

Creativity in  
the Imagination  
of Sustainable  
Solutions

Strategic  
Planning of  
Systemic  
Interventions

Systemic  
Conflict Analysis  
and Conflict  
Monitoring

Engagement  
with Key  
Stakeholders

Mobilization  
of Agents of  
Peaceful Change

# Systemic Conflict Transformation

Guiding principles for  
practitioners and policy makers  
working on conflict

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In 2004 and 2005, the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS) conducted a concept study on “Systemic Approaches to Support Peace Processes”. Based on Berghof’s practical experiences, this study makes a number of recommendations useful for international organisations working in the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. It was supported by the Swiss Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (DFA), Political Division IV (Human Security) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The study also presents brief case studies that illustrate possible applications of this approach.

The conclusions and recommendations presented in this study are subject to further discussion and practical implementation, especially in the context of our strategic partnership with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Political Division IV (Human Security) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (COPRET).

We appreciate the trust, intense feedback and support we have received from the donors who funded the research project and this brochure. However, the opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Political Division IV (Human Security) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Any errors are the exclusive responsibility of BFPS.

**The full version of the study is available online at:  
[http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/systemic\\_approach.htm](http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/systemic_approach.htm)  
 or can be ordered as print version at BFPS.**

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# Introduction

Experience and research studies have shown that international efforts to mitigate violent conflicts and to build peace make an impact.

Yet we can safely say that such impacts could have been considerably improved if the actors involved had actively worked towards the following objectives:

- better analysis of complex conflicts (regarding power asymmetries, inclusion of all relevant issues and stakeholders, change processes, external powers, etc.);
- more targeted and coherent interventions with the various actors involved in the conflict, including those opposed to non-violent solutions;
- strategic choice of actors within the country (targeting agents of peaceful change); and
- supporting processes to generate new and innovative solutions to protracted conflicts.

## **What is the unique contribution of Systemic Conflict Transformation (SCT)?**

SCT represents a collation of best practice in conflict transformation work and systemic models of social relations. It draws on methodologies from other disciplines, such as family therapy and psychotherapy, change management and organisational theory, and cybernetics. The primary advantages of interpreting any given violent conflict as a system and to proceed in a systemic manner include the following:

- It helps internal and external actors to better reflect the complexity of conflict systems and their respective sub-systems. On the one hand, a definition of the system's boundaries and the ability to see the elements of the system as combined and mutually influential facilitate the development of a deeper understanding of the conflict and its dynamics. This is the idea that "a system is more than the sum of its parts". On the other hand, the necessary simplification of the complexity of violent conflict permits the identification of do-able interventions.
- Because of the holistic nature of systemic approaches, SCT can serve as a joint reference point for diverse actors and initiatives, for example in conflict analysis and planning and implementation of conflict transformation activities, thus fostering greater coherence and complementarity.
- It helps generate hypotheses about the most efficient and effective interventions within the conflict system.
- SCT focuses on change processes and resources within the conflict system, as well as facilitates the identification of relevant internal actors and better delineates the contributions and roles of external institutions.
- Guiding principles, such as multi-partiality and inclusivity, are operationalised on the basis of a systemic understanding of conflict; e.g., by initiating and institutionalising resource networks for all key stakeholder groups, processes of multi-stakeholder dialogue and/or other peace support structures.

## **What is this brochure about?**

This brochure provides an introduction into the whys and hows of Systemic Conflict Transformation. Although the complete study is available at [http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/systemic\\_approach.htm](http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/systemic_approach.htm), here we aim to give an overview of the elements and principles of SCT to practitioners and policymakers – those who work in or with countries affected by civil war and violent conflict, be it in the field of diplomacy, development cooperation, peacebuilding or humanitarian assistance.

# Why Systemic Conflict Transformation – The Background and Objectives of SCT

When practitioners start working with or in a country characterised by protracted internal conflict, most of them grapple with three key questions:

1. How can we support conflict transformation?
2. How can we tackle the complexity of the conflict?
3. What is our special contribution and how can we link up with others?

Our approach to Systemic Conflict Transformation is not an attempt to start up a new school of thought on civil conflict transformation. Rather, we seek to provide a conceptual framework that will help to further develop peacebuilding and civil conflict transformation, both in theory and practice. SCT builds on innovative and state-of-the-art practice in conflict transformation and combines this with systemic approaches from other disciplines, such as change management, psychotherapy and cybernetics. What we present here is our first comprehensive effort to conceptualise this approach. Further conceptual work and the application of Systemic Conflict Transformation (SCT) concepts in the field will follow in future.

## **Why the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support developed SCT**

The Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS) was established in the summer of 2004 as a sister organisation of the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management (BRC) in order to implement and further develop Berghof's hands-on contribution to conflict transformation. Both institutions closely work together.

Initial impetus for the development of the Systemic Conflict Transformation approach was drawn from two primary sources: 1) the wealth of insights from Berghof's project in Sri Lanka, the "Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation" (supported by DFA and BMZ/GTZ); and 2) a process of high level Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue workshops. While we have reflected on the state-of-the-art in both academic research and concrete practices in conflict transformation, we also have been inspired by the contribution of system's

theory to our field. Especially helpful for us were insights and concepts from those disciplines in which systemic approaches have been successfully used and adapted.

## **Objectives of SCT**

The relevance of a systemic approach is twofold. First, it provides a simple and accessible way to describe the complexity of conflict systems. Second, it offers a way to help see through this complexity. System interventions require an analytic reduction of the complexity and a series of working hypotheses. These are designed to make interventions feasible, help identify "agents of peaceful change" and achieve the critical mass necessary for political and social change.

