respect to the downplaying of individual human rights violations by the LTTE or their equalisation with the violation of collective human rights by the government of Sri Lanka at the beginning of the peace process (International Crisis Group 2006, 2007). It also starkly highlights the general dilemmas faced by human rights organisations engaging with governments and non-state armed groups over terrorist activities (International Council on Human Rights Policy 2007).

Requirements for a sound peace process therefore should not have to be framed in an “even-handed” or “neutral” way by all intermediary parties at all times. This raises the important question as to which different and complementary roles intermediary parties can and must play in peace processes. For purposes of trust- and relationship-building it will be necessary for some intermediaries not to engage in the public chastising of one or the other party. Yet it is all the more important that there are other actors who can play this role, *and* that there is a shared understanding that both approaches have to complement each other.

(7) “Paradoxes of International Safety Nets”

The Sri Lankan peace process is an excellent case study regarding the possibilities and limitations of domestic efforts to mobilise international support, as well as of international actors to influence developments in the country (Goodhand et al. 2005; Noyahr 2006). The focus in the following is on those issues contributing to the fragility of the Sri Lankan peace process that show characteristics of systemic archetypes: first, the simultaneous “overburdening” and “underutilisation” of Norway as facilitator (A); and second, the idea that international actors would support and aid peace in a “non-political way” (B).

(A) In Sri Lanka, Norway served both as a “facilitator”, whose mandate was defined exclusively by the two warring parties GoSL and LTTE, and as a “monitor”, heading the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) according to the CFA. The scholarly discourse focused very much on the difficulties of an official mandate which only foresaw a rather passive facilitating role, whereas in practice, the Norwegians were pushed into a more active mediating role (Ferdinands et al. 2004). In this context issues of leverage, Norway’s strategic reasoning and personal approaches were raised. A key aspect was the quality of interaction with the group of more or less “likeminded” countries, particularly Norway’s “co-chairs” (the USA, the EU and Japan), as well as India, Canada and Switzerland.

One could argue that Norway was both overburdened with roles and underutilised with respect to the need for joint strategising among the likeminded countries. The double role of Norway as facilitator and monitor of the CFA was criticised early on because these two roles can easily collide (which might have been precisely the reason why the signatories of the CFA wanted this combination). In addition, Norway took over several further functions, e.g. development donor and capacity-builder in collaboration with the LTTE, which tainted them as “biased towards the Tigers”. It did so for the simple reason that other international actors were reluctant to do so (or were legally prevented from doing so). While not all discreet backchannel work is known, there is sufficient evidence to assume that a more effective international division of labour in engaging with the stakeholders in Sri Lanka would have been possible – and necessary.

(B) Thinking that the Sri Lankan peace process looked quite promising at the beginning, the donor community adopted a non-political “normalisation first” approach, backing the UNF-lead GoSL, and hoped that a “conditionality approach”, i.e. an explicit link between a set of peace-related criteria as preconditions for further development cooperation, would provide sufficient incentives for the parties to stay committed to this course. Subsequently, donors put together an impressive aid package of US\$ 4.5 billion at the Tokyo conference in June 2003 to express this conditionalised support for peace (when, tragically, the process was already in decline). The deterioration on the ground in 2006 led to a widening gap in the donor community between those who wanted to safeguard some kind of link between aid and peace and those who were prepared to close that chapter. It would be unwise to conclude that this failure was due to an unrealistic assessment of the relevance of economic

incentives, because there had been no coherent and robust effort to provide these. What can be concluded is that the provision of a substantive “peace dividend” – independent of an agenda identifying how this peace should be achieved politically – is unlikely to have a significant impact.¹⁰

It can be concluded that the creation of “international safety nets” (including the conditionality approach) generates complex dynamics of its own – and that their net impact might be just the opposite of what was intended in the first place. To explain this systemic change in detail is beyond the scope of this article, but what is striking is that in stark contrast to the start of the last Sri Lankan peace effort in 2002, there is now, in 2007, a strong hostile attitude within the Southern polity and society against any kind of foreign interference into matters of peace and conflict.

4.2 The Added Value of Systemic Thinking for Understanding Peace Processes

The added value of systemic thinking, and of applying archetypes, for understanding and supporting peace processes can be summarised in three points:

- (1) The concept of the “archetypes of fragile peace processes” offers an innovative explanation of the difficulties that peace processes, as well as their internal and external support, face. Its academic advantage is that it allows one to understand the constituent components of peace processes in detail and that it facilitates comparative research. Its practical advantage is that it can be used for more effective strategic planning because it focuses on counterbalancing and less foreseen developments, and on the resistances against transformation in settings of protracted conflict.
- (2) It helps to overcome the simplistic equation that “the more pro-peace engagement in a polity and society, the more likely it is that there will be a successful peace process”. In fact, it might be that it is particularly the strength of such an engagement which provokes counterforces to reduce their influence (compare the archetype of “ethnic outbidding” above).
- (3) Systemic thinking helps one to better understand the concept of “resistances” which is sometimes used to explain why processes of constructive social change are interrupted or confronted by seemingly “irrational” forces. Systemic thinking helps to focus first on the drivers within the system which might have quite “rational” reasons to prevent the intended social change from happening.

There are a number of practical conclusions from this analysis:

- There is a need to combine inter- and intra-party strategies for peace promotion right from the start;
- There is a need to institutionalise mechanisms that address mutual disappointments in the process;
- There is a need to overcome bipolar interactions, and to complement bilateral ones in order to generate more creative and multidimensional options;
- The tetralemma is useful as a tool for broadening content-related dialogues and negotiations;
- There is a need to address the legitimacy/parity of status dilemma in the case of asymmetric conflicts; and
- There is a need to understand the paradoxes of international support for peace processes.

¹⁰ If a peace dividend is explicitly connected to a political agenda, it might have other repercussions, yet these remain to be explored.

The starting point for applying systemic thinking to support peace processes is to conceptualise the latter as “learning processes within a system constituted by the conflict parties”. While it is beyond the scope of this article to explore in more detail the demands which applied systemic thinking (and learning) places on conflict and third parties, I want at least to point out three principles that have guided us during our engagement in Sri Lanka (see in more detail Wils et al. 2006, 51ff.). Moving from war to peace means changing the modes of learning (from “how to pursue the war as effectively as possible” to “how to address the ongoing dispute, hostilities, mistrust, etc. with nonviolent means”), which constitutes nothing less than a radical “system change”. Three guiding principles support this type of change, and all of them challenge – in one way or another – assumptions implicit in the “war system”. The first is “multipartiality”, i.e. the possibility of integrating opposing perspectives and models into an overarching common system of peaceful settlement of conflicts. The second is “constructive-critical engagement”, i.e. the concept of sustained, value-based relationship-building, empowerment and joint reflections with the aim of supporting political and nonviolent strategies for pursuing the parties’ interests. The third and last I call “multiple peaceful futures”, i.e. the vision to encourage all parties to further develop their positions in order to be able to seriously address the concerns of other parties as well as their own.

Several of the patterns and principles presented here are clearly already reflected (albeit not from a systemic perspective) in the literature on peace processes (Dudouet 2006). What is still missing, though, is a meta-framework which can help to integrate these difficulties into one interdependent whole and develop more integrated policies and approaches for more effective peace processes. The archetypes presented in *Section 4.1* should be seen as suggested components of such a meta-framework, which will still need to be developed and consolidated.

5. Conclusions and Open Questions

The aim of this article was to explore the potential of systemic thinking for guiding the transformation of protracted conflicts, based on the experiences of a comprehensive project of capacity-building and dialogue promotion in Sri Lanka. The basic findings can be summarised in five points:

- Systemic thinking as understood in this article is based on the assumption that all conflict analyses are mental models, which are inherently linked to the interests and interactions of the parties involved. Third parties are not exempt from this. Their task is to encourage acceptance of this phenomenon, to emphasise the need to understand the interdependence of these models and at the same time expand every party’s capacities for accepting different perspectives.
- Systemic thinking can make use of a multiplicity of tools to analyse conflicts, as long as they also further the acceptance of different narratives and perspectives as essential parts of any conflict. Two important advantages of systemic approaches are, firstly, the tools of system dynamics which provide new insights into the self-reproduction of protracted conflicts, and secondly, the focus on tools for addressing the analysis of solutions next to the analysis of problems.
- With respect to the analysis of peace processes, systemic thinking offers an inspiring set of explanations for the fragility of these processes. System dynamics helps practitioners and researchers to understand why a multiplicity of well-intentioned individual actions can lead to counterproductive effects. The concept of “archetypes of fragile peace processes” deserves future research and comparative systematisation.

- As stated in *Section 2*, the basic assumptions of systemic thinking teach us that complex social changes are rarely linear and that peace processes in particular will be confronted with a series of setbacks and resistances, even if the latter might become politically relevant only after some delay. The most general conclusion is therefore that any kind of constructive peace support (from inside or outside the country) has to take into account right from the start ALL forces with interests in the course of the peace efforts, the “like-minded” as well as the “unlike-minded”. Without doing that, a well-intentioned strengthening of “peace constituencies” might provoke just the opposite, i.e. an upgraded campaign to undermine the credibility of the peace activists.
- Applying systemic thinking in peacebuilding projects and programmes means framing the interaction with and among the conflicting parties as well as other stakeholders in the conflict region as a “learning space”, which is characterised by three parameters: multipartiality in elaborating and reviewing processes and structures; constructive-critical engagement with the stakeholders, and envisioning multiple peaceful futures (Wils et al. 2006, 51ff). These three parameters are useful guiding principles in the context of long-term processes in which conflict transformation is undertaken as a fundamental system transformation.

One of the key arguments of applied systemic thinking in psychotherapy and organisational development is that mobilising “internal resources” within the system is the best way to solve problems. How to do that in protracted conflicts is, in my view, the first and most fundamental open question for practice and research. Other questions and issues resulting from the reflections in this article are:

- Systemic thinking comprises a multiplicity of theoretical and meta-theoretical approaches. These were developed, to an extent, in discourses with competing approaches, particularly those in the tradition of critical theory which were of crucial importance for the development of modern peace and conflict studies. An open question is whether these two currents of thinking could be reconciled with each other, particularly in light of the fact that in applied systemic thinking, respect for and empowerment of the human beings within the system is the core value.
- An important variable that differentiates various systemic approaches is to what extent they assume that processes of change can be initiated and controlled. The majority of experts interested in conflict transformation assume, for understandable reasons, that there is sufficient space at least for supporting indigenous trends in the respective society. Some who argue from a rigorous systemic-constructivist point of view are more sceptical, and plead for a radical revision of peace-related interventions. The latter critique has not been outlined here in detail, but it will be necessary in the future elaboration of SCT to assess the implications of these different approaches in more detail.
- With respect to the systemic tools for conflict analyses two crucial questions are, firstly, how to systematise the mental conflict models and narratives of the disputing parties in such a way that they can be more effectively related to each other, and secondly, how to develop additional tools for promoting creative and lateral thinking about the (analytical) solution of the conflict (similar to the tetralemma concept).
- To further explore the utility of the concept of “archetypes of fragile peace processes”, it will be necessary to apply it in a comparative research study to a variety of peace processes. If it turns out to show a high level of validity and reliability, it will be interesting to see whether the different archetypes can be combined into a “tree of archetypes of fragile peace processes” (*cf.* Senge 2005). Other promising comparative approaches could be to explore on a deeper level of

analysis the “resistance” factor of parties against changes in the conflict system, and to study the driving systemic factors for so-called “spoilers” in peace processes.

- 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.

In all future endeavours, one of the essentials of systemic thinking should be kept in mind: that the aim is not to re-invent the wheel, but to assemble the existing wheels in the most useful way to promote conflict transformation.

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Enriching Conflict Diagnosis and Strategies for Social Change: A Closer Look at Conflict Dynamics

A Response by Friedrich Glasl

From 1 to 10 June 2004 I had the opportunity of gaining some insights into the RNCST's¹ work, collaborating with Norbert Ropers and his team on internal and external matters. For this reason I would like to begin this response by expressing my sincere appreciation for everything that they have accomplished there, in all its encouraging ups and disappointing downs. And knowing from personal experience the extremely difficult work involved in peace processes in Armenia, Georgia, post-war Croatia, Northern Ireland and South Africa, I would like to focus here on making a few suggestions in response to some of the instruments and approaches which Ropers describes. This means focusing on how to avoid interventions which have limited prospects of success, and expanding all the more effectively on others instead. In making these suggestions, I am fully aware of the limits of my perspective and experience.

My thoughts and actions draw on ideas from systems theory, which formed the basis of my doctoral thesis in the field of International Relations (Glasl 1967). Coupled with experience as a conflict researcher, consultant and mediator in meso-social systems (organisations, organisational units and inter-organisational relations), these thoughts also flowed into my habilitation thesis (Glasl 1980), where I used them to demonstrate a contingency theory model of conflict dynamics. In Glasl/Lievegoed 1994 (and later Glasl/Lievegoed 2004) I placed my systems theory approach in the context of Kenneth Boulding's "system of systems" (Boulding 1956). This is how my model of conflict diagnosis should be understood.

¹ The Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation (RNCST) was launched in 2001 with the goal of strengthening peace constituencies in Sri Lanka through engagement with civil society partners. After a brief phase of confidence-building, the commencement of peace negotiations between the government and the LTTE and the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 2002 provided the opportunity to focus on direct engagement with major political stakeholders and address almost all the key issues of the peace process. The project is implemented by the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS), under the directorship of Norbert Ropers, and co-funded by the Swiss and German Governments. For more detailed information about RNCST, see Ropers (in this volume, 18) or www.berghof-foundation.lk.

1. Enhancing the Usefulness of Conflict Diagnoses

The authors of solution-focused approaches, as developed by Steve de Shazer, often reject conflict analyses on principle, fearing that they will only lead to or reinforce a sense of “problem fixation”. According to these authors diagnosis is synonymous with causal research, in the sense of linear cause-and-effect relations. For both theoretical and practical reasons I too reject causal research (as stressed in Glasl 1980), because a “mutual causality” (nowadays called “circular causality”) can really be taken as given. Research into causality is futile, because the dynamics of escalation tend to induce further problems which have little to do with the original conflict. I therefore share Ropers’ view that conflict analysis should be used to gain insight into the dynamics of a given conflict situation, in order to decide which interventions can be applied where, and how best to apply them.

