

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

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*“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/Fischer/Schmelzle 2006).

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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

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.

## 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”.

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.

#### 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.

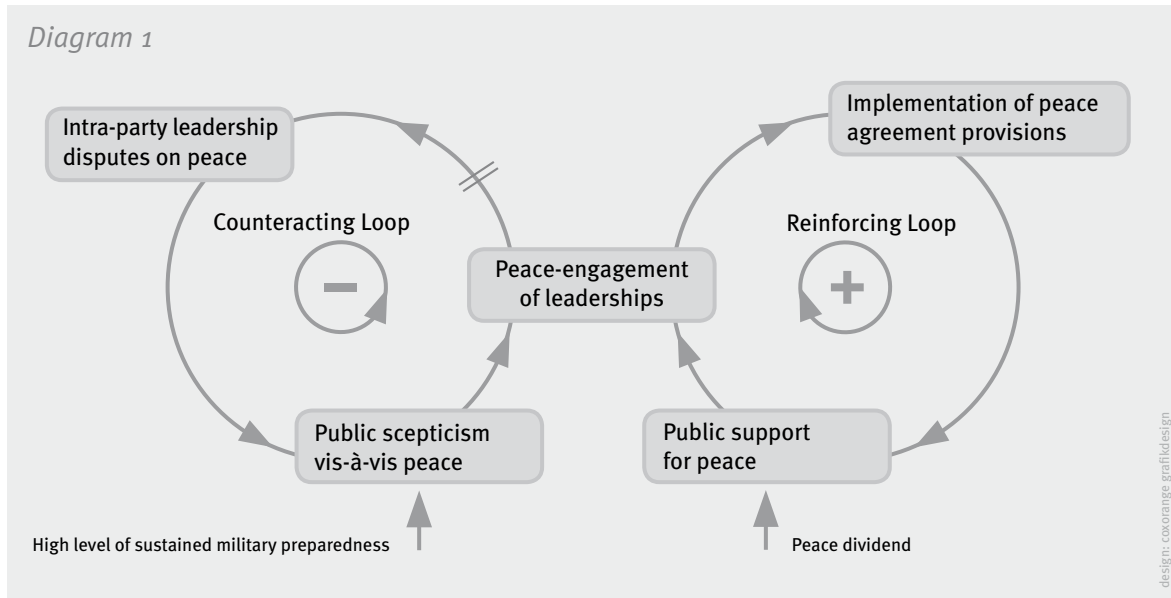
(Source: based on Ossimitz 1998)

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).<sup>2</sup> It can be seen as a specific methodology to understand, and simulate, the behaviour of complex systems over time. It

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

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).



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 loop<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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*).

### 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.

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

## 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

One of the early exceptions was John Burton, an influential scholar of conflict resolution since the 1960s (Ramsbotham/Woodhouse/Miall 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).<sup>5</sup> 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).<sup>6</sup>

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). 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*).

<sup>5</sup> 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).

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



### 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/Woodhouse/Miall 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?

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



### **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](http://www.berghof-foundation.lk).

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 ethno-political and an ethno-societal (sub-)system (*see Table 1*).

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

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

<sup>7</sup> 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/).)

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 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.

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"> <li>• Sovereignty</li> <li>• Territorial integrity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• “Homeland”</li> <li>• Self-determination</li> </ul>
“Fact-based”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Original settlers</li> <li>• Descendants of Vijaya</li> <li>• Only Theravada Buddhist country, thus custodian of Theravada Buddhism</li> <li>• Whole island was united under Sinhala kings</li> <li>• East part of Kandyen Kingdom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Original settlers</li> <li>• Descendants of Mohenjadarro and Harappa civilisation of India</li> <li>• Independent kingdoms in North and East</li> </ul>
Relationship-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Tamils are a majority in the Indian subcontinent.”</li> <li>• “Giving Tamils a part of Sri Lanka will never satisfy them, they will look for ways in which they could get the whole country.”</li> <li>• “Sinhalese will have nowhere to go.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Sinhalese are the dominant numerical majority.”</li> <li>• “Sinhalese will always discriminate against Tamils.”</li> <li>• “Tamils can’t expect the Sinhalese to understand Tamil grievances.”</li> <li>• “Sinhalese cannot be trusted to devolve power.”</li> </ul>
Needs-based	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language: Sinhala predominant</li> <li>• Religion: Buddhism given supremacy</li> <li>• Identity: Sinhala Buddhist, pure identity, retain identity supremacy, promote and protect Buddhism, security, ability to reach potential.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language: Tamil to be used in predominant Tamil areas.</li> <li>• Religion: Hinduism</li> <li>• 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.</li> </ul>



### (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).

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).