The activation and empowerment of the system's own resources is a key contribution to the transformation of a conflict system. In this sense, we understand that SCT supports key individuals and/or groups in specific ways so as to stimulate and support political and social change towards a fair and peaceful society. As an external actor, for us it is crucial to see internal actors as those who will drive change. In order to do this, we base our work on the principles of long-term engagement, partnership, complementarity, multi-partiality and inclusivity.

In its practical application, SCT can be described as a dynamic joint learning process involving multiple internal and external, state and non-state actors. As the figure below suggests, it is a process whereby the outsider party tries to understand and evolve along with the conflict system, adapting its intervention strategies and support accordingly.



**Cycle of Systemic Conflict Transformation**

**1. Observing the system**

- regular analyses, monitoring and assessment
- understanding the complexity (“complexify”) and identifying do-able intervention strategies (“simplify”)

**2. Working with and within the system**

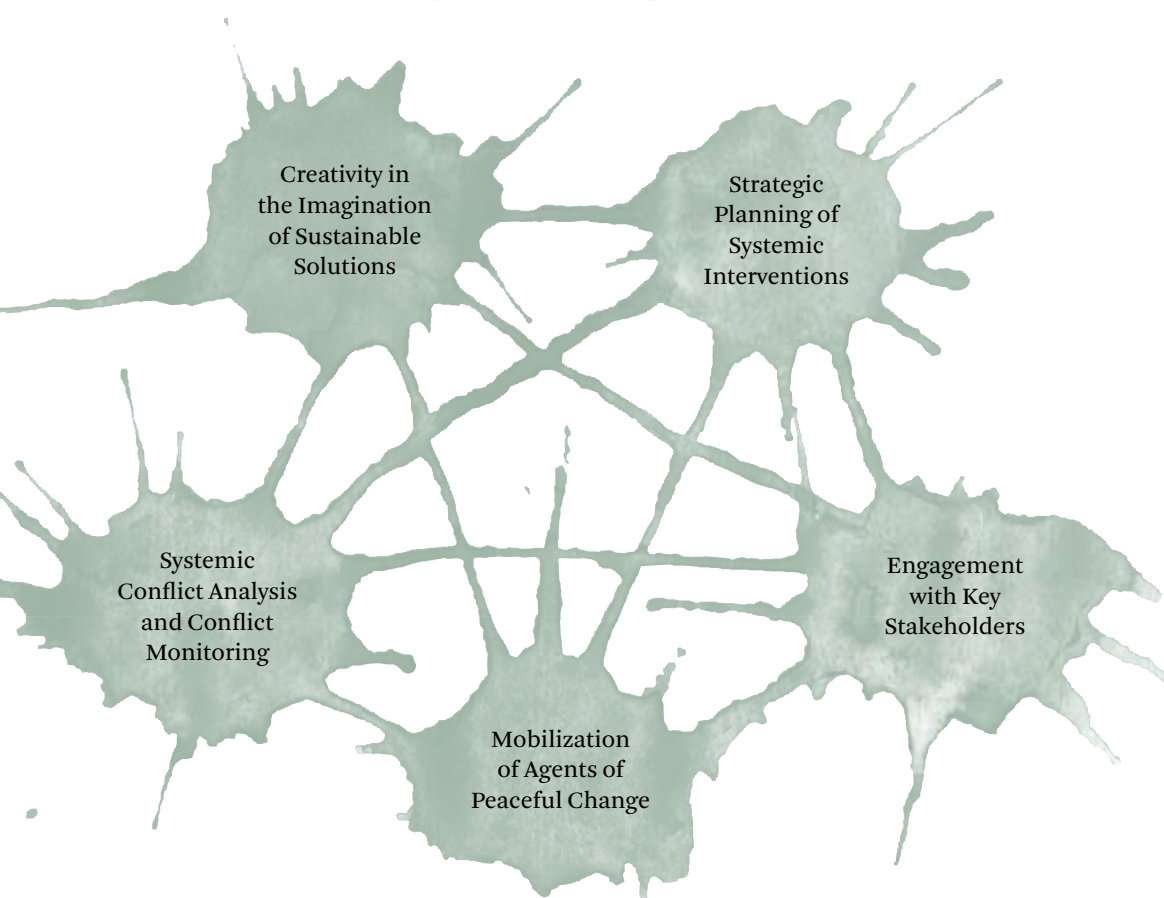
- critical-constructive engagement
- understanding of own role and its constraints
- supervision and “outsider’s perspective”

**3. Evolving along with the system**

- joint learning processes with partners and anticipation of reactions from the system
- flexibility
- adapting intervention strategies

**Five core elements of Systemic Conflict Transformation**

We distinguish five core elements of SCT, which the following figure reflects. Two of them refer to the planning and implementation design stages, while the three other elements refer to the necessity of SCT to work simultaneously on the levels of process/relationship, actors and issues.



# 1 Systemic Conflict Analysis and Conflict Monitoring

Given the protracted and highly complex nature of most ethnopolitical conflicts, a thorough analysis of the conflict, along with regular updates, are necessary preconditions for every intervention.

Although many good methods for conflict analysis are available, these tend to produce case-specific studies offering only limited perspectives on the overall complexity of a given conflict. Moreover, in practice conflict analysis is often done too quickly and at superficial levels. The risk here is that such an analysis might fail to make a contribution to the necessary adaptation of already-existing programmes. In contrast, the systemic approach helps avoid conceptualisations that are based on uni-linear, cause-effect relations. It also increases our understanding of complex and evolving system dynamics and the patterns of interaction between different sub-systems. Examples of the latter include the application of circular questioning and the development of systemic diagrams.