Leaving this to chance would be unprofessional. Concentrating on five dimensions of conflict diagnosis gives us a more practical image of conflict dynamics.

These five dimensions are briefly indicated below (for further detail see Glasl 2004a, 29-312; Glasl 2004b):

- 1) What are the relevant issues from the parties’ points of view?
- 2) Where can the various stakeholders and conflict parties be placed in terms of stages of conflict escalation? And what predictions can be made about this for the immediate future?
- 3) Which stakeholders and conflict parties are involved in the conflict? How are the internal dynamics (structure, systems of leadership, power relations) of the parties’ systems structured? Are there any coalitions and alliances at hand?
- 4) How are the relationship patterns between the conflict parties and stakeholders structured? What is the wider structural and cultural context?
- 5) Which basic attitudes towards conflicts or strategic considerations (assumptions about the costs and benefits of their actions) can be identified among the parties and stakeholders? To what extent do religious, ideological or philosophical assumptions shape the parties’ basic attitudes towards conflicts?

In this commentary I will not go into every aspect of the five diagnostic dimensions, but simply raise certain aspects of the diagnosis, intended to complement Ropers’ thoughts.²

(1) Issues

Any attempts which interveners make to categorise the contentious issues in a conflict are irrelevant. As far as I am concerned, all that matter are the topics which the stakeholders and parties themselves identify, their emotional stance on these topics and how flexibly or rigidly they deal with them. Classifications or interpretations made by third parties are irrelevant. This also applies to *Table 2* with its classification of issues into “interest-based”, “value-based”, “fact-based”, “relationship-based” and “needs-based”. As Ropers himself says, these different elements always support and reinforce each other in established conflicts, meaning that they are always closely linked. Conflict parties view particular “facts” as being relevant, because they affect their interests and therefore their needs. They also see “relationship issues” as relevant, since it is on account of these that their needs

² All references to “the article”, and to tables, diagrams and sections refer to Ropers (in this volume, 11-41).

are not met. Nevertheless, practical experience has shown that for potential interventions it can prove fruitful, when recording the issues which the parties report, to pay attention to the *positions* (demands) and *interests* which they articulate in doing so. Also of interest is how greatly the various parties' viewpoints differ on these positions and interests; the central question is ultimately about what *needs* they are based on. After all, an intervention is always about detecting and acknowledging deeper needs, identifying common needs and finding practicable and acceptable means and ways of satisfying these needs.

(2) Stages of Escalation

The main focus of my theory and practice has been research into escalation dynamics (Glasl 1980; 1999) and the consequences which can be deduced from it to facilitate conflict management in meso-social systems. Fisher/Keasley (1991) take up my model of escalation and apply some of the central ideas to macro-social conflicts. Here I would simply like to make a few recommendations for conflict analysis. It is of great help to grasp as clearly as possible which of the conflict parties are involved in the escalation and to what extent, and which have been able to keep more or less clear of it. If certain groups have been largely able to resist getting drawn into an escalated situation, then this gives us an important indication of resources available to these parties. They can assist the peace process by building bridges to the parties who are more entrenched in the escalation. For example in Northern Ireland, since it is very difficult to gain access to militant "hardliners" and extremists, I was able to make contact with the paramilitary organisations via the parties' political wings. People or groups can always be found who have similar goals to the hardliners, but have avoided being implicated in the escalation. In this case it is of great practical benefit to determine *how* they have managed to avoid being drawn in or getting caught up in offers to form coalitions. South Africa's impressive transformation from apartheid to a modern democracy was only possible because the leading personalities in the African National Congress (ANC) were never striving to achieve political or military power for its own sake. They were just genuinely convinced that only nonviolent transformation would lead to a form of society in which human dignity is respected. Their ideals for the process of change were consistent with their ideals for the goal they were striving towards: freedom cannot be achieved with prisons, but through enabling people towards autonomy; equality as a principle of law cannot be achieved through oppression, but by taking steps towards the rule of law. I shall return to this question in *point 4* below.

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(3) Stakeholders and Parties and their Internal Structure

In my opinion the systemic approach places too little focus on how system dynamics are structured *within* the individual conflict parties, although this plays a decisive role in whether a peace process is successful. By placing "intra-party leadership disputes on peace" into the loops in *Diagram 1*, Ropers does indeed mention this, but this topic deserves much more attention than that. That is to say: which internal forces are the leaders exposed to? How do they view their dependency on voters (audience-directed or self-directed), and other constitutive or legitimising factors? Can they only connect with the prevailing mood in their group, or also counteract it? How much scope do they allow themselves in their mandate – and what can be done in the peace process to give them more freedom of movement, and to secure it?

Based on these ideas, my mediation in post-war Croatia involved a great deal of work with Serbian and Croatian delegates to find and agree on concrete ways of supporting their advocacy work back in their own constituencies. Mediation talks with conflict party representatives often only focus on "selling inwards", i.e. encouraging the parties to jointly find common solutions. However,

it is the subsequent “selling outwards” which later plays a decisive role, i.e. how successful the delegates are in convincing their own “hinterland” (party, voters) to adopt the ideas that have been negotiated. Furthermore, in analysing the conflict parties I would recommend making the following distinctions:

- a) On content: how extreme is the target position which the conflict parties articulate (a unitarian state under Sinhala dominance vs. separate Tamil and Sinhala states) or where do they see themselves between the two extreme positions? That is to say, do they take up “extremist” or “intermediate” positions?
- b) On methodology, or rather strategy: what level of violence or nonviolence are they prepared to use to pursue their goals? That is to say, are they “radicals” or “moderates”?

The only way to access radicals is by going through moderates, even if they are extremists. In order to achieve any kind of progress in the peace process with regard to the political issues, violent thinking must first be transformed into moderate thinking, then reinforced and consolidated. Extreme positions can only be negotiated after this has happened. This procedure proved useful during the aforementioned work in Northern Ireland, and has presumably also already done so in Sri Lanka. In any case, I believe that this distinction is more useful than the classification into “primary, secondary and tertiary parties” mentioned in *Section 3.1* and used to categorise the actors in *Table 1*.

(4) Relationships Between the Parties and Contextual Structures

The system dynamics analysis shown in *Diagram 2* seems to be very useful in its approach. Ropers notes that this is one of the RNCST’s most important discoveries, because it enables us to visualise the kind of interrelated impacts that can come into play. It could, however, be made even more useful. Using arrows and lines, this visualisation shows presumed “reinforcing” and “counteracting” impacts which exist between the various elements. This could deliver important and practical insights for peacebuilding interventions, if in addition the actors’ *mechanisms of unconsidered reaction patterns* were to be detected and described. In actual fact it is unconsidered reaction patterns that lead to escalating or de-escalating, reinforcing or inhibiting effects. The reaction patterns are determined by distorted perceptions of events and opponents, by interpretations of these perceptions, by the emotions which they stir up, by conscious and subconscious intentions and needs eventually leading to actions which can trigger escalating or de-escalating effects. Thus the crucial finding is not that these interrelated impacts arise between certain elements, but about which processes or mechanisms arise in the leaders, if for example voters reject the de-escalating measures which said leaders have proposed. This could perhaps be: “I will lose my mandate. I will be seen as a soft or weak leader. My group/party could be perceived as being too soft or too weak. I will not be voted back into office. My group will lose its financial backing, etc.”

If we can identify these unconsidered reaction patterns correctly, then we can (hopefully) avoid letting fears like the ones listed above determine actors’ behaviour, by using targeted interventions. Subconscious patterns and their expressions are made conscious – and this is the only way that such cycles can be broken, by means of responsible decision-making and actions. Escalating reactions develop “automatically”; any de-escalating actions must be consciously chosen, while actors must remain aware of possible difficulties or forces of resistance from among their own ranks. These are the mechanisms referred to in *point 2* above to describe the groups who manage to resist escalation, and their ability to immunise themselves against being drawn into it. The method for detecting this kind of automatism mainly consists of consulting key figures and reflecting with them on: (a) what consequences they might fear if they resist the escalating stimuli; (b) what

negative sanctions might be imposed; (c) what reasons they have for assuming that these sanctions may be imposed; (d) what alternative options they might have; and (e) what positive and negative reactions they can envisage as a result.

As “hidden” or “secret rules”, the expressions of these unconsidered reaction mechanisms make up an important part of cultural patterns which determine behaviour within the parties’ systems and between parties. They are also part of the conflict parties’ (subconscious or semi-conscious) conceptualisations of the conflict, their patterns of thought and perception. Therefore, in my opinion, the impact of peacebuilding interventions depends greatly on whether or not these “secret rules” can be disabled, by making actors aware of them.

In Ballreich/Glasl (2007) and Glasl (2007) I illustrate in relation to micro- and meso-social conflicts that sustainable conflict management can only be achieved when the key persons have experienced certain turning points. What exactly does this mean? It is a question of

- 1) an “initial turning point”: the “preliminary phase” or “pre-mediation” has led to the realisation that an alternative means of conflict management would be better than continuing the conflict with previous (violent) means;
- 2) a “cognitive turning point”: the conflict parties have arrived at a change of perspective because they know and understand their own perceptions and interpretations, as well as those of their opponents;
- 3) an “emotional turning point”: the conflict parties are in touch with their own emotions and have gained empathy for the feelings and sensitivities of their opponents;
- 4) an “intentional turning point”: the conflict parties are aware of their own deeper needs and both willing and able to respond to their opponent’s needs. This then gives rise to possible options for resolution.

I am convinced that this generally applies for the key persons in macro-social conflicts as well. This was the guiding principle behind the mediation between Serbs and Croats (and Hungarian-speaking sections of the population) in Eastern Slavonia, which I undertook before the UN forces withdrew from the region. Back then, my main concern was to see the various groups arrive at the inner conviction that a continuation of the hostilities of war would only be detrimental for everyone involved. In order to do this, I followed a methodology which I had developed (Glasl 1999, 113-115) called “consensus about the unwanted future”, asking each of the parties:

- 1) Where will Eastern Slavonia be one year from now, if the current destructive conflict dynamic continues unhindered? What will the situation be like for all the people who live here?
- 2) How does this probable vision of the future make the delegates feel? How would they feel when the continued destruction has become reality?
- 3) What could each of the groups do independently to prevent further deterioration? Are there “doables” which the delegates could undertake on their own initiative, without waiting for their opponent to make the first move?
- 4) How can the images of the unwanted future, the delegates’ fears and initiatives be communicated without giving rise to misunderstandings?

What this activity brought about was that the delegates resolved not to abandon the path of mediation and working together constructively, even if new problems arose. Unless the key leaders have reached this initial turning point and resolved to resist the escalating persuasions and provocations, the unconsidered reaction mechanisms will continue to take their course. Therefore the key figures

will keep on falling back into their previous patterns of conflict management. And unless they can at least achieve some level of self awareness, recognising their own thought patterns and beginning to see through how these underlie their reaction mechanisms, they are not likely to take responsibility for their actions and begin to resist escalation. Therefore it is only by raising this awareness and changing the “secret rules” that the compulsive course of events which keeps on feeding into “counteracting loops” can be broken through.

Box 1 – Methods: The “U-procedures” and “Plexodrama”

There are proven methods for recognising and describing unconsidered reaction mechanisms: systemic constellation work as developed by Matthias Varga von Kibéd and Insa Sparrer (2003), and also my own methods of “U-procedures” and “plexodramas” (Glasl et al. 2005). A “U-procedure” begins by getting the parties involved to describe the concrete sequence of events from their own points of view; then in the second stage analysing the factual contributions and influence that people have had on events. The third stage addresses the unwritten maxims and logic behind behaviour and the exercise of influence; the fourth stage raises the question of whether these maxims should also govern future behaviour. This is the deepest point, at the heart of the analysis. Then in the fifth stage new maxims are formulated; and in the sixth new ways of sharing tasks and exercising influence are negotiated. The seventh stage establishes a new sequence of operations to be followed in the future. In the diagnostic part (stages 1 to 4) this procedure takes us step by step from a description of factual, observable behaviour to the deeper, underlying assumptions and principles which govern behaviour. Only once this critical reflection has taken place can – in stages 5 to 7 of future design – concepts for the desired future be discussed and binding agreements made. (From 1969 onwards I often used this method in South Africa, in order to expose the intrinsic image of humankind which underlay behaviour in the apartheid system.) The “plexodrama” method is very similar to the systemic constellation work and helps to generate a scenario. The people involved identify themselves as individual factors cross-linked in a system. If one factor is changed, the people who represent the other factors describe what effect this has on them. All the statements they make are recorded on a pinboard. This then reveals the interacting mechanisms.

(5) Conflict Parties’ Basic Attitudes and Strategic Considerations

Ropers points out in several places that the way conflict parties conceptualise the conflict plays a major role. My experience working in meso-social systems confirms that knowing about conceptualisations is one of the most important success factors in conflict resolution. In fact I discovered this through my very first activities as an intervener. The way that conflict parties assess the costs and benefits of their previous actions in comparison to the costs and benefits of an alternative conflict resolution strategy determines their dedication to peacebuilding strategies. It is obvious that conceptualisation is very closely linked to discovering and changing unconsidered reaction mechanisms.

In this context it is worth discussing the usefulness of the tetralemma method. I came to know and appreciate the tetralemma method while working with Varga von Kibéd and Sparrer. It can be used above all in peer consulting and supervision situations, to make people aware of limited views (“tunnel vision”) when searching for solutions. This way “blind alleys” can be identified and discarded. Admittedly, this rational insight does not necessarily mean that creative options will be found. The tetralemma method provides the impulse but does not in itself open up new resources. What is still required are creative methods which appeal to people’s imaginative and intuitive capabilities.