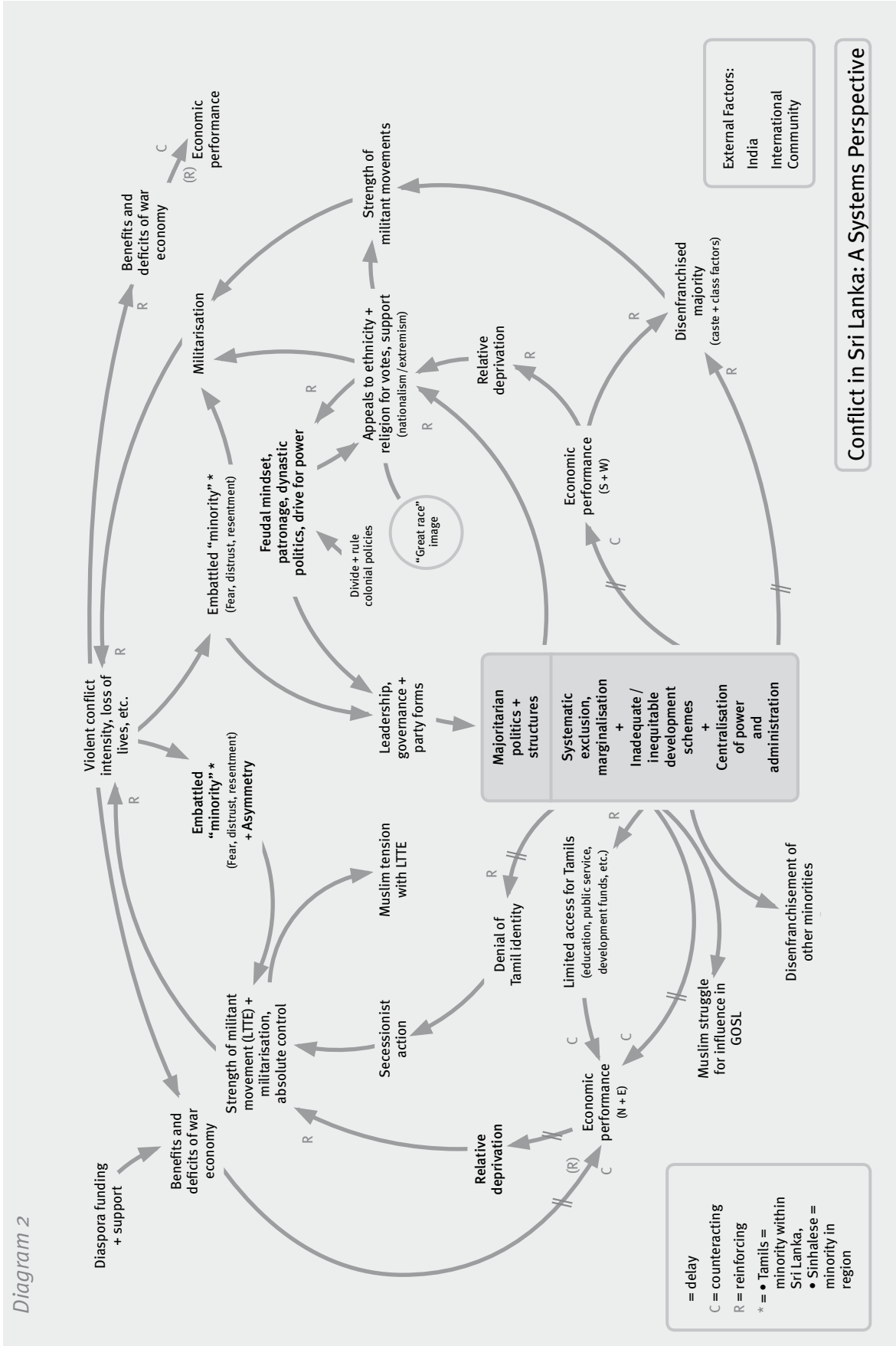
Inspired by this work, the RNCST team also used the system dynamics approach to identify key driving forces of the Sri Lankan conflict. Under the guidance of Peter Woodrow they came up with a diagram which is slightly simplified and expanded here (*see Diagram 2*).<sup>8</sup>

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/Woodhouse/Miall 2005, 3-54) had already focused attention on the main need to support processes of democratisation, state reform and respect for human rights. The

<sup>8</sup> 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.





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.

#### (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.

**Table 3: The Tetralemma of the Conflict on State Power (and its Double Negation)**

<b>“None of this – but also not this”</b> Avoid any of the solutions; emphasise other dimensions of mutual engagement; or go to war.	<b>Position A</b> Pro unitary state or moderate devolution only	<b>Both A and B</b> e.g. compromise (genuine power-sharing, federalism, etc.)
	<b>Neither A nor B</b> e.g. power-sharing is not the key issue, more important are genuine democracy, development, good local governance, etc.	<b>Position B</b> High level of autonomy or separate state

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.

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.<sup>9</sup> 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).

<sup>9</sup> 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).

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 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 ethno-political 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.<sup>10</sup>

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

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

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.

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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**See also...**

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