Joint analyses conducted with key partners and/or key stakeholders to the conflict are also rare. Nonetheless, involving internal actors is essential because it contributes to a deeper understanding of the conflict system and reflects the fact that the causes of conflict themselves are often contested (conflicts about the conflict). Further, joint analyses both foster local ownership and serve as a good basis for partnership.

## **Key insights and guiding principles for conflict analysis and monitoring**


While we think that many useful conflict analysis tools and manuals have been developed, we see the following key principles as essential for enhancing the quality of such analysis. These principles reflect our systemic understanding of the complexity of violent conflicts.

### **Define the boundaries of the system you are working in**

Every analysis should start with an assessment of what constitutes the conflict and what is not part of it. System boundaries usually do vary considerably, depending on whether we look at the geographical dimension of violence, the scope of the conflicting issues or the key stakeholders in the conflict. Most interventions at the civil society and grassroots level (Track-3 interventions) generally do not address the conflict system as a whole. Rather, they focus on smaller sub-systems involving a specific set of actors and a limited range of issues. It is very important to be clear about the respective system's boundaries and what can be realistically changed. However, it is equally important to assess both how these sub-systems relate to the overall conflict system and how they interact with and mutually influence one another.

### **Put local perceptions and knowledge at the centre**

Conflict analyses should be based on local perceptions of the conflict. Internal actors should define what is part of the conflict and what is not. They should also identify specific characteristics that belong to the different sub-systems of the conflict. While some local knowledge can be brought in by referring to already-existing analyses and workshop reports, we recommend validating key assumptions with representatives from the various conflict parties to complement these analyses. Again, we must take note that these parties are composed of distinct sub-groups which may have differing perceptions. Thus it is helpful to involve diverse local actors, paying close attention to gender, ethnic and religious balances. Local perceptions of the conflict and assessments of the linkages between different conflict sub-systems (e.g., through systems diagramming) help identify the resources for change within the system. For this reason, we suggest bringing in the perspectives of the main conflict parties, along with at least one external actor (triangulation).



## Systemic Conflict Analysis and Conflict Monitoring

Edward Aspinall, a highly-respected conflict analyst from the Australian National University, makes the following observation about the different perceptions of the causes of the conflict in Aceh/Indonesia:

“As with many internal conflicts, identifying key causes of the conflict is fraught with controversy. For many Acehese nationalists, especially those in [the Free Aceh Movement] GAM, the conflict is essentially about identity. They say it involves a ‘rediscovery’ of an ancient Acehese nationhood and a struggle for self-determination. For many other observers, including those from the Government of Indonesia (GoI), the conflict arises due to particular grievances in Acehese society about economic, human rights, religious and other issues. Acehese nationalists are apt to downplay grievances (except insofar that they, in their view, typify the ‘colonial’ nature of Indonesian control) and instead emphasise what they see as fundamental incompatibilities between Aceh and the Indonesian state. Supporters of the GoI downplay identity, instead pointing to grievances that (at least in theory) are amenable to resolution by way of technical policy adjustments. In fact, identity and grievance aspects of the conflict are inter-linked and mutually reinforcing.”

### Shift between a bird’s eye view and frog’s eye view

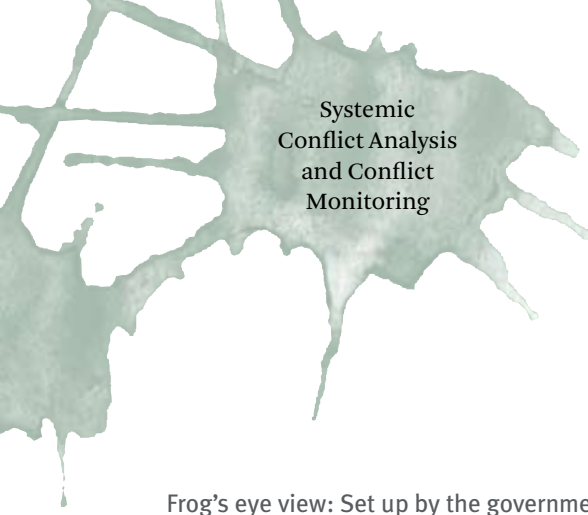
In order to encourage different perspectives on the possibilities of change, it can be beneficial to shift from the analysis of the overall system (a bird’s eye view) to the micro analysis of relevant sub-systems (a frog’s eye view). Regularly shifting between micro- and macro-perspectives is helpful for better contextualising the sub-systems, both to see how they relate to one another and help generate hypotheses about how they

might affect the overall conflict system. Given that almost all conflict transformation interventions target only a limited number of sub-systems, this practice of shifting perspectives is especially important. By locating our work in relation to the broader system context, we can better assess both how it impacts on the overall conflict and how a particular intervention relates to other peace initiatives.

### Different perspectives on the Guatemalan Reparations Programme

A case in point is the difficulties faced by the Guatemalan Reparations Programme (Programa Nacional de Resarcimiento). Set up in 2003 on the recommendation of the Guatemalan Truth Commission, this programme of reparations is led by Rosalina Tuyuc, a prominent Guatemalan victims’ representative and human rights activist. The programme receives some technical support from international donors. Its primary purpose is to make individual and collective reparations to the thousands of victims of Guatemala’s 36 years of internal conflict. However, the programme has been slow to take effect. Simultaneous attention to macro- and micro-levels of analysis sheds light on the problems therein.