2. What Community Development Approaches Add to Peacebuilding

In various places Ropers mentions the relation between conflict processes and change processes. The editors of this Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series have already begun looking into the topic “Social Change and Conflict Transformation” in Bloomfield et al. (2006). For peace processes to succeed it is very important to pay attention to the relationship between peacebuilding strategies and strategies of social change. After all, conflicts are always about efforts to bring about or prevent certain changes to the society or the political system of a state. This is also evident both in the history and the current dynamics of the conflict in Sri Lanka, where the extremists of all groups are striving towards contradictory changes in the nature of the state.

Although structuring change processes, above all Organisation Development (OD), is an important area in systems theory-based consultation, it receives too little attention in the article. By “community development” I mean something far more strategic than pure grass-roots activities. The challenge of peacebuilding lies precisely in structuring a nonviolent transformation of formal and informal structures (constitution, legal system, etc.), intercultural or inter-faith relations and the economic system, in such a way that the powers who had been enemies find a way out of the conflict dynamic and start working constructively to reorganise their society. For this purpose there are several tried and tested methods, which have been used in complex organisational development, regional development and other social change projects. These should not be seen as an alternative to Ropers’ suggested approach, but as a complement to it, offering further support and consolidation for peacebuilding efforts.

Within the scope of this contribution I must now limit myself to a few brief remarks (for further details see Glasl et al. 2005):

- 1) The overall strategy should seek to balance the poles of taking a problem-based or a vision-led approach. (A vision-led procedure is more than a solution-focused approach!) Any one-sidedness will have a destructive effect, because a bias towards problem-orientation could easily reinforce the feeling of hopelessness (problem fixation) whereas a bias towards vision-orientation could lead to unrealistic euphoria. Nevertheless, the energy of both poles should always be put to use for change processes: the repelling force of the problem and the attracting force of the vision.
- 2) The multi-track approach (Diamond/McDonald 1996), which also influenced Ropers’ article, emphasises the importance of approaching subsystems and system levels from various angles and linking up these efforts. I find it important to focus primarily on the subsistence needs of the people affected. This is also suggested by proponents of needs-based mediation (Burton 1990), based on their thoughts and experiences. Vision-led procedures thereby become all the more important.
- 3) Processes of change are processes of development which arise from the continuous interaction of the following basic OD processes (Glasl et al. 2005):
 - a) *Diagnostic processes*: these raise awareness of the problems and their background, how they have arisen and intensified, and resources and strengths which still exist. This forms the basis for consensus about the need for change.
 - b) *Future-design processes*: i.e. developing visions, overall concepts, future scenarios and alternative models, thus focusing people’s energy towards a desirable future which makes the peacebuilding worthwhile.

- c) *Psycho-social processes*: these are about changing roles, relationships and attitudes, etc. and must be professionally structured to facilitate constructive diagnoses and designs for the future.
- d) *Learning processes*: these support all the other processes by spreading new knowledge (e.g. about confederations, best practice in other countries regarding security, ways of dealing with the past, etc.) and providing training in new skills.
- e) *Information processes*: these help to raise awareness among the broader public about what is planned and what has been achieved so far.
- f) *Implementation processes*: these are not only about putting the negotiated solutions and changes into practice, but also about reinforcing previous goals, targets and plans.
- g) *Change management processes*: these are necessary in order to professionally plan the processes listed under point 6, providing personnel and material resources, harmonising and coordinating them.

The concept of multi-track diplomacy gives some indication of where in society various interventions can be applied. Basic OD processes are helpful in deciding how to proceed and how the stakeholders can be helped to participate.

- 4) Lastly I would recommend considering ways of including the wider surroundings – in the context of systems theory, the international community – into the peace process, so as to lend it more support.

I am convinced that by combining conflict resolution approaches with community development methods, it will be possible to achieve the goal of taking action in Sri Lanka without resorting to violence, in order to establish a society based on respect for human rights and human dignity. And I am also painfully aware that this is “much easier said than done!”

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“Emerging Archetypes”: A Comparison of Patterns of the Peace Processes in Sri Lanka and Nepal

A Response by Günther Baechler

A peace process often appears to start at one point in time (e.g. when a third party is mandated), to move from a ceasefire agreement to some sort of interim power sharing and then end with a peace accord, followed by a period of post-conflict rehabilitation. This sequence easily evokes an image of bright sunshine over a harmonious and prosperous community. Linearity provokes idealistic and normative thinking: the peace process is constructed up-stream according to visions that tend to be very general indeed (democracy, human rights, good governance). What such visions – most often put forward by external third parties – miss is that conflict parties may themselves be considering a series of options, may have hard choices to make and might not simply adhere to one externally imposed long-term objective, however “shiny” it may be. My personal experiences as a facilitator in Nepal between April 2005 and October 2007, and as the current Senior Adviser for Peace Building in Darfur for the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, have made me think differently about the relationship of linearity and complexity, which quite often implies circularity.

In this short essay in response to Norbert Ropers’ propositions for a systemic approach to conflict transformation (SCT), I will first touch on three aspects of systemic thinking which I see as the most important ones; namely, (a) bringing solutions to the problems; (b) acknowledging that systems are built by actors and not by abstract structures; and (c) underlining the crucial role of the individual in mediation. My main assumption is that in conflict transformation the ‘subject’ matters (in historical terms we may focus on ‘material structures’ – so-called root causes – but as a mediator this is not so). In a second step, I will then concentrate on the seven “emerging archetypes” which Ropers has developed against the Sri Lankan background. I will discuss whether and to what

extent the seven archetypes apply in the Nepali context. For me, the “archetypes” resemble a three-dimensional pattern constituted by the individual behaviour of actors, by collective action in the light of specific perceptions and by the psychological dispositions of those involved. Keeping this pattern in mind, a comparison of the two cases (Sri Lanka and Nepal) may allow us to critically assess the value added of the systemic approach. Two questions have to be answered: What have we learned that we did not know before, and what have we learned to enrich the praxis of conflict transformation?

1. “Reading Ropers”: Three Cornerstones of Systemic Thinking

1.1 Bringing Solutions Closer to Problems

In contrast to the common “linear ideal” sketched out above, Ropers offers a different view. “Because of the complexity of causal interactions, of time delays and various in-built resistances, systems do not function in the way a linear expectation of ‘the more the better’ would assume” (Ropers in this volume, 15). Certainly there is nothing new about complex approaches to conflict resolution. What is new about Ropers’ “system dynamics” is that he (together with a group of “likeminded” people at Berghof and elsewhere) breaks with the linear trinity of time, steps, and instruments we normally find in *international* or *political* conflict transformation systems. Instead, he sheds light on the autonomous dynamic and self-reproduction of social systems (Luhmann’s “*autopoiesis*”). What he aims at is not a new (macro) theory but rather a radical new practice informed by conceptual thinking. Making use of the chief institutions of any systemic thinking such as feedback loops, impact cycles, reflection on external intervention in a dynamic system and the like, he concentrates on adequate forms of visualisation and an illustration of (mental) models. In the context of SCT, interactive conflict mapping which involves conflict parties is a “systemic intervention” in itself. It mobilizes internal resources in a system, promotes inter-subjectivity and therefore mutual understanding and empathy. In SCT the solution is already contained in the problem and the problem is well reflected in the solution; e.g. if power sharing is at stake in a multicultural conflict arena, then the solution cannot ignore this but must reflect it in a certain set of concrete options (be it federalism or other means of devolution). This means that only through its practical application – and not through isolated reflection – systemic thinking is becoming real, is having an impact, or inserting an impulse-giving energy. It is “learning by doing” but in a structured, self-reflexive and conflict (systems) sensitive way. Ropers would not have been able to develop the concept we are discussing in this volume without his personal, practical, and long-lasting experience in the Sri Lankan conflict system.

1.2 Systems are Constituted by Many Actors, and Not Only by Those We Like

In “non-systemic” conflict resolution, various actors try to influence the system dynamics in a linear manner. Key issues and key actors are identified from the outside. The strategies they create are based on linear timelines. This holds true for both the conflict parties and the facilitators. Armed non-state actors, for instance, tend to have a very particular view about the internal dynamics of a system; they use armed violence in order to accelerate or change dynamics they may perceive as being too stable, or blocked by the conservatives. Third parties impact on a system they do not fully understand, by laying an inflexible structure over a complex and dynamic fabric: for example, by setting deadlines; by selecting participants for talks; by narrowing down the scope of negotiations; by putting pressure on one or all sides; by intervening with financial means or by imposing mediators who the conflict parties do not like. One of the worst practices in this regard is the linking of “pushes for peace” with third parties’ own election calendars.

SCT is based on the assumption that the interests, needs and fears of all actors – including third parties – constitute the system. Negative expectations of the diplomatic community impact on a system as much as intra-party resistance or the stubbornness of individual leaders does. Referring to Ropers' clustering of elements of a systemic approach (in this volume, 17), I dare say that for professional facilitators (from the ranks of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Berghof, Conciliation Resources, the Mediation Support Unit to the United Nations (UN / MSU), etc.) it is relatively easy to link up with and mobilize agents of peaceful change (cluster 4). Nor is it so very difficult to be creative in imagining alternative peaceful futures (cluster 5). Yet Ropers' cluster 3 – engaging with key stakeholders – has always proved to be a difficult one. Professional facilitators do have an impact on the system, but it is quite often biased and at the same time not sustainable. The main reason is that professional facilitators often exclusively engage civil society actors and intellectuals at Track 1.5 or 2 levels. However, as a Sudanese colleague aptly described it, “the SPLM [Sudanese People's Liberation Front] (in the South) did not fight for independency just to hand over to us intellectuals.” Externally driven conflict transformation is also quite often like a *wadi* in the Sahel: when there is rain the *wadis* are full of water rushing downhill; as soon as the rains stop the *wadis* dry up.

It is imperative to understand that each one of the actors aims at shaping the system according to their own preferences. Armed rebels may wish to trigger a revolutionary change of the system's dynamics. Human rights activists may wish to promote a democratic transformation as part of the peace process. Conservatives, including regular armed forces, may not easily agree that peace should automatically lead to radical change; for them peace equals the cessation of hostilities, nothing more. Why should the powerful agree that peace is equal to revolution or democratic transformation which basically means undermining their very power base? In Nepal, the feudal elite in Kathmandu wanted an end to the Maoist violence; they did not want a Maoist revolution wiping them away along with their “feudal system”. So each and every actor lives in a different system and it is hard for them to understand that they are part of one system which they constitute together. The plurality of visions and interests is the main and at the same time widely ignored challenge for any external impulse-giver. Therefore, the following questions are crucial: how can individuals from all constituencies be engaged in systemic conflict transformation? What are their preferences, options, needs and fears – but also what means are there for overcoming a given crisis or for mitigating collective stress?

1.3 In Mediation, the Individual Matters

If individuals matter, then the next question is who should participate in a peace process, who should third parties approach or trust, and who should be excluded and why? One of the main challenges for SCT is that third parties (conflict resolution experts and professional facilitators in particular) quite often lack access to some of the most powerful actors of the conflict parties. Normally the “primary parties” in a conflict system are tiny elites, intelligence officers, regular armed forces, and armed non-state actors or rebels who have gone underground. The main dilemma is that prime ministers, presidential advisers, army generals, field commanders, etc. do not often participate in conflict transformation seminars and interactive learning workshops. Many seminars reach out only to specific strata of the conflict parties. The tools developed for systemic changes only make sense, though, if they are applied in a process impacting on the systemic links as a whole.

How then to address this dilemma of inclusion? First of all, systemic tools and instruments are necessary components of a third party's intervention, but not sufficient ones. Individuality and subjectivity matter as much as systemic tools do. If SCT aims to engage individuals of all segments

of the primary parties, facilitators have to establish excellent and respectful relations with key figures of all of them, no matter which party they come from or what they did in the past. Secondly, they may apply a long-term strategy and engage with key figures long before these have become part of a primary party. Thirdly, SCT facilitators may aim at enlarging the circle of those belonging to the primary parties through capacity-building, institution-building, etc. (as, for example, in Track 1.5 work). Fourthly, the third party has to reflect on its own role, mental models, analytical ‘constructions’, cultural biases and personal preferences, not least with regard to the chemistry in the relationship with key individuals. In Nepal, I succeeded in establishing excellent and also emotional relations with a relatively large group of people from all sides (including a close adviser to King Gyanendra). People must feel that you respect them; there is no such thing as 30% or 60% respect. If a facilitator does not have this personal capacity or wants to keep a distance (e.g. to people who have allegedly committed war crimes) because he or she is confusing mediation with advocacy, he or she will not be able to properly implement the tools and approaches of SCT.¹

A first lesson can be drawn from the discussion above: protracted conflicts call for protracted peacebuilding. It is not sufficient to punctually kick off a meeting, organise one-off events, pay three-day visits, or try and impact on the system with only one or two minor impulses. Conflict transformation means the third party becoming part of the transformation as an actor. What is needed is not only a concept of the, as Ropers puts it, “self-reproducing character of protracted conflicts”; there is also a need for a concept of the self-reproducing character of peacebuilding and the means to transform it. For example, international actors who put pressure on the conflict parties may use the same conflict-reproducing pattern; a pattern which quite often undermines the process leading to consent about major issues.

2. Archetypes of Fragile Peace Processes – The Example of Nepal

In order to shed light on the value added of systemic conflict transformation, I will now undertake a comparison of “emerging archetypes” in Sri Lanka and in Nepal. One caveat should be placed before comparing experiences made in different contexts. It is, in my opinion, not the description of archetypes which distinguishes systemic from non-systemic approaches. What makes a difference is the way of addressing the archetypes, or the type of relations a third party has with those actors who are behind such emerging patterns. So the question is whether SCT offers concepts, instruments and tools that are better adapted (or adaptable) to the conflict context than non-systemic approaches. If the description of emerging archetypes is seen as a conflict analysis within SCT, then the challenge would be to establish such analysis together with exponents of the primary parties – as a first step to peaceful conflict transformation.

In the following I refer to the seven archetypes as described by Ropers (in this volume, 30-35). Since this essay is a dialogue response to his reflections, I will not repeat his definitions/descriptions here.

(1) *‘Ethnic outbidding’* (Ropers in this volume, 31) was not a prominent issue in the Nepali context. In countries with a multitude of ethnic and other identity groups (in Nepal there are more than 100), ethnic outbidding may not work the same way as in countries with two (dominant) groups struggling for power and/or territory. The Nepali conflict is very much a political-ideological

¹ However, mediators are bound by international law and should not hinder advocacy groups from doing a sound job in terms of monitoring, investigations, etc.

system, dominated by political parties with membership all over the country. If there was an emerging archetype, it was rather that the parties were urged to fight for the 'inclusion' of marginalized groups. This became one of the most prominent issues during the peace process. Inclusion *de facto* meant that the parties co-opted some emerging political leaders of marginalized groups, while keeping more or less "mum" about social and political inclusion of marginalized groups as a whole (in Nepal there is a complex fabric of cast, ethnicity, religious and regional identity).

Whereas the main issue was therefore inclusion by means of overturning the feudal and highly centralized monarchy, there were some elements of ethnic outbidding. I would call this a secondary conflict: in the late nineties, the Maoists started to mobilize their constituencies along ethnic lines (Magar, Gurung, Tamang, Limbu, Rai, etc.) for opportunistic reasons. First, the Maoists started their rebellion in the rural Mid-Western hills (Rukum und Rolpa districts). Their mass base were farmers who belonged to one or the other identity group and cast. Although Maoist leaders tend to underscore that "we do believe in class and not in cast or ethnicity!", they had no choice but to attract the rural poor by addressing grievances related to ethnic and cast marginalization. Since the Maoist central committee consisted mostly of high cast Brahmans, the rural poor were highly suspicious about the peace deal of Kathmandu and the interim constitution. Immediately after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed, many groups felt they had been excluded from the Kathmandu elite peace deal, and raised their grievances both with the seven democratic parties and with the cadres of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), or CPN (M).

In February 2007, when the conflict in the lowlands of Terai escalated, the Madhesi (the main population group in Terai) opened up a new ethno-political front against the Kathmandu elite (or hill Brahmans). Initially all parties – including the Monarchists – tried to use the Madhesi upheaval to weaken the Maoist movement, which had some strongholds in (western) Terai; in particular Maoist splinters used the Terai "card" to fight against their previous mother party and to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the central government. So in fact, in Nepal, ethnicity was not a primary factor of intra-party obstruction, but rather an issue of inter-party fighting and propaganda.

(2) *'Mutual disappointment'* (Ropers in this volume, 31) and, consequently, a permanent crisis of trust was one of the main barriers in the Nepali peace process. In May 2005, when I started to shuttle between the political parties in Kathmandu and the Maoist leadership in India, there was tremendous mistrust between the leaders of both sides. This mistrust and real lack of confidence was based on bad experiences with each other related to the democratization process that had taken off in 1990/91. When the leaders of both sides finally – and following some confidence-building measures from my side – called each other on the phone, an incredibly dynamic process started to take shape. The 12-point understanding of 21 November 2005 – a kind of declaration of principles signed in Delhi – indicated that both sides had rising expectations about their joint capacities to end the direct rule of King Gyanendra (who took over executive power on 1 February 2005).

With the declaration of a unilateral ceasefire, the Maoists enabled the seven parties' alliance to reach out to their constituencies in the districts, to take to the streets for political protests, to organise mass rallies and finally to mobilize the huge manifestations of more than a million people from 21 to 24 April 2006.

In the aftermath of the successful move against the King and the re-instating of the old House of Representatives (with G.P. Koirala as Prime Minister), the mutual disappointment slowly but steadily grew bigger again. In the euphoria of the peace rallies, both sides (democratic parties and Maoists) somehow naively overestimated the capability of the other side for real change. The Maoists somehow expected that the social democratic Congress Party would move leftwards and

would automatically drop the constitutional monarchy from its programme. Leading Congress members of the “peace wing” were convinced that they could easily transform the ultra-left Maoists – once the cadres had begun to enjoy their life in the hundreds of bars in Kathmandu – to a “mainstream” parliamentary party. Of course, neither was the case. For both sides the peace deal was necessary to stop armed violence, to end the direct rule of the King and to jointly establish an interim government. There was no need and no will to change the ideology or the parties’ political programmes and strategies. The Maoists made it very clear that they would never go back to the jungle. But they also made it clear that democratic struggle is a continuation of the people’s war with different means. In their view, the constituent assembly – once elected – should be a platform for the people’s movement towards socialism. The Congress on the other hand was mainly interested in remaining the most important political party, appointing the Prime Minister and safeguarding some kind of ceremonial monarchy. With each agreement signed, disappointment increased: the Congress used its strong position in the interim parliament to grasp state power; the Maoists continued with extortion and even abduction. The newly founded Young Communist League in particular embarked on a dangerous kind of political hooliganism which urged the regular security forces to take action against elements of a political party in government.

However, in contrast to Sri Lanka, the Nepalese succeeded in managing their expectations as well as their disappointments. The peace process did not collapse. Maybe the Nepalese understood better than the international community that a step-by-step approach with a cascade of agreements is better adapted to the country’s conflict culture than a comprehensive peace that deals with each and every issue at once. With the crisis of confidence after the signing of a new agreement, a new pattern emerged: despite public accusations about the other side’s obstructive politics and non-implementation of the provisions, both sides engaged in internal (intra-party) discussions. After a period of strange silence, some leaders started to send signals and finally reached out to test the ground for confidential talks with the other side. New meetings were set up to deal with open questions or emergencies. This pattern reproduced itself again at least five times – while the rather nervous international community reproduced its generally pessimistic view about the peace process in Nepal. The successful elections of 10 April 2008 proved again that the Nepali political actors had been able to combine diverging interests in the system in order to avoid a deep crisis – if not breakdown – of the peace process.

(3) *‘Avoiding core issues’* (Ropers in this volume, 32). “Nothing is agreed on until everything is agreed on” – this quotation concerning the status negotiations of Kosovo is attributed to the Finnish peace diplomat Martti Ahtisaari. In Nepal this would not resonate. In fact, just the opposite was true. Avoiding core issues turned out to be the most important – and productive – archetype. As I mentioned (under (2) above) both sides engaged with a lot of political will and energy in a cascade of preliminary and interim agreements. Even the Comprehensive Peace Accord of 21 November 2006 was neither final nor comprehensive. The CPA was only the platform from which the main and final event ought to be launched. The core of everything, the future of Nepal, would be dealt with in a Constituent Assembly (CA). After 50 years of democratic fight against the monarchy, the CA became a national symbol for the solution of all problems of the entire nation and all individual Nepali citizens. Since the expectations of the CA and its revolutionary, democratic, and change capacities are extremely high and loaded with visions of *Shangri-La* (Nepal as paradise), the Nepalese themselves somehow fear the very moment when the CA starts its work. The political parties were afraid of a tremendous loss at the ballot box (and for some of them this proved to be justified). The path to the CA elections – postponed several times – was paved with obstacles and

hurdles. The nearer the date came the more the Nepalese understood: once confronted with the reality of it, they would almost certainly face another disappointment. This is the pathological aspect. At the same time, the CA is a big chance. There is hardly any country on the globe that is happily engaged in an internally-driven peace process, of which the core is democratic change through a participatory constitutional process. The latter is also necessary because many of the core issues have only been dealt with at a very general level of principles. The “federal state restructuring” is one of these issues that need a lot more hard work, both politically as well as legally.

(4) *‘Limits of bilateralism’* (Ropers in this volume, 32) are evident in Nepal as well. Before April 2006, the conflict was triangular: monarchy – seven political parties – Maoists. With the political defeat of the King, the conflict became bipolarized. The triangle was still there, but the monarchists either kept quiet or acted clandestinely in the background. So the seven political parties’ alliance on the one hand and the CPN (Maoist) on the other sat at the table. The table was constituted by two negotiation teams consisting of three representatives each. The two sides negotiated a comprehensive peace and an interim constitution in the name of all Nepali people and the country as a whole. The King was defeated, the monarchists were invisible and other groups and actors did not really count. Civil society was subsumed either under the seven parties or under the Maoists.

However, the limits of this arrangement surfaced rather soon. I have already discussed the main issues under (1) ‘ethnic outbidding’. After the signing of the CPA and the endorsement of the interim constitution by the interim parliament, bilateralism came under heavy pressure from various sides. The birth of this problem is clearly linked with one politically explosive issue of high symbolic value: while the CPA was clear about decentralization and federal state restructuring, the same provision is not to be found in the interim constitution (although it was in one of the last drafts I checked). For many actors, this was a plot of the old hill Brahmins (including the Maoists) who do not really want to devolve power. So bilateralism – via the issue of federalism – triggered new bilateralism: there was no unified opposition that could have stood up against the bi-polar antagonists in the peace process. But many individual groups had learned from the Maoist movement how to get access to power and consequently copied their strategy. More and more groups formed which, under the name of a Madhesi people’s movement or “Cobra” or “Terai Tigers”, burnt tyres in order to be listened to by the government. The Minister for Peace and Reconstruction had more than 70 bilateral rounds of talks with different groups, including many serious political actors and powerful associations like the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, the Madhesi Human Rights Forum, the Dalit Federation, Women’s Associations, etc.

Neither side wanted to open up the negotiation table for more groups. The Maoists basically refused to talk to some radical left wing and newly armed groups with former Maoist cadres as their leaders. Therefore, bilateralism heavily backfired. Until the election date of April 2008 the series of deadly actions, Terai *bandhas* (closures) and blockage of the only transport route to the capital Kathmandu did not end. Only at the end of February 2008 did the interim government and three main agitating Madhesi parties sign the first agreement that has a chance of being implemented; previous agreements signed by the peace minister were not taken seriously by either side.

A striking parallel concerning the limits of bilateralism is the CPA between the parties in North and South Sudan. Before it was signed by the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) it triggered the deadly Darfur conflict in the West and the conflict in the Beja region in the East (as well as a range of further conflicts at a lower scale among pastoralist communities).

(5) *'Dilemmas of asymmetry'* (Ropers in this volume, 33) are related to the 'limits of bilateralism' and to questions of recognition. Peace processes are very much a struggle over and for recognition (cf. the Oslo process that led to the recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization, PLO). At the moment when the seven political parties agreed to negotiate with the Maoists, they *de facto* recognized the CPN (M) as a political party on an equal footing. Both sides agreed to apply a one-to-one formula for the talks (two equally staffed delegations). This almost perfect symmetry was only jeopardized by the fact that the Maoists were not recognized by the US, since they were on their list of terrorist organisations.

With the power sharing agreement, the question of asymmetry came up again. Since the parties considered the conflict as having been solved, there was no need to apply the one-to-one formula any further. The seven parties' alliance created the notion of "mainstreaming the Maoist party", which basically equalled a 7 to 1 formula (for the interim institutions). Needless to say, this created the first and maybe most serious crisis of confidence. The Maoists threatened to initiate a new "peaceful movement" which in real terms was prepared as a kind of urban warfare. At the same time, new asymmetries emerged: in the ceasefire commission, the Nepal Army (previously the proud Royal Nepal Army) did not want to be compared with the Maoist People's Army. When it comes to issues of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) this very fact poses a lot of serious problems with risks even for the peace process as a whole.

The international community plays an extremely critical role in the question of asymmetry, in particular when it comes to UN security arrangements and guarantees. Country envoys, it seems, have a natural affiliation towards state actors, no matter how badly they behave (with some exceptions). They have serious problems recognizing armed non-state actors, let alone talking to them or building a relationship. In Nepal the Maoists complained weeks after they came to the surface and established their party offices in Kathmandu that almost no envoy paid them a visit. At the same time, diplomats were found almost daily at one of the receptions or tea parties organised by the Chief of Army staff, Ministers, or the King's secretariat (the latter basically stopped after 24 April 2006). Asymmetries and a lack of recognition are major stumbling blocks on the road to peace, be it in Nepal, Sri Lanka or elsewhere (e.g. Sudan).

(6) The last two emerging archetypes, namely *'repercussions of even-handedness'* and *'paradoxes of international safety nets'* (Ropers in this volume, 33/34) do play a role in the Nepali context as well, but may not be so important, or at the forefront, as the other five archetypes. What was interesting about the repercussions of even-handedness was that the "balancing of criticism" or the attitude of promoting neutrality (and favouring "neither side") was quite superficial. The international community was politically correct in the regular press statements. However, behind the scenes and also in newspaper commentaries this balance often got lost, or was never even intended. The US envoy normally came down heavily on the Maoists whereas the King was only softly criticized for not reaching out to the political parties. Of course, those directly involved in the peace process – such as the UN – were more prudent. The local non-governmental organisations, in particular the human rights advocates and their international supporters, had a real problem with the regime change from the King to the political parties and Maoists. While all advocates and journalists were very outspoken about human rights violations during the direct rule of King Gyanendra (and welcomed the Swiss / European Union burden-sharing initiative in Geneva's Human Rights Commission, which led to a big mission of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR) the same advocates did not really know how to address the human rights violations committed during the period of the interim government. They mainly feared disturbing the peace process and confronting the Maoists.

The international safety nets were maybe not as paradoxical as elsewhere. Nepal was basically a process driven by the Nepalese themselves. The United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) had a limited mandate focused on monitoring arms and troops, as well as on the ceasefire and on CA elections. UNMIN was not mandated to mediate or to set up a huge mission. India, as a big and dominant neighbour, played a crucial role which, however, was often neither clear nor visible. For sure, India was there and used its influence in many ways and at various levels. It is difficult to prove, but my impression was always that there was an invisible safety net that would hold. The Nepalese may refuse to admit it, but everybody was aware that in the worst case India would help. The close links between the Indian and the Nepal Army were a kind of insurance against free fall. Paradoxically, India always claimed not to interfere, knowing that Delhi is the only actor that would have the capacity to do so. India was also the force behind the refusal of a more comprehensive UN mission or a formal mediation through a third party other than India. The Nepalese, however, managed the situation quite well, applying a mix of attitudes like, “we do not need India or foreigners to solve our problems” against, “please help us to get things done in a proper way”.