Bird’s eye view: Reparations programmes always pose large-scale challenges. As the broader context for inaugurating such a programme in Guatemala indicates, these difficulties have been further complicated by two factors: 1) impetus for establishing the programme came from both internal victims’ groups and external pressure from the international community; 2) even though the reparations programme was established during the former FRG government, they were not proactive in effectively developing it. One of the FRG’s features as a political party is its strong link to former President Efraín Ríos Montt, who was largely responsible for human rights abuses in the early 1980s. This produced disturbing effects. Although officially excluded from the reparations programme, for example, people forced into the service of the Civil Self-Defence Patrols (PAC – Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil) have nonetheless already received compensation from other sources. However, some of these same people were responsible for committing atrocious crimes against other victims who are still awaiting compensation from the reparations programme.



## Systemic Conflict Analysis and Conflict Monitoring

Frog's eye view: Set up by the government, the Programme Commission's composition and mode of functioning were risky from the start. Specifically, competing differences among victims' groups—like the rest of Guatemalan society, these are fragmented – were not accommodated in that design. This oversight, combined with overly optimistic expectations on the part of victims' groups, eventually led to a long-term blockade in decision making. To resolve this stalemate, the government restructured the Commission in 2006, effectively taking full control of the entire reparations programme. As a result, there appear to be no effective mechanisms for public accountability of this process.

Greater sensitivity to the diverse and fractured character of Guatemalan victims' groups, combined with closer attention to the need to factor this reality into the operating structures and procedures of the reparations Commission, might have better enabled this process. Failure to do so, along with a host of other salient issues, has resulted in serious on-going problems. Guatemala still lacks an adequate (social and political) space for discussing and addressing the issue of appropriate reparations. This also indicates an inability to grasp the complexity of constructively engaging with victims of past violence.

### Make use of past experiences

Conflict systems are marked by pathological learning curves (e.g., cycles of violent action and reaction). Therefore, proper assessment of past peace processes and conflict resolution initiatives is very important before planning any new interventions. This helps us to better understand why certain initiatives failed and others succeeded. Reactions to past initiatives also offer insight into the internal patterns and functioning of the conflict system over time.

### Resources and Links

On the Aceh case see Edward Aspinall, Aceh/Indonesia - Conflict Analysis and Options for Systemic Conflict Transformation, August 2005; download at:

[http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/Aceh\\_final%20version.pdf](http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/publications/Aceh_final%20version.pdf).

One example of systemic analysis and planning is a method developed by the German consulting firm, Denkmodell: SINFONIE [http://denkmodell.glrarium.de/static/denkmodellHomepage/Artikel%20&%20Konzepte/SINFONIE\\_leaflet.pdf](http://denkmodell.glrarium.de/static/denkmodellHomepage/Artikel%20&%20Konzepte/SINFONIE_leaflet.pdf).



## 2 Strategic Planning of Systemic Interventions

One of the real challenges of conflict transformation is to identify a set of measures that not only reflects the complexity of the conflict system, but the outcomes of which make a difference. Working to achieve this raises a number of questions:

- how to make use of the most effective leverage points for change?
- how to link activities on different tracks (which are probably conducted by a variety of different organisations)?
- how to sequence peace support measures in the most effective way?
- how to take the large-scale political dynamics of conflict systems into consideration when planning and implementing a conflict transformation project or programme?
- how to effectively monitor and assess our activities?

### Key insights and guiding principles

With respect to a systemic understanding of conflict transformation, the following principles and methodologies offer insights about how best to initially address these questions.

#### Build on internal resources for transformation

Social and political systems have considerable potential to adapt and change. Systemic conflict transformation tries to activate and support the system's own resources for political and social change towards just and sustainable peace. The mobilisation of external forces and pressure might facilitate change, but can also block it. Similarly, we know from experience with change management that too much pressure triggers counter-pressure. It is therefore recommended to increase pressure and support for change simultaneously in different areas.

#### Nepal: a strong local initiative with a supportive role for the international community

Nepal's striking poverty, non-egalitarian political and social systems, and the uncompromising attitude of King Gyanendra were the driving forces behind the mass demonstrations of April 2006. The strong genuine will for change forced the King to accept the reinstatement of parliament and form an interim government. The Royal Nepal Army was placed under parliamentary control and both the government and Maoist rebels (CPN/M) declared unilateral ceasefires. In June, the two parties agreed on an eight-point road map to peace and constitution building. This map includes: i) drafting an interim constitution; ii) forming an interim government (with the Seven Party Alliance, CPN/M and representatives from civil society); iii) announcing dates for constituent assembly elections; and iv) dissolving the parliament and the people's governments of CPN/M.

What is interesting about the Nepali example is that it shows how strong local ownership was able to generate its own resources, momentum, and legitimacy for political and social change. Under these conditions, the role of external parties is a supportive one, including: behind-the-scenes diplomacy and back-channel communication with the negotiation teams; coaching and backstopping to the Nepali facilitators; facilitating the creation of a conducive environment for successful negotiations, and so on. However, this process still demands a great deal of attention, trust and commitment from all of the relevant internal stakeholders and external actors. Just and sustainable peace in Nepal will certainly require no less than a new definition of state-society relations, especially an open and inclusive constitutional process.

#### Emphasise processes and long-term commitment

Effective leverage points for change are identified based on hypotheses and reviewed with local partners. As these leverage points are very context specific and necessarily quite variable, magic formulas do not exist. However, if treated as common denominators, such leverage points can function to continuously link together three distinct factors in a conflict: actors, issues and processes. From a systemic perspective, it is important that these are always simultaneously addressed. Based on our experience, it is also crucial that interventions (like trainings, study groups, dialogue seminars and thematic workshops) are conducted in such a way that allows for follow-up activities, the transfer of knowledge and experience, participant networking opportunities, and other forms of on-going engagement.

Transforming social and political systems requires time and considerable commitment. With respect to the issue of adequate funding in particular, this must be taken into consideration by intermediary organisations and/or government agencies seeking to initiate such activities.

#### Target different tracks (multi-track approach)

One of the primary contributions from the field of conflict resolution is to have differentiated at least three distinct levels, or tracks, of interaction and communication that must be activated in order to enhance the likelihood of transforming protracted violent conflicts. From a systemic point of view, it is particularly important to work on the vertical linkages between these three tracks.

#### Linking tracks in the Aceh/Indonesia peace process

During 2004, the security situation in Aceh was very tense, with no official communication acknowledged by the main adversaries, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Government of Indonesia (GoI). Backed by the president, Vice President Kalla called his closest advisers together to work in secret on a peace plan for Aceh. Informally, back-channel communication was initiated, with specific interest in making contact, via Helsinki, with exiled GAM leaders in Sweden. This brought former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari and his Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) into the process. Step by step, a principle interest in finding a peaceful solution was signalled from all stakeholders, including exiled GAM members, key representatives from Acehnese society, and political representatives in Jakarta. The scope of devastation by the tsunami in December 2004 radically changed the political landscape in Aceh, increasing the political relevance attributed to the province in Jakarta. GAM immediately declared a unilateral ceasefire in the interest of smooth delivery of humanitarian assistance, allowing thousands of international aid workers into the province. During the semi-official peace talks between the GoI and GAM, the mediators (Martti Ahtisaari and CMI) were able to create links between the three different tracks right from the beginning. On the one hand, close contact to the European Union and several other Asian countries facilitated the quick deployment of the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) after both parties had signed the MoU in August 2005. On the other, through partnership and collaboration with other organisations working at the civil society level and with GAM (e.g., the Swedish Olaf Palme International Center), efforts were strengthened to support GAM's transition to politics, as well as to facilitate civil society participation in the peace-building process.



### Lack of multi-track initiatives in Israel-Palestine

In the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there has been substantial activity on all three tracks of engagement. However, the linkages between society-based conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives and the official political process often have been weak or non-existent. This is partly a problem of timing. When the Oslo process led to the Declaration of Principles in 1994, there were only a few civil society-based initiatives that could have been brought into the process. In fact, many Palestinian and Israeli actors felt excluded and marginalised. Unfortunately, when Track-2 and Track-3 activities gained momentum in the second half of the 1990s, thus creating space for dialogue and discussion within and between the respective societies, they could not be matched by a substantial political process at the official (Track-1) level – after 1996, the latter had largely collapsed. In addition, Track-2 and Track-3 activities suffered problems of sustainability. For example, they did not succeed in creating a critical mass for sustainable peaceful change, nor did they contribute to setting up structures that could impact the official peace process. Clearly, Track-2 and Track-3 activities cannot replace official peace processes. While the international community was open to funding the former, it was too cautious in exerting sufficient pressure on the parties for reaching progress on the latter.

### Opt for strategic, yet flexible processes

Conflict transformation must combine the need for flexibility (e.g., using windows of opportunity) with more long-term strategies. In order to plan different types of activities, effectively relate to key activities of partner organisations or other third-party actors, and to take official political dynamics of conflicts into consideration, seemingly unorthodox and innovative approaches to project, programme or process planning are required. Our experience in Sri Lanka indicates that it is useful to develop a more general strategic framework for guiding mid- to long-term engagement. This overall strategic framework is complemented by strategic working areas, which relate more to specific activities, thus allowing for more flexibility.

### Monitor interventions in a systemic way

Monitoring conflict transformation interventions is a challenge. At times, conflict is a very dynamic process, impacting on and changing basic parameters of conflict transformation work. To assess the effectiveness of our work in such dynamic settings requires an innovative and flexible approach. We share the perspective that, in most cases, it will be difficult to measure the effect of single interventions on the macro-level peace process. We think that it is more appropriate to reflect on the outcomes of a programme or project and to link them to a systemic understanding of the conflict. First and foremost, monitoring and assessment should be seen as a reflective learning process that focuses on the strategic approach of the intervention, the creation and support of change processes within the conflict system and the role of the intervening party.

### Resources and Links

With respect to monitoring and assessment, the Berghof Dialogue on New Trends in Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) offers a critical perspective. Available online at: [http://www.berghof-handbook.net/std\\_page.php?LANG=e&id=24&parent=5](http://www.berghof-handbook.net/std_page.php?LANG=e&id=24&parent=5).

From a systemic perspective, we found IDRC's "Outcome Mapping" useful: [http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-9330-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-9330-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html).



## 3 Engagement with Key Stakeholders

Working with conflict actors is challenging because it is about relationships and the process of relationship building. Often, protagonists in a conflict will want to exclude some other opponents on the grounds that it would be easier to solve the problem without their participation. But the reality is that these actors do represent interests in the conflict and therefore must be taken into consideration. It already has been noted that a sustainable solution requires dealing with all of the relevant issues. It equally demands that all interests are at least acknowledged, if not satisfied. In short, these requirements necessitate an inclusive approach. But what does inclusivity mean in practice? How do we organise our work with key stakeholders in any given conflict in inclusive ways?