3. Systemic Conflict Transformation: The Added Value is in the Practice

Coming back to the questions set out in the beginning, I have to say that I did not learn anything I had not known before. However, I (and hopefully the readers) may be enabled to use knowledge based on experience in a much more structured way. Having said this, I concentrate my conclusions on the second question, which is also more important: what have we learned to enrich the praxis of conflict transformation? Some answers will be presented here; not in a “final sense” but rather to promote further discussions.

Three crucial general observations are:

- The value added of SCT is to be seen in practical terms; it is not about providing a new theory or creating a new school of conflict resolution. Emphasis should be on solutions next to problems in terms of systemic interventions – see the example of power sharing in a multicultural context (*Section 1.1*).
- Mobilizing internal resources and adding energy to the system are the main points of reference for SCT. There is an in-built scepticism on how changes in systems can be initiated and controlled from outside. The radical focus on narratives of the disputing parties constituting the system as individual actors urges a revision of current conflict transformation practices.
- It is not the description of archetypes as a sort of pattern which distinguishes the systemic from non-systemic approaches. What makes a difference is the way of addressing the archetypes, or the type of relations a third party has with the actors who are behind such patterns.

The value added of systemic conflict transformation can, in my opinion, therefore only be fully appreciated if it is tried and tested in practice, and thus experienced. Hence I would like to conclude my reflections by providing six personal lessons and experiences which I found important when addressing archetypes:

First, I am deeply convinced that the only way to cope with *ethnic outbidding* and ethno-politicization is to be as inclusive as possible. In practical terms: negotiation tables should reflect the complexity of the conflict lines among various actors. If conflict parties refuse to recognize certain actors, one has to develop concepts of sequencing and flexible geometry (with different types of

participation) based on consent and transparency. Ethno-politicization in whatever form always has a true core. In SCT one has to explore this core at early stages of the process, in order to use internal energies to deal with it constructively.

Second, addressing *mutual disappointment*: if a third party has trustful relations to all sides it will be accepted in a role of holding the mirror, warning parties about elusive elements of the process and about shortcomings and illusions. In Nepal, I confronted both sides with a SWOT analysis of the 12-point understanding three days after it was signed.² Although the leaders did not like to be disillusioned at such an early stage of the post-agreement honeymoon, they soon learned that the analysis addressed those very points which would remain critical throughout the process.

Third, *avoiding core issues* can be a sound approach of conflict parties and negotiators in order to bridge gaps, circumvent blockages, provide common ground through creative ambiguity, etc. Both sides win time for intra-party consultations but also to deal with misunderstandings, lack of trust, and disappointments. In SCT one could use concepts of sequencing and of negotiation architectures to address the aspects of this archetype. Pre-talks and talks about talks can contribute to highlighting the process first, without entering into substantive talks. In Nepal, there was a kind of second track task force with the Peace Secretariat (later Ministry) which prepared some of the core issues well in advance. The parties could make use of non-papers, concepts, proposals, etc. when they saw it as being useful and adequate.

Fourth, one must have established good relations and the parties must understand how a facilitator really ticks before he or she can do anything meaningful to address *dilemmas of asymmetries*. Again, in SCT a third party only acts if and when internal resources are being mobilized. Asymmetry is usually deep-rooted due to perception, cultural pre-dispositions and psychological patterns. Dealing with asymmetries implies long-term strategies of empowerment for both sides, of capacity-building, and of dealing with the past. In SCT we can help to mitigate asymmetries through dialogue facilitation, feedback processes and joint interactive analysis. The problem of recognition can be solved through a clear concept of representation and participation. On Nepal, Switzerland organised a first seminar in February 2003 (during the ceasefire which ended in August of the same year), where all three conflict parties (the monarchy, democratic parties and Maoists) engaged for one day in an interactive “needs and fears mapping exercise”.

Fifth, how should the issue of *even-handedness* be addressed? I believe that a facilitator has to sharply distinguish between values and persons. A clear value orientation may help the conflict parties in their own orientation, as long as you respect individuals and as long as those individuals trust you. And why do they eventually come to trust (you as) a third party? Maybe because parties see, personified in you, the values that they want to live up to in the future. It is not about a general normative background; it is more about democratic processes and fair play. My experience is that if you have no personal value profile (in terms of ethics, human rights, democratic values) or if you pretend to be “balanced” or “a blank sheet” in this regard, conflict parties are left wondering why they should believe you and entrust you with a sensitive mandate that their future depends on.

Sixth and finally, in order to address *paradoxes of international safety* nets, a key lesson for third parties is to be clear and consistent in roles and capacities. In my experience the UN, as the major actor in peacebuilding and peacekeeping today, is collecting too many roles and mandates to be active in one single context. The spectrum reaches from prevention (through Special Envoys of the Secretary General) to protection and humanitarian aid, ceasefire monitoring, peacekeeping, technical advisory roles, facilitation and mediation, as well as implementation, including post-

² A SWOT analysis systematically explores the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of a presented option or chosen course of action, drawing attention to potentially helpful and harmful factors of both internal and external origin.

conflict rehabilitation in all its different aspects. This confusion of roles not only leads to coordination problems within the “UN family”, it also makes the UN highly vulnerable to pressure from different sides. It is high time for the UN and other international actors to assess their own capacities and to reconsider their support strategies and architecture.

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

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 in this volume, 30)

This is elaborated in the earlier exposition of the “tetralemma” as an interesting tool for conflict 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., 29; 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 “constructive-critical engagement” as well as of “envisioning multiple peaceful futures” (Ropers in this volume, 37) 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 in this volume, 38).

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

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Working for Peace in Conflict Systems in Kenya: Addressing the Post-Election Crisis 2008

An Interview with Dekha Ibrahim Abdi

This text is the transcript of an interview with Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, in response to Norbert Ropers' article *Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on the Conflict and Peace Process in Sri Lanka*. The interview was conducted by Oliver Wils, executive director of the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support and co-editor of this Dialogue, on 14 June 2008, during a workshop on "Insiders' Mediation" in Schloss Munchenwiller, Switzerland.

Background – Box A: Kenya's 2008 post-election crisis

Violence broke out in Kenya following the presidential election held on 27 December 2007. The incumbent President Mwai Kibaki was initially declared the winner amid widespread allegations of electoral fraud, leading to protests by supporters of the opposition Orange Democratic Movement, headed by Raila Odinga. Both violent and nonviolent protests were registered in many parts of the country and ethnically-targeted attacks began to escalate, primarily against Kikuyu people living in the Rift Valley. Over 30 people were killed near the town of Eldoret on 1 January 2008, when the church where they were seeking refuge was burned to the ground. Attacks and looting were also reported in Kisumu and Mombasa.

A power-sharing agreement between Odinga and Kibaki was signed on 28 February 2008, following negotiations headed by the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. This National Accord and Reconciliation Act established a coalition government, with Odinga as Prime Minister and a bi-party cabinet, which was sworn in on 17 April 2008.

Dekha Ibrahim Abdi was one of the conveners of the Concerned Citizens for Peace (CCP) peace movement; the other members of the core team were Ambassador Bethuel Kiplagat, General Lazarus Sumbweiyi, General Daniel Opande and George Wachira from the Nairobi Peace Initiative.

CCP was created as a forum and framework of engagement to help Kenya transform the violent conflict and reconstruct its social fabric. It also aimed at creating a critical mass of people and organisations who worked strategically at three levels: “upstream”, “middlestream” and “downstream”. These three levels will be described in more detail at the end of this interview. But let us first hear from Dekha Ibrahim Abdi about the role that system thinking plays in her work:

Dekha, I would like to ask you first how relevant, or inspiring, is systemic conflict transformation, or what Norbert Ropers has outlined, for your concrete work in Kenya?

As a peace practitioner who does conflict analysis but at the same time process design, system thinking or system analysis is something that I was thinking about a lot last year, even before the current crisis of Kenya. But I couldn't find it in a book the way it was organised in Norbert's paper. So it was really like fresh air – as I was reading it I could identify places, I could find examples in my own context. It spoke to me. It gave me that I started making sense of some things I've been observing and doing, it started naming them for me. In that sense it's helped me to think, to grow and to re-energise. You sort of feel like you've been doing it again and again – and “maybe what I'm thinking right now is not so relevant”, “maybe it's not needed”. Then you realise yes, this is in relation to Sri Lanka, but yes, I can observe this in Kenya, I can observe this on the border of Kenya and Ethiopia, and Somalia. So you start making a connection with other countries, making a connection with yourself. What I think touched me so much about Norbert's paper was the fact that it was linked to practice, but also linking to theory. The frameworks that were put in there inspired me and I kept on carrying the paper with me. Since then I've been using the word “system thinking” in analysis, “system thinking” in strategy building. It became my conceptual framework of engagement. It's now very alive with me.

What does it mean concretely? If you look at a conflict situation/constellation, if you use it for analysis and diagnosis – can you reflect a bit on the tools/approaches you are using?

Let me go back to Norbert's paper, there is a place where he talks about the characteristics of systemic thinking, and he talks about dynamic frames in relation to time delays. I can see that also in Kenya, concerning the violence at the beginning of January. During the first five days of January, when the violence was in the Rift Valley, we did an analysis at CCP in the morning forum. We talked about hotspots and coldspots and we said, let's know where the hotspots are so we can intervene, but let's identify coldspots which have the capacity to become hot soon. And “soon” was two weeks later! People were focusing on the Rift Valley, and we were saying, focus on the Rift Valley, but also focus on central Kenya, because the people who are evicted from their land, their houses are being burned. They will become internally displaced, and they will move to central Kenya. Once the first internally displaced people arrive in central Kenya, central Kenya will stop being a coldspot, it will become a hotspot. So already you can see that systemic thinking in terms of time delay. Some people think that the problems are just in the Rift Valley – they think “thank god!” – but at CCP in the morning forum we were doing the analysis. We didn't call it “systemic thinking”, or say “time delay” – we didn't use that terminology. But we talked about the current hotspots, the potential hotspots which are currently coldspots, and the potential for them to become hot.

And that helps you to be strategic in terms of responding: you don't wait until the place becomes hot for you to respond. You start working on it while it is still cold. But the reality was that the process in Kenya was so dynamic and moving, and so big, that we weren't able to intervene in the entire Central Province; still at least we managed to create processes for Nairobi Province.

We also started using two things that you use when societies have historical trauma. Specifically, whether you're supporting processes of intervention or programmes to transform the violence, to do diagnostic analysis with system thinking is to use different tools. Some of it is a descriptive narrative – like a timeline: in that time this happened, in this time that happened. People are describing things. And it's like trying to remove the issues and placing them on the table. And then you take it to the laboratory and say OK, this is now out here, and you look into the details of it. You take the analysis from descriptive narrative to reflective analytical understanding of the designs of the conflict.

And that requires two processes: the first bit – using stages of conflict tools, using perception tools, using timelines – is helping to ventilate the anger, to make sense of things, to tell the story. (A lot of people like to tell their story, and the truth of their story – “my truth”.) That mapping helps you to bring the issues to the fore. Then after a while you really need to look, together with the actors in conflict, what are the threads that keep on repeating? You might go back to the same tools but you now go back with a different framework and ask: what are the patterns?

For me, the best diagnostic analysis has two sides. Where we use the word “diagnostic” it's like going to the laboratory, but the actors who are in the conflict need to go in the laboratory. You need to teach them how to use the tools. They need to look at their issues themselves, or collectively with the other party in conflict, so that transformation can happen. And then for them to also say, “yes, is this the problem?” It's like looking at yourself in a mirror. But it requires a lot of preparation, because diagnostic conflict analysis in itself is an intervention. It helps people to shift their perceptions, their attitudes, their behaviour, so the rules of engagement have to be negotiated. You cannot just do diagnostic conflict analysis as an “extractive process”, to get information for your own understanding. You have to work side by side with the people you want to get the information from. Or help them to do their own analysis, and you do your own analysis. It requires both sides and I think if we do it as a mechanical process, as an extractive process, then it doesn't empower, it doesn't transform, it doesn't *build* systems and structures. I think above all, from my experience, doing this sort of conflict analysis is nested within networks and networks of people who come together to look at this.

And then we also need to ask, “what are the historical injustices?” This thing is rooted in history, but this history cannot be transformed over a short time. It needs to be transformed over a long time, so you need to create societal structures which are multi-generational. Each generation does their analysis, develops a strategy, passes on to the next, draws lessons and failures from it. That, for me, is using structures, too.

What patterns does this kind of analysis reveal for the Kenyan conflict system, and how are they interrelated?

For me, from being active in Wajir since 1994 – and this is also true for Kenya – it looks like this: if you use a timeline you see that every five years, there's an election. After every election, there's violence. Every five or ten years, a drought. So environmental issues are connected to political processes like elections, they're linked to social issues like the violence. That shows you that actually, in doing analysis, you don't just look at this as a political crisis and then just do political analysis; whereas some drivers are in politics, you really need to look at environmental factors, social relations, economic sectors. And I think that this deep reflective analytical looking

at the system is to sort of say, yes, for example in Kenya, the disputed election was the trigger, but how did it impact? It impacted on the social relationship. It impacted on the social disparities, the economic disparities between the rich and the poor and the affluent. It became a class thing. So social grievances came, regional disparities came – and people said yes, we need a solution to the electoral violence, but we really need other solutions, too.

In addition, the impact of the Kenyan national crisis is linked geographically to the whole of Eastern Africa. Within three days Rwanda, Burundi, Eastern DRC, Congo, South Sudan, Somalia, Uganda – all were paralysed economically because they depended on the lifeline, so you see the interconnectedness of the geographical space, and again the interconnectedness of the social issues. At the same time, in terms of international partners, Britain and Kenya are so interlinked, because of the long historical colonial link but also economic links. The USA sees Kenya as their strategic partner on their global issues, the ‘war on terror’, etc., so it’s like “Oh my god, we can’t allow this country to...”