### Key insights and guiding principles

Here, we shed light on our principles of engagement with key stakeholders in a conflict and make some suggestions on the institutionalisation of this process.

#### Base your engagement on inclusivity and multi-partiality

It is widely understood that inclusivity is a key idea in conflict transformation. Hence the challenge in any given setting is to identify creative processes for involving all of the legitimate interests in a peace process. However, it is difficult to involve every voice. For example, it is debatable whether such groups as those that promote brutal warfare, have little support from the local population and/or an undeveloped political programme, actually represent “legitimate” interests that need to be taken into account.

#### Sudan: Inclusivity in steps?

After more than two and a half years of negotiations in Kenya, on January 9, 2005, the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) signed the “Comprehensive Peace Agreement”. Although the agreement was not inclusive, it appears that high ranking members of the SPLM/A, as well as the IGAD facilitators and international supporters, regarded the wealth and power-sharing protocols in particular as a potential blueprint for resolving other conflicts in the country, especially in Darfur and the East. However, the “partnership” between the two parties did not develop well and consequently failed to trigger a dynamic, inclusive peace process. In fact, both parties seem uninterested in returning to the peace process again and are instead likely to compromise on the gains and privileges they have already achieved. As such, it is highly improbable that the current round of negotiations on Darfur and the East will produce a new framework for peace which can contribute to a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the Sudanese conflicts.

Multi-partiality refers to the principle that intervening third parties must engage with all key parties to the conflict. Importantly this entails maintaining an equidistant position with respect to all sides. Protracted conflicts are marked by high levels of polarisation. In this context, the principle of multi-partiality is important: it gives the third party a greater degree of legitimacy to engage with the “other side” and to counter those voices who call this betrayal.

A primary challenge of multi-partiality is to create channels of communication and engagement with those parties who refuse contact (e.g., as we have experienced with some Buddhist nationalist parties in Sri Lanka). Another challenge is dealing with legal or technical regulations that prohibit contact. For example, diplomats often face difficulties in terms of engaging with non-state armed groups (NSAG) or other proscribed organisations. The current identification of an increasing number of organisations as “terrorist groups” also complicates opportunities for multiple forms of engagement (e.g., in Sri Lanka and Colombia). However, we regard it necessary to engage with all key stakeholders, including hardliners and/or “spoilers”. In order to overcome these dilemmas of multi-partiality, third parties can consider working with proxy groups. Another option is to work in close partnership (e.g., through a division of labour agreement) with other third parties that both have access to such groups and are not prohibited by international bans.

#### Undertake critical-constructive engagement


Engagement requires trust building and empathy (not sympathy) for the actors, and mostly is centred on people with whom relationships can be built. Transparency, openness and confidentiality from the third party is necessary to build a trusting relationship. False expectations and promises that cannot be fulfilled damage relations in the long run. Critical-constructive engagement aims to transform the actors in a conflict – their perceptions, strategies, future aspirations, and so on. It combines three distinct activities:

- 1) offering positive and supportive incentives for change;
- 2) making a clear stand on practices that violate human rights and humanitarian norms; and
- 3) providing feedback on the effects of specific political strategies (e.g., credibility of negotiation tactics).

The third party is well advised to establish clear and transparent rules and objectives of engagement and should know exactly what the limits of engagement are.

#### Help to build peace support structures

One way to sustain critical-constructive engagement and strengthen the conflict transformation capacities of the key stakeholders is to enhance existing peace support structures. Such structures may foster an institutionalisation of capacity-building and communication between conflict actors and external actors. Peace support structures, such as peace secretariats, can support broader public elaboration of negotiation strategies and peace policies. They also might serve as separate communication channels and reference points for different key stakeholders (as in Sri Lanka) or form a more inclusive structure (as in South Africa).



## Engagement with Key Stakeholders

### South Africa: National Peace Secretariat and Peace Committees

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and business leader John Hall co-chaired the National Peace Committee, which initiated the process that led to the signing of a National Peace Accord in September 1991. The Accord identified a number of mechanisms to investigate the causes of political violence and facilitate the resolution of these disputes. In order to implement this, a National Peace Secretariat (NPS) and a local multi-party peace structure were established.

Chaired by an independent lawyer, the NPS included representatives from four major political parties and one from the Peace Directorate of the National Peace Committee. The organisation was charged with establishing and coordinating Regional and Local Dispute Resolution Committees (RDRCs and LDRCs), which later became Regional and Local Peace Committees (RPCs and LPCs). The committees held primary responsibility for implementing the national agreement on the ground, as well as promoting new structures to facilitate socio-economic reconstruction and development. All 11 provinces had an RPC, with members drawn from political and religious groups, business communities, unions, local authorities, police and defence forces, LPCs and other stakeholders. By April 1994, approximately 260 LPCs has been established (which were accountable to the RPCs), with membership reflecting the composition of the local community.

This inclusive approach to achieving peace meant that a broad cross-section of South African society became part of a peace process with a common objective. Designed to play only a transitional role, these successful peace support structures were phased out soon after the democratic elections of 1994.

Other examples indicate that peace support structures must be devised with caution in order to contribute to peace efforts. In the context of Sri Lanka, for example, several key stakeholders – the government, LTTE, and Muslim community, each established their own peace secretariats. In contrast to South African experiences,

these three separate Sri Lankan peace secretariats are bound by mandates formulated by their respective constituencies and therefore can make only limited contributions to building bridges between these stakeholder communities.

### Resources and Links

On structures and functions of South Africa's National Peace Accord, please see:

<http://www.c-r.org/accord/peace/accord13/sanat.shtml>.

The "One Text Initiative" is an interesting example of a multi-stakeholder dialogue in Sri Lanka: [www.onetext.org](http://www.onetext.org) and [www.info-share.org](http://www.info-share.org).

## 4 Mobilisation of Agents of Peaceful Change

Successful conflict transformation comes from within the system. It requires key committed people and groups who share the belief that non-violent approaches to solving differences best serve their country's and their fellow human's interests. These people might have powerful visions as individuals or small groups, but they often do not know how to change the dominant climate of violent action and reaction that is so typical of conflict systems.

External parties have an important contribution to make in this respect: they can help to identify these persons or groups, support them through a range of capacity-building measures, and cooperate with them in efforts to constructively transform conflict systems.

### Key insights and guiding principles

#### Identifying agents of peaceful change

Our concept of agents of peaceful change (AoPC) serves to extend two earlier ideas: the notion of “change agents” (innovators) as this is discussed in organisational science; and DFID's definition of “drivers of change” (institutions contributing to change in development). AoPC is a more specific and context-related concept as


it refers to actors in conflict settings. AoPC are key individuals or groups from within a conflict system which contribute, or could potentially contribute, decisively to the de-escalation of violence, the initiation of peace processes and/or the sustainable support of peace processes. These agents of peaceful change are caught between actors resistant to change and those advocating radical change. Regardless of which side of the conflict they belong to, they are characterised by their perception of an advantage in reaching amicable and inclusive solutions based on compromise.

There is no fixed methodological tool for identifying agents of peaceful change. While the analysis of the conflict provides insights about which groups should be worked with, it likewise requires thorough knowledge of such organisations, a degree of trust upon which to base future discussions and carefully designed support measures. Care also must be taken to avoid working only with individuals or groups close to one's own culture and/or to perceive groups that are open to change as a homogenous entity. Rather, it is essential to respect these differences and actively pursue balances with regard to gender, ethnicity and religious backgrounds, so as to best draw on the rich potentials that diversity offers.

#### Conceptualising agents of peaceful change in our Sri Lanka work

Our work in Sri Lanka is based on the hypothesis that it is possible to identify agents of peaceful change in strategically important and politically influential positions, to support them and to bring them together in effective ways. We do this by engaging with important individuals from all key stakeholder groups and civil society. Such individuals represent different ideological, political and normative concepts of change. Among other things, what defines them as agents of peaceful change is that they: a) have access to decision-makers; b) are open to peaceful change; c) recognise the equality of all ethnic groups living in Sri Lanka; and d) acknowledge the necessity of reaching a just peace agreement.

In times of crisis, this type of work is especially challenging because the individuals who are involved must take extra precautions to avoid risks to their lives. While we have managed to sustain good working relationships with groups of people linked to all of the key stakeholders in Sri Lanka, the escalation of violence impacts on our capacity to work with these agents of change, and in some cases also limits their scope of action.



## Mobilisation of Agents of Peaceful Change

### Link capacity building and dialogue work

Agents of peaceful change are always a diverse set of actors and organisations. For example, they might make suitable partners, function as multipliers or be advocates for peaceful conflict transformation in their respective area of influence. Therefore, AoPC require different types of support, ranging from capacity-building in methods of conflict transformation to organisational development, network management and advocacy work. In particular, our experience indicates that it is important to link the promotion of dialogue between agents of peaceful change who represent different stakeholder groups with a range of capacity-building measures. In other words, external parties must work to assist internal agents of peaceful change through a combination of both content- and process-related support which can help them to overcome the destructive cycles of violence and counter-violence typifying many conflict systems. Again, this requires long-term engagement that does not readily lend itself to impact assessment.

### Facilitate and support networks of agents of peaceful change

Our experience suggests it is essential to devise peace-building and civil conflict transformation measures that can contribute to the formation of a “critical mass“ of AoPC. This entails that they act as a group and develop the capacity to shape social change in the direction of accepting and implementing power sharing concepts. Apart from gaining momentum as a group, such networks also help encourage individuals to keep up their efforts despite the resistance they encounter as people with dissident viewpoints.

External parties can support AoPC by facilitating network structures and management between different stakeholder groups, or even by creating extended networks that include like-minded international actors. Experience demonstrates that networks of effective action work best when they have common goals and shared rules of engagement, but remain flexible, decentralised and self-organised.

### Resources and Links

More information on networks of effective action is available online at: [www.brandeis.edu/coexistence/linked%20documents/RR%20paper.pdf](http://www.brandeis.edu/coexistence/linked%20documents/RR%20paper.pdf). Also see the forthcoming BFPS study on peace secretariats at: [www.berghof-peacesupport.org](http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org).



## 5 Creativity in the Imagination of Sustainable Solutions

The protracted character of many ethnopolitical conflicts makes it increasingly difficult for the parties involved to generate innovative thinking and new ideas about contested issues. In part, this is because each side creates a number of “certainties” about the conflict and also adheres to entrenched ideas of victimhood. In turn, this leads to a hardening of positions. It is therefore crucial for external actors to support processes that facilitate creative and constructive solutions for overcoming violence; e.g., by reframing the issues and bringing in new perspectives that can break the destructive action-reaction cycles. However, it is equally important that all potential solutions are generated and owned by the conflicting parties themselves.