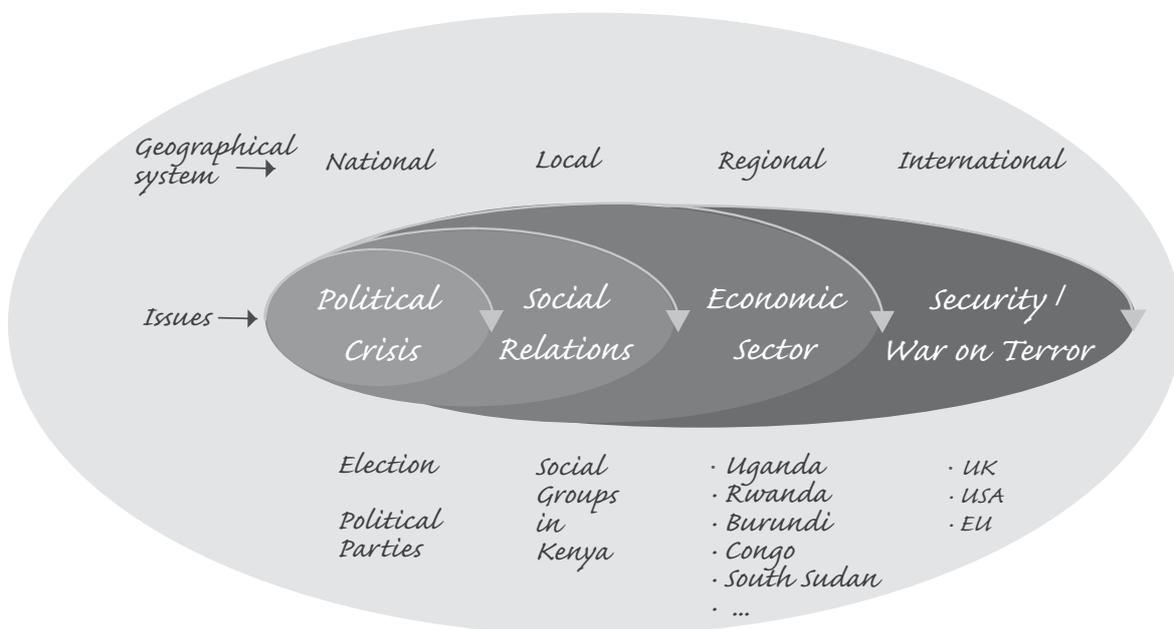


Figure 1: Sectors Connected as Issues in Conflict

That sort of analysis helps you realise that, while looking at one problem you really need to look at other sub-sectors. Later on, and this was a ‘find’ to me and to CCP, during the Kofi Annan-led processes, there were four agendas. The first agenda: ceasefire, national and local. Agenda number two: the humanitarian crisis and the economic impact of the conflict. Agenda number three: the resolution to the political crisis. Agenda number four: dealing with the underlying issues, the constitutional issues, poverty and inequality, the role of youth, the role of governance issues – so many other things are on agenda number four. It shows that even the formal mediation team were also having a systemic thinking of how the issues are interconnected. And they listened to Kenyans, who told them that the election was just a trigger.

One final element that I’ve found is in terms of how issues are connected and nested in one another. For example, and I’ll draw this for you [see figure 2].

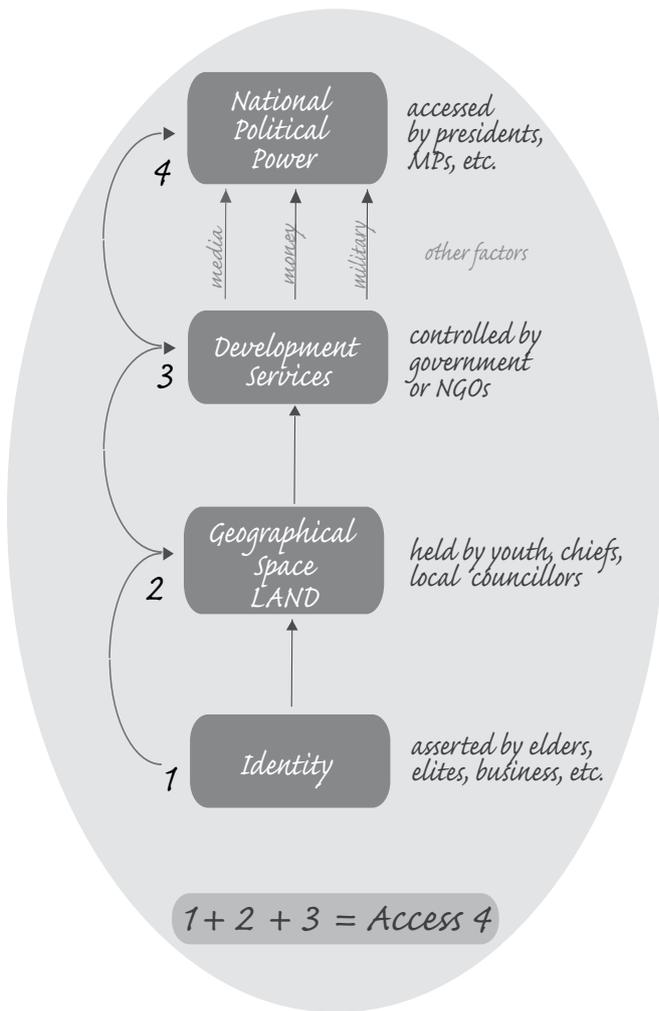


Figure 2: Factors of Conflict

money, if you control the constituency development funds, if you control certain services then that helps you in gathering any number of people within a certain geographical space, with a certain identity. That becomes the vehicle to access national political powers. And a lot of people, MPs and presidents, say, “look what I have done for you”, “look at my development record”, “look at this” – it’s like they do these things exclusively... and this creates a charity mentality and sycophancy, rather than recognizing people’s constitutional rights as Kenyans to have their basic needs met.

But at the heart of this, what people are looking for is a fair, just, inclusive system. If there is a fair, just, inclusive system for us all, as a value, then there is no need to assert the identity, no need to assert the geographical space. Then the geographical space becomes cosmopolitan, pluralistic, inclusive. The development services are a right, the national level becomes meaningless. Just when these other three are not being fair, then people start organising exclusive processes, then people also become militant. Identity becomes an issue. Geographical space becomes an issue. But if you create a fair, just system for all... This is an analysis of things that are linked and nested into one another. If you just look at land, land as an economic thing – no, you won’t get far. You really need to understand – which land? Land as a political asset, land as an identity asset, land as a space you hold as a bargaining chip?

When there is a political crisis or a contestation of a political crisis, but underneath there are other issues, for example when a group excludes a certain other social group from a geographical space, from services, from national political power, then all of a sudden it’s like, “Oh, why, we’ve been left out. Is it because we are this tribe, we are that geographic space?” Then they start asserting their identity. That identity could be a social identity, a religious identity. They go on to gather numbers and numbers of people to assert that identity. Having asserted that identity, it’s linked to a certain geographical space: “This is our country. This is our constituency. This is our district. This is our street.” So identity is linked to the land. When people claim land, it’s not land as an economic drive but land as a bargaining chip for that identity.

And on that level you’ll see youth, or people like councillors and chiefs, local authorities for Kenya, holding the space, securing the space. And that is nested in development services. Where a state exists like Kenya, people want to control some of the assets.

If you control the local authority



How do you then turn some of this thinking and analysis into strategy development for process design? To use Norbert's words, to identify agents of change?

Here in Kenya, there are elites, elders, chiefs, councillors, NGOs, government departments, MPs, presidents... So, let's say you understand the issue, you understand who is driving the issue. And then you ask, what is their need? What is it that they are trying to seek? Are they looking for these just, fair processes? Are they being militant? Or, in that term, extreme? Exclusive? Or what? Is it because they have a certain need that's not understood? Are they being seen as a problem? Are they being seen as the spoiler? When you have this sort of system analysis to understand the issue, the factors in the conflict, and you unpack it, you sort of see beyond the normal day-to-day picture. When people describe land they say it is a natural resource, it is pastoralist, it is the farmers' land. They give general names which mean nothing at the end of the day. But underneath that, you say, who are the drivers? "Oh, youth are the ones doing violence." But youth are not the problem. Behind the youth is an administrative system, or a political system. You ask again, who are the drivers, who are the designers, who are the holders of these designs?

And then you start thinking, how can I transform them? How can I understand their need? How can I make them part of the analysis? How can their needs and their fears be part of the analysis? You don't see them as a problem, but you see them as people needing to be understood. You understand their fear through the analysis and then they become part of the strategy development.

You look very much into all the different resources in the system or society you could use. In the case of the post-election crisis in Kenya, how did you design the process to bring these resources in? How did you really link micro and macro, or the national and the local levels?

I think first and foremost there has to be the engine, the drivers of the processes. And that is people who have had long experience, have worked in the context – in their own context and other contexts – and can read the signs of the time. We had people who had had a military background, who have served other countries.

You said "people who read the signs of the time" – how do you identify them? Do you know them, do you have a good intuition or would you ask other colleagues?

I think in CCP, for example, Ambassador Bethuel Kiplagat is a national asset. He's known for his peacemaking in Somalia and other countries. As well as George Wachira, General Lazarus Sumbweiyi and General Daniel Opande – they are people who have served their country and have served in neighbouring countries. They stood and addressed the media. And they called everybody to come and help them, making a public appeal: "I, General Sumbweiyi, see our country is not going right, please come to me. Come and help me." Just that open door policy, I think, was one side of public mobilization. But at the same time, in Kenya there were key individuals who, from 1990 onwards, were working at the community level, at the national level, who knew each other, who had had a relationship with each other before this crisis, and the crisis could not break us up because we have had 15 years of working together.

I think that's what we created in Kenya, but the investment from 1990 to 2007, I must say, is what gave fruit to the ability to convene quickly. When we said "we are Concerned Citizens", it was, "oh, we know, that's Dekha, we know her from her work in Wajir; that's General Opande, we know him; that's so and so". History becomes your asset, your pain becomes your asset. It gives you the capacity to convene for the conflict analysis, the strategy development, the organising and mobilizing.

CCP was also able to mobilize quickly due to the existing networks that were ready to work in their own context. These networks of peace resources are different, each making an

important contribution to the process of conflict transformation and peacebuilding in Kenya. They are, to mention a few: Inter-Religious Forum, PeaceNet, Women's Coalition for Peace, Election Violence Response Network, Media Council, Kenya Private Sector Alliance, and the National Steering Committee on Peace Building.

I joined the CCP core team when George Wachira called me on 31 December 2007 and requested that I join them. So five of us were the nucleus for CCP, but we had enormous foot soldiers, enormous thinkers, enormous researchers, enormous cultural leaders, enormous youth who came to us. Some days it was like serendipity, we would say, "can we talk to women?" And then the women appear. "Who has access to a parliamentarian?" – "I'm his son, I can go and do it." People volunteered and I think one of the important things is the *need* to solve the problem, the willingness of the citizens. All the time we talk about political will. Yet it is the social will, the citizens' will to change the situation. Kenyans had the money, they could have all left the country just like that, but the opposite happened. Kenyans stayed, those who came for holidays stayed, those who had the capacity to run away stayed and said, "we have to solve this problem". I think that was the spirit of our country, of saying "we can't let go". That is the greatest asset in designing processes: they have the willingness, they have the commitment, and that energy becomes an internal resource for them to say "what do we need to do?"

There is no mix-recipe for you to pour and mix – you create the recipe continuously. We had a morning analysis every day, it continues up to now! And each day a little bit of the recipe comes. But you test it. "Let's do this" – and we test it, there is no critique, there is no right and wrong. Any idea is a valid idea. So through this, people realised the patterns of our work: "it seems that we are always engaging with the top people. You here engage with the top. It seems that Dekha, you're good at engaging with the middle level. It seems like Francis Nguli of PeaceNet and his team have the capacity to link with grassroots." And although words like "upstream", "middlestream", "downstream" just came out of the moment, it has been there continuously, dreaming, thinking. Sometimes a process requires that intense engagement, but also after a while taking a break from it, to think through it, and then fluid processes for you to come in and to come out.

Where do you get your power, your energy? Every morning you were gathering a lot of people, you were doing analysis together. I imagine that is very challenging. And if your process gets difficult because you think something needs to be done and there is a blockade, how do you deal with that?

I think from a variety of sources. One, it's amazing to be a parent. It's amazing to leave the work behind you and on a weekend just shut down, and stay at home, and talk to your children about what you did, and then ask them for answers. I think when we started engaging with the Ministry of Education in terms of trauma healing in school, I got those ideas from my children, and I came back to CCP Monday morning and said we have to work with children. They become a source of inspiration.

Two, the five of us of Concerned Citizens, we created spaces where sometimes you break down and cry. I remember one of the evenings we were writing letters and redrafting, we were creating press statements and it looked like a role-play. I said this is not a role-play, this is my country, and we broke down and cried. It releases some of that energy. And then it's just to be able to say, hey, I need help. I remember a colleague from South Africa said, "I can offer you ten days". We said if you can offer us one hour, get on a plane and come, just to be there and say what can I do? You may say, "now, can you write this paper for us? Can you organise that meeting with those young people? Can you help us, this is what we are thinking, can you put it in writing?" Get outsiders to come in and take specific roles, asking anybody to come. So that some days when you are completely dead and say, today I can't get up, I'm going to lie down, there is not the need to be there every day.

Acknowledging the fact that your body cannot function, you say, “I can’t function today, I can’t think, I can’t run this meeting today, I need help,” so somebody else runs the meeting and people contribute – and you don’t feel guilty that you are not available. It is to voice that you’re not carrying the whole world by yourself, that everybody is carrying a little bit of the world together.

And the other thing is, as someone who is devout, trying to have spiritual time with God, time for devotion, time for reflection, time to make sense, above all of the traumatic experience in Kenya. I, for example realised another side of me, that actually there are some days when I can’t think in English, I can’t think in Swahili, I can only think in Somali language and I started writing poetry in Somali. And I said, oh my god, I can write poetry.

It’s those sort of spaces – and family and colleagues and talking through something – that really help you also to realise your own potential. Sometimes you don’t realise that you really do have those potentials. So you require so many different resources and support mechanisms. But if you’re a loner it’s not possible. It’s too heavy, it kills you. You really require the process to nourish you. Because if you become compassion-fatigued, then all you can give is venom. You can’t organise analysis, you can’t organise strategy building, you’re criticising, you’re impatient. When you see that, you have to understand the signs of your body, and the signs in your team, and say it’s time for you to take time out.

If I can come back to the question I posed at the beginning once more. SCT, you said, was very inspiring for you and helped you to frame your strategic approach. Yet is there something you wished had been elaborated more, to be more “practical”?

I think because there was some abstract and academic thinking, it needed to be simplified. I don’t know what level of audience it was meant for... Sometimes, I was thinking the other day, we go up there and theorise, but I think it is important to have a pragmatic approach to the analysis and give what people can identify, some practice, practical things, practical analysis. If some of those things were put in the article, then it could have helped people to see themselves in it. I think a lot of practitioners will not see themselves in the paper, so it needs to be toned down to a practical level, with some pragmatic exercises, even reflection questions or something like that, so that they can pause and say what does that mean? That could have helped.

Dekha, thank you very much, that was very rich.

You’re most welcome.

Background – *Box B*: Concerned Citizens for Peace

Concerned Citizens for Peace (CCP) was created as a forum and framework of engagement to help Kenya transform the violent conflict in the aftermath of the contested elections in December 2007, and reconstruct its social fabric. It also aimed at creating a critical mass of people and organisations who worked strategically at three levels: upstream, middlestream and downstream. These three levels are described in more detail in the following:

UPSTREAM – Supporting the Top-level Mediation and Dialogue Process

Key activities

- a) Facilitating initial contact with protagonists
- b) Requesting former President of Sierra Leone Ahmed Tejan Kabbah to stay on and help in the initial contacts
- c) Supporting Desmond Tutu's visit
- d) Interacting with and briefing former African heads of state (former President of Mozambique Joaquim Chisano, former President of Botswana Ketumile Masire, former President of Zambia Kenneth Kaunda, former President of Tanzania Benjamin Mkapa)
- e) Discussions with other interveners, including Kenya-based and international diplomats and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon
- f) Process support to mediator (briefing papers)

The CCP core team created a small task team of 12 members (the Technical and Strategy Team) to support this upstream process and to take forward the ideas from the Open Forum (see below). This team helps in distilling and making use of ideas to support the work of the National Mediation Process. It also provides information about the day-to-day local action through media outreach.

MIDDLESTREAM – Supporting Mid-level Public and Private Institutions and Key Individuals with Links to the National Policy Framework

Key activities

a) Mobilizing the Government and Public Institutions

Concern about the effects of the crisis on schools and universities led to a visit to the Ministry of Education and a meeting with the Permanent Secretary, who is the most senior civil servant in the Ministry. The Permanent Secretary then organised a further meeting with heads of secondary schools in Kenya and education officers both at district and national level. This meeting took place on 15 January 2008 and focused on Education for Peace in School and First Aid in Trauma Healing for the school communities (teachers, students and non-teaching staff).

A meeting was also held with the Vice Chancellor of the public universities, discussing the impact of the post-election violence on the public universities and strategies to mitigate this impact. This led to a meeting with the Ministry of Youth Affairs and dialogue with student leaders from the public universities, bringing about their role in contributing to the national dialogue and promoting safety and security in their universities.

A visit to the Ministry of Internal Security led to discussions on strategies for cooperation that could add value to the initiatives undertaken by the government. The meetings agreed on a strategic partnership linking CCP to the Permanent Secretaries' initiatives.

Finally, a meeting was held with the Permanent Secretary in charge of public sector reforms, and a member of the inter-ministerial Committee on Humanitarian Response and Peace Building. Discussion focused on the establishment of a collaborative framework for dialogue and peacebuilding from the ground up.

b) Mobilizing the Media

The FM vernacular radio stations played a role in fuelling the conflict during the campaign period. After an initial discussion with a small group of presenters, they agreed to mobilize 50 local vernacular stations for a half-day training on conflict and peace sensitivity in radio programming. A public dialogue session with the 50 media houses led to a commitment from the presenters to hold the country together and take active roles in building peace through the radio.

A follow-up meeting with the Media Council of Kenya was held, where the discussion focused on the need to train journalists on peace journalism and revisit the gap in the code of conduct.

DOWNSTREAM – Supporting Local-level Pragmatic Actions by Key Individuals, Groups and Institutions to Transform Local Violence, Mobilize for Change and Offer Practical Support for Confidence-building and Healing

Key activities

a) Open Forum

At the launch of CCP, the initiators called upon Kenyans to join and contribute their thoughts towards the resolution of the crisis. The Open Forum became the place where people of all walks of life came together to reflect, analyse and strategise, connect and act jointly. In the first month of the crisis, the Open Forum met for 2-3 hours every day. Each session was attended by anywhere between 30 and 60 persons from different backgrounds.

The issues generated from the analysis sessions of the Open Forum formed the basis of the paper *The Citizens' Agenda for Peace*, launched on 9 January 2008.¹ The paper was widely circulated, locally and on the internet, and was shared with diplomats and eminent persons. The paper was also shared with the Inter-Religious Forum in order to avoid duplication and create synergy between initiatives.

b) Support to Nairobi Province

At a point when violence was threatening to engulf the capital city of Nairobi, CCP saw an urgent need to mobilize for peace in Nairobi. Activities here included:

- The formation of the Nairobi Peace Forum on 29 January 2008, under the chairmanship of the Provincial Commissioner and co-facilitated by Dekha Ibrahim Abdi of CCP and Hassan Sheikh Mohamed of the National Steering Committee (NSC). It comprised the NSC Secretariat, Nairobi Province Security Committee and the key line ministries of Education, Youth, Health and Information. It also included *Jua-Kali* Association (representing the informal sector), Resident Associations, the Kenya Private Sector Alliance, *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake* (the leading women's organisation in Kenya) and non-governmental organisations such as Saferworld and PeaceNet. The Nairobi Peace Forum continues to meet every two weeks.

¹ Available at www.peaceinkenya.net/CitizensAgenda2007Kenya9Jan.pdf [accessed 27 June 2008].

- The formation of District Peace Committees covering the three Nairobi districts (Nairobi North, Nairobi West and Nairobi East). These committees are now fully operational and working to build relationships between the citizens and state institutions.
- The elaboration of a training and capacity building plan for Nairobi Province, targeting all sectors of society both at the district and provincial level.

c) Support to Nyanza and Rift Valley

Support was given to a mediation and dialogue process between women in Borabu and Sotik, the border areas of two provinces, leading to an accord between the women, who committed to working toward local reconciliation and healing, and being agents of change.

d) Decent Burials and Mourning Initiatives

The nature of the crisis and the numbers of deaths it caused meant that there was an accumulation of bodies in morgues, streets and even people's homes. At the same time, people's ability to bury their dead in a dignified and culturally acceptable manner was severely limited. CCP helped to mobilize resources and supported communities in Kisumu, Eldoret, Nakuru and Nairobi in burying their dead. This became an important way of encouraging healing.

Some of the participants in the Open Forum came up with the idea of using flowers as an expression of mourning and memorialisation. Following weeks of negotiation with the government, permission was granted to build a temporary memorial and lay flowers at the hitherto heavily guarded and sealed Uhuru Park. Within days, the flower memorial was attracting people from all walks of life including politicians and the police, who all brought flowers to the memorial. Flowers were also laid in other towns such as Kisumu and Eldoret, including at the site of the church that was burned with 35 people in it.

More information on CCP can be found at <http://forums.rescuekenya.org/ccp/> [accessed 15 July 2008].

Further Reading

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- Ropers, Norbert 2008. Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on the Conflict and Peace Process in Sri Lanka, in: Daniela Körppen, Beatrix Schmelzle and Oliver Wils (eds.). *A Systemic Approach to Conflict Transformation. Exploring Strengths and Limitations*. (Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 6.) Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 11-41.

Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on Utility

A Response by Dan Smith

1. Scholarship and Practice

Norbert Ropers' essay on Systemic Conflict Transformation contains a valuable dual perspective, aiming both at academic rigour and practical relevance. It reflects his own trajectory through both reflection and practice. While the practitioner's perspective seeks to know what works and to improve what does not work as well as it could, the academic perspective seeks reliable general theory to guide understanding and ultimately practice. Combining the scholarly and practical standpoint in a single essay narrows the distance between explanation and practice, and that is extremely important.

On the one hand, too much scholarly research on peace and conflict themes pays too little attention to the practical realities of violent conflict and peacebuilding. Too many scholars have no experience either of the field of combat or of the processes of peace – and while it is not impossible that purely abstract and deskbound reflections far from the sites of contestation and compromise can help improve peacebuilding practice, it seems fair to say that theory's contribution to practice will be clearer and quicker if the gap between them is relatively small. On the other hand, too many practitioners have too little patience for or interest in general theoretical explanations that might usefully challenge – or at least lead to a valuable reflection on – their own assumptions about how peace comes about.

So the first appeal of *Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on the Conflict and Peace Process in Sri Lanka* is that it offers this dual perspective of scholar and practitioner. The combination balances the habit of dispassionate reflection with the practitioner's passionate

engagement. Each is a useful counterweight to the other. The commitment of the practitioner is essential, but can cloud the analytical mind and blinker the perspective. Improving practice means, in part, identifying the generalisations that can be read out from specific experiences in different contexts. To do that, the practitioner has to stand back a little. The scholarly part of the compound of theory and practice helps raise the practitioner's gaze from the gritty immediacy and perhaps there is then a better opportunity to grasp issues of broader relevance. Meanwhile, the practice side of the duality both emphasises the importance of practical relevance in research design and helps reduce that difficult distance between abstract theories in the library and how things actually play out in complex and often chaotic real situations.

At the same time, this combination of qualities carries its own risks. Practice might be shaped by over-elaborate concepts, for example, and research might be distorted by a sense of the practical requirements, the urgency of getting a useful answer. Overall, the criteria by which such work demands to be judged are higher than either work that is purely of practical interest – a 'lessons learned' study, for example – or work that is purely of theoretical interest.

Ropers' essay proposes the use of a systemic approach to conflict transformation to link theory with practice. The proposition draws on experience of doing exactly that in Sri Lanka from 2002 to 2007. At the start of that period, a ceasefire was agreed between the combatants in Sri Lanka with what may have seemed at the time like surprising ease. During it, the ceasefire and its gains were eroded as the parties seemed unable to take advantage of the opportunity they appeared to have created. The aftermath of the tsunami did not encourage progress towards a peace agreement in the way it seems to have done in Aceh. The tide of violence steadily increased and by the end of the period, the ceasefire was all but defunct. This was, then, a period in which the issues addressed by Ropers' presentation of systemic conflict transformation were of fundamental significance in a country's well being and historical evolution.

The approach in the essay seems in the end to raise at least as many questions as it answers, which is often the way with an effort to link a general theoretical approach to the intricacies of a specific situation, such as that in Sri Lanka. The scholar will not find this a problematic or critical conclusion; the practitioner might do – or alternatively might pick what seems to work and move on.

2. Strengths of Systemic Analysis

Chaos Theory warns us that the world does not always function in a way that is amenable to easy analysis. While we might like to think in terms of relatively straightforward chains of cause and effect, the way the world works is full of cases where small factors, knocking into each other so to speak, in ways that are hard to predict and often even tough to observe, have consequences upon consequences that we cannot always trace. It is the first advantage of systemic thinking that it offers us a way to address chaos.

It may be worth offering a brief explanation of why Chaos Theory is of interest. The digression seems worthwhile because the way that the word chaos is normally used means something quite close to "senselessness". It could be regarded as being counter-productive to apply it to conflict since many people see violent conflict and throw up their hands in horror at the senseless nature of the whole thing. That reaction is understandable but unhelpful. It is very often the first task of conflict resolution and peacebuilding to show that it is possible to make sense of the situation, to understand it, to discern interest, motive and purposeful actions – because only then is it possible

to identify potential interest in a different course of action, motives for peaceful settlement, and the prospect of purposes and actions changing. The difficulty is that this sometimes produces a relentless optimism, which may be as likely to overlook genuine obstacles in a peace process as relentless pessimism is to ignore real opportunities.

Trying to find a way of moving past these dilemmas, I have become interested in Chaos Theory.¹ Applying an approach that seeks out unlikely connections between widely divergent phenomena offers useful perspectives on economics, even if its tone and content are very different from standard academic or marketed economic analysis (see Levitt/Dubner 2006). It has struck me that if more people understood the basic insights of Chaos Theory, there might have been a widespread recognition of the risks of global warming and climate change much earlier than has been the case, because of the emphasis that both Chaos Theory and climate science place on tracing distant consequences. An example from the field of climate change that could be a case study for Chaos Theory is the case of the declining population of lemurs of Madagascar. Lemurs are mating and reproducing on a cycle guided by light and the length of days, but climate change means that their food is growing on a different time-scale, so there is too little food available for the young (Walker/King 2008, 39/40). In a different context, I asserted (but did not support with argument) that assessing the impact of peacebuilding might be more fruitful if we looked at Chaos Theory, because of thinking about indirect effects, knock-on consequences and the very large number of variables that determine the prospects for war or peace in a given context, rather than by continuing to hunt for a simple cause-and-effect explanation (Smith, D. 2004, 15 and 51/52).

While having no pretensions of deep theoretical insight into this field I was struck and pleasantly surprised by parallels between Ropers' presentation of Systemic Conflict Transformation and some features of Chaos Theory. These useful parallels are particularly noteworthy in the proposition that a focus on systemic analysis means paying attention to "network structures".

This is the second strength of Ropers' use of a systemic approach. The notion of incorporating "feedback loops" into the basic analysis is crucial – not only to analyse the context but to analyse the actions that are to be undertaken, and in fact to realise that the peacebuilding actor (and even the analyst) is a part of the situation being analysed, so must be included in the analysis. It is self-evident that this could lead to third parties being more reflective – whether they are governments, inter-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or individuals.

Equally, the incorporation of time into the analysis, while it seems obvious, is notoriously difficult – how many times does the conflict analyst write that s/he has only offered 'a snapshot of a fast changing situation'? Emphasising the importance of time and likewise distance as factors that make a uni-directional chain of cause and effect an inappropriate assumption is important. To revert to Chaos Theory, it is time and distance as well as the multiplicity of actors and variables that generate the uncertainty about actions and effects that Chaos Theory sets out to explain.

I am not sure, however, that, as Ropers states, this complexity reflects the lack of linear logic between causes and effects in a social system. I think it simply reflects the fact that many things take time – among them, education, awareness-raising and learning. As a result, while education left to itself might over time lead to exactly the fine results we hope for in linear manner, education is never left to itself. As one goes through educational experiences, other influences come into play, some of which strengthen and some might weaken the prospects of education achieving its desired outcomes. Each of these has its own linear effect. As a result the learning process does not happen in the smooth getting-more-knowledge fashion that traditional views and policies about education seem to assume.

¹ A useful and very accessible general introduction is Smith, L. 2007.

Likewise, as experience has shown in many different environments, the multiplicity of linear effects working at different speeds and in different locations mean that a peace process taken as a whole is not necessarily linear. In fact, the opposite generalisation would be more tenable: in general, a peace process is necessarily non-linear. As it unfolds over time, other influences are at work. So the process is at least iterative and potentially a spiral – circling and re-circling through territory that is modified by each repetitive visit.

This mode of thinking may make it easier to understand why and how peace agreements break down and how it is possible to work to strengthen them. The systemic approach brings into sharp relief the problem of self-reproducing conflict dynamics – or of self-weakening peace dynamics – through its attention to feedback loops over time.

A third strength of the systemic approach is its concentration on people and their learning processes. Noting my reservation expressed above that I make no great claim to knowledge of Chaos Theory, it seems to me that the attempt to apply this natural science construct to social science must also encourage a clear focus on the role of people, both as individuals and in groups. The archetypal (albeit misleading) presentation of Chaos Theory in terms of the movement of a butterfly's wings in Tokyo causing tornadoes in California is, translated into the social realm, an attempt to grasp that small groups and ordinary people can have far-reaching impact. Peace processes that neglect the people are running serious risks of failure. That is, in fact, the fundamental insight on which peacebuilding is based.

3. General Applicability – The Acid Test

Ropers puts forward seven archetypes of fragile peace processes. As he comments in a footnote, it is questionable whether it is particularly useful to classify them as archetypes, because of the term's baggage. But the key issue is whether what is identified through them makes an appearance in many different contexts and whether a given list of archetypes stacks up and becomes a useful diagnostic tool. In other words, two questions:

- While the seven categories may have appeared in one setting, are they common?
- If the seven categories are common, are there others that are equally common?

The second is the more demanding test. The problem it raises is that if a list of archetypes gets very long, it may lose utility. The advantage of such a theory-driven checklist lies in its ease of use; if making it more reliable makes it more complex, it becomes less interesting and less useful. The practical appeal of theoretical frameworks is in similar fashion likely to increase in proportion to their simplicity.

Mulling this question over, the Crocodile River game came to mind and did so with a feeling of inevitability. This is a much used game in teaching conflict resolution and facilitation, which asks participants to form two negotiating teams, make value judgements about a story in which right and wrong are hard to discern, and negotiate an all-encompassing agreement putting the story's characters into rank order from most honourable to least. When using this game as a teaching method in former Yugoslavia, my experience was that disagreements *on* each side were always as much of a blockage to agreement as the divisions *between* the two sides, and sometimes the internal issues were considerably more significant.

In many peace processes, disunity within ostensibly unified conflict parties lies behind hitches in negotiations and obstacles that emerge in the post-agreement continuing peace process. In Sri Lanka, for example, the different positions within the government, whose president and prime

minister came from different and opposed political parties, and the differences among the LTTE that led eventually to the breakaway by what came to be called the Karuna faction, are important parts of a reliable explanation of why the initial progress to ceasefire could not be transformed into actual conflict settlement.

The first archetype listed by Ropers – ‘ethnic outbidding’ – reflects on intra-party issues, but does so with focus on a specific political mode. The text moves on from describing the archetype to concluding that “any sustainable peaceful settlement needs parallel efforts to accommodate intra-party resistances in one way or another” (in this volume, 31). That could well be a viable general conclusion, but with wider general application than in cases where ‘ethnic outbidding’ occurs. However, it is also worth looking again at the phenomenon. True, it has a long history in Sri Lanka and has a lot to do with the evolution of the conflict in the 1950s and 1960s, but it is questionable that the political rivalries in Colombo – i.e., not between the parties but among Sinhalese parties – in the period 2002-5 were determined by ethnic outbidding or expressed in those terms.

While the risk of mutual disappointment – the second archetype – seems more reliable as a guide to pitfalls in peace processes, the third archetype of ‘avoiding core issues’ is open to the objection that it might be adopted as a conscious strategy. Rightly or wrongly, this was part of the strategy for the Oslo process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization PLO – agree on the substance that is possible to agree on now and define a set of negotiating principles for getting to final settlement on the rest. Given the apparent impossibility in the early 1990s and now of agreeing on a settlement – even though everybody seems to know what settlement they would agree on if they could only agree (two states) – opting to avoid core issues was not an unintelligent choice. It did not work out the way its advocates intended and hoped, but it was perhaps at least worth trying. Either way, characterising the strategy as simply a recurrent pattern or resistance seems to miss out on analysing the dilemmas and issues in any attempt to bring a negotiated peace to that conflict.

Rather than follow this track of inquiry through all seven of the proposed archetypes and their conclusions, it may be more useful to attempt to sum up the underlying reservation. The notion of archetype is presented, in the introduction to the section, as a diagnostic tool. As each archetype is presented, it is treated as not just a diagnostic but also a prescriptive tool. It could be argued that the core purpose of diagnosis through archetype, whose usefulness may well be confirmed by further investigation, is more likely to be preserved if it is made the *sole* purpose.

4. Identifying the Value Added

Notwithstanding these reservations, there is considerable value added in Ropers’ espousal of the SCT approach. However, he does leave some open questions behind on exactly this issue. At one stage (in this volume, 25) he argues that the added value lies in “the detailed contextualisation and visualisation of linkages” between the variables. It is possible that he would respond to my next point by saying it is no more than a question of wording. But it seems to me that the added value does *not* lie in identifying the linkages but in identifying the unfolding processes. The emphasis should be on the feedback loops, time delay, issues of distance, network analysis and focus on human beings and their learning processes, all of which are referred to earlier but seem not to be picked up at this point in the argument.

When Ropers offers a systematic list of the systemic approach’s added value, he suggests three further points: self-reflection by the third party, convincing conceptualisation of the self-reproduction of protracted conflict, and the focus on solutions alongside problems because

identifying solutions is difficult and some seeming solutions create new problems. These claims all seem well grounded and supported by the evidence and analysis within the essay. Even so, this reader found some reasons for scepticism starting to rear their heads. Fortunately, by looking at them, a perhaps surprising additional point of value added can be identified. In what follows, then, first come some sceptical thoughts and then, in *Section 5*, the extra value.

I take the question of utility as the starting point again, because of my practitioner's perspective. We should always be asking tough questions about utility. These questions have to go beyond asking whether a theory is applicable to a particular case and ask whether it is the best approach to a particular problem. The question is not whether it works, but whether it works better than any other approach. And this in turn means becoming very precise and specific about what can be achieved by using it, and thus being open about what cannot be achieved, because only that way can we be clear about its advantages compared to other ways of approaching the problem.

Ropers asserts that the systemic approach "offers a practical tool to understand and explain non-linear developments" (in this volume, 15). But is that really so? It seems to me that what it really does is to remind the third party actor and analyst that these non-linear developments are important. That is a different, useful but more restricted role. The reason for this, put briefly, is that the systemic approach is a theoretical rather than an analytical framework. It provides good questions and a way to approach them, rather than a checklist for answers. If so, the framework should not be over-taxed or its benefits exaggerated. Theory does not do the work for you but may, if it is good theory, tell you where to do the work and what tools you need.

This can be explored by looking at the six key questions Ropers proposes have to be addressed in a systemic conflict analysis (in this volume, 17-21). These are standard questions for conflict analysis. It is not clear that there is something specifically systemic about them. They are the questions that should be asked if, without taking a systemic approach, one is simply attempting to be holistic. Indeed, Ropers' arguments and examples do sometimes seem to blur the distinction between being systematic and taking a systemic approach. If there is a systemic essence to the mode of conflict analysis proposed in Ropers' essay, it is not to be found in the questions but in how they are approached – not just what answers are produced, but *how* the answers are produced.

It is instructive to think about the types of analysis and range of skills required to answer the six questions. The first three are about parties, issues and historical dimensions. These can all be addressed using standard political science qualitative research methods. The fourth question is about structural and contextual factors that require a broader basis in social science, potentially including economics, anthropology and social psychology. The fifth question concerns the parties' interpretations of the conflict, which require exploration through sensitive textual exegesis, presumably informed by the methodologies relating to the previous four questions. And the sixth question is about framing conflict resolution options; this requires broad conflict knowledge plus those precious qualities of imagination and realism. In fact, a key quality here is intuition – the capacity to process experience-based information quickly and understand its applicability in a given context.

Thus, the types of analysis required are different. The breadth is demanding, either for an individual or for a team. Standard academic approaches cannot work because of their tendency to value one discipline or sub-discipline or methodological preference above others. Their narrowness cannot capture the feedback loops, time factors and progress through spirals that characterise systemic thinking as Ropers presents it.

There is also variation in the level of skill required to answer each question. The first three questions require good intelligent analysis, drawing on the methods of qualitative political science, but the combination of different approaches required to answer the fourth and fifth questions

presuppose a more demanding skill set, while the realism, imagination and intuition that are required to frame options for conflict resolution make a precious (because rare) combination.

As further work is done both on the theoretical shape and the practical application of systemic thinking, some attention might be given to the differences between the different components of the approach, as revealed by these six questions. But I would suggest that an even more valuable avenue to follow is to think about training and competence development, the management of knowledge and the support of practitioners.

5. Added Value and Challenge: A Better User

Norbert Ropers' essay lays down a challenge. As I have revealed, I am sceptical here and there about his argument and the way it is developed. But at the end, there is a formidable challenge that is well backed by evidence and reasoning. Answering these six questions is not easy. As indicated above, standard academic approaches will not answer the questions adequately; they will get us part of the way on some of them, but will not deliver us to the analytical destination we are aiming at.

Indeed, the conclusion I take out of Ropers' essay is not in the end to do with theory and analysis and their relationship to practice. It seems to me that the key value added by the systemic approach lies in a clearer understanding of the skills and qualities required both to analyse and to act as a third party in conflict situations. In other words, the theoretical framework of systemic thinking actually focuses in the end onto the importance of the human factor both in theory (see above) and in practice. Perhaps the goal is not a better (and therefore systemic) approach, nor even a better use of the systemic approach, but, rather, a better user.

The essay itself is a step towards this goal. But how do practitioners learn to become better users? How can practitioners' competence develop – and how can people start to become competent practitioners? In practice, many NGOs in this field stress the importance of academic knowledge as a starting point, leavened by experience – first learn by learning, then learn by doing. As master degree courses open up in the field of peace, conflict and development, this is proving to be a valid path for getting engaged in peacebuilding work. If we are honest, however, it is a valid path in part because there is no other path available.

The best training pedagogies now are all highly inter-active, stressing the arrival at understanding rather than the transfer of knowledge. It would be worthwhile to include the six-question framework and a beginner's guide to the systemic approach (or, indeed, to Chaos Theory) into a new approach to training practitioners. In this approach, training would not be a course done for a period after which comes experience. Instead, because training is achieved through arriving at understanding, it has to be understood as a process that continues. In fact, the process is probably less to do with training practitioners and more to do with giving practitioners the opportunity to learn.

For this, it will be useful to have a better storehouse of learning than we now have. Ropers' essay is a step in the right direction on this as well (as are other contributions over time to the Berghof Handbook among other publications). Practitioners themselves are the source of a lot of this knowledge but it is mostly not organised and not available, because it is sitting in people's heads. They are talking to their close colleagues but the benefit to the field as a whole is slow and diffuse. Some more opportunities for practitioners to learn from each other's experience, to deepen their understanding by comparing notes, would go some way towards meeting the challenge Ropers' essay puts in front of us.

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Perspectives for the Further Development of Systemic Conflict Transformation

A Concluding Reflection

Norbert Ropers

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. 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 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”.¹ 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 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.

¹ See Ramsbotham, Oliver, Tom Woodhouse and Hugh Miall 2005. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge: Polity Press, 288-301.

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.



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Norbert Ropers, PhD, is Director of the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies Sri Lanka office and Director of the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support, Berlin, Germany. The latter was established in 2004 with the aim to help generate, develop and implement innovative approaches to peacebuilding based on a systemic understanding of conflict transformation. The Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation (RNCST), which was co-funded by the Swiss and German governments, was set up by the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies Sri Lanka office in 2001.

From 1993 to 2002, Norbert Ropers was Director of the Berghof Research Center in Berlin. He is an experienced facilitator, trainer, consultant and researcher. He has dealt in particular with East-West relations in Europe, security policy, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the impact of transnational relations on political decisions and strategies and methods of conflict resolution. He has published widely, for example, on transnational problems, security policy, the social psychology of international relations, alternative dispute resolution and constructive conflict management. He initiated the “Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation” project in 1999.

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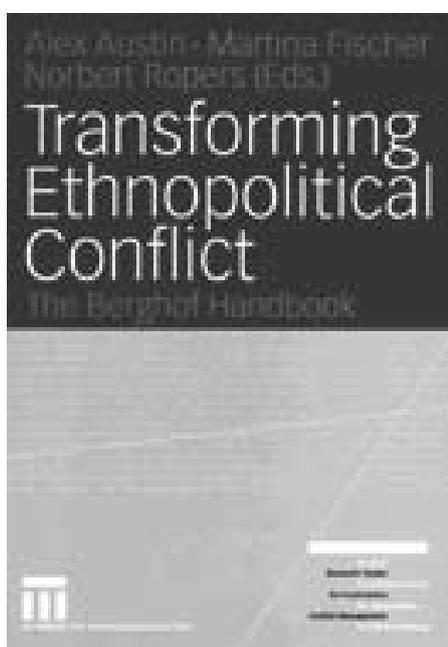
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