### Key insights and guiding principles

#### Offer expertise and inspiration

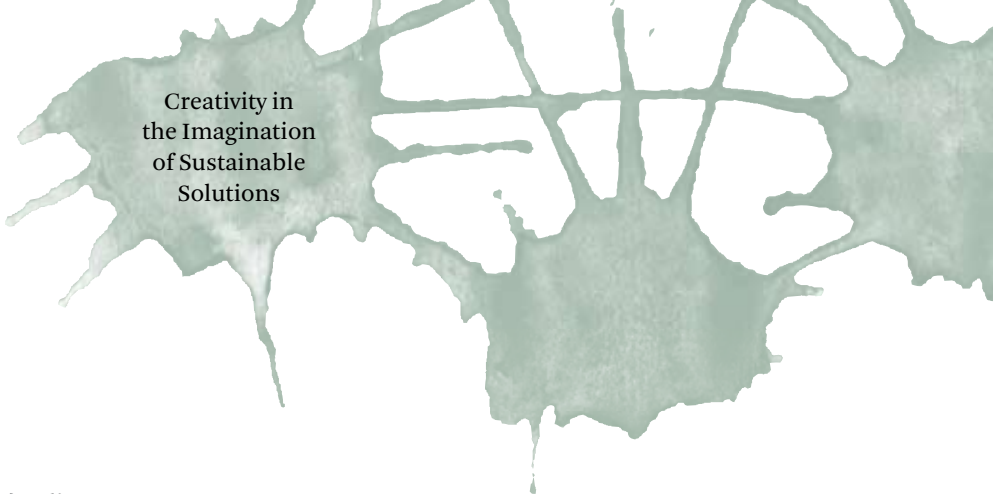
Third-party interveners can be a potentially powerful catalyst for conflict transformation by giving stimulating (or disturbing) impulses to the system; e.g., through feedback, studies, workshops, or official statements. In particular, our experience shows that reflection on insights from experiences in other contexts (i.e., learning from other peace processes) is extremely valuable. In workshops, third-party facilitation helps improve constructive thinking by applying group facilitation techniques, for example reframing, paradoxical interventions (i.e., “why don’t we leave things the way they are?”), work with metaphors, creative mapping techniques, and so on.

#### Generating fresh thinking in frozen conflicts: the Georgia-Abkhazia dialogue process

The Georgia-Abkhazia dialogue workshops that were organised by the Berghof Research Center and Conciliation Resources, UK, were attended by a group of 12 to 14 people (decision-makers and other influential persons), with equal representation from both sides of the conflict. In a confidential and structured, but informal and “off-the-record” setting we aimed to: 1) elicit new ideas contributing to constructive conflict management; and 2) encourage the development of new concepts addressing the long-standing political challenges in the region. In order to effectively stimulate discussion, we learned that other ethnopolitical conflicts from different parts of the world served as highly useful “prisms” through which to examine the Georgia-Abkhazian conflict. To this end, politicians and experts from Northern Ireland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus, Sri Lanka and South Africa have made workshop presentations. While this frozen conflict has not yet been resolved, nonetheless this series of workshops has contributed to a range of constructive and substantial policy initiatives on both sides.

#### Take note of resistances and deal with them creatively

Resistances within a system, which can relate to issues, symbols, or procedures, are very informative for the analysis of a conflict because they refer to its underlying structures and are often overloaded with emotions. Resistances must be considered and addressed in cautious, but creative ways.



## Creativity in the Imagination of Sustainable Solutions

### **Sri Lankan Buddhists reject the term “federalism”**

In Sri Lanka, the term “federalism“ faces strong resistance, especially in the south where Theravada-Buddhism prevails. If this resistance was solely rooted in not wanting genuine power-sharing, it could be addressed through political dialogue. However, this resistance has deep cultural-religious roots that are based on fears which Sri Lankan Buddhists have in relation to their desire to preserve their Theravada strand of Buddhism in a region dominated by a large Hindu majority. These fears and deep emotional attachments must be taken into account and constructively addressed so as to arrive at a sustainable and just power-sharing agreement with the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka.

### **Push frontiers**

Sustainable problem-solving must be understood as a joint learning process involving the conflict actors and the supporting third parties. As experience demonstrates, it is difficult to push external solutions on local actors. However, collaborative partnerships can be effective in extending the frontiers of existing attitudes and behaviour. Taking the mindset of the conflicting

parties into consideration is crucial. Their emotional resistances and blockages must be engaged with, which requires a high degree of process-related sensitivity. This also can be enabled by drawing on those people whose voices often are not heard when discussing solutions. For example, women frequently will be able to bring in different ideas.

### **Push frontiers with scenario-building for the future**

Scenario-building exercises are often cited in this context. This entails an intensive series of workshops with key people who engage in a process dedicated to imagining various potential future scenarios for that country; e.g., the Montfleury process that took place in South Africa during 1991 and 1992. Four very compelling images were creatively developed by more than 20 different South Africans to depict the country’s possible future. These scenarios were widely discussed and thus contributed to both imagining a peaceful future and overcoming obstacles in decision makers’ thinking.

### **Resources and Links**

Berghof’s experience with “conflict prisms” can be found in: Oliver Wolleh, A Difficult Encounter. The Informal Georgian-Abkhaz Dialogue Process. Berghof Report No. 12. Berlin 2006. Online at: [http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/georgia\\_abkhazia.htm](http://www.berghof-peacesupport.org/georgia_abkhazia.htm).  
More information about Scenario Planning and the Montfleury Process is available online at: [http://www.arlingtoninstitute.org/future/Mont\\_Fleur.pdf](http://www.arlingtoninstitute.org/future/Mont_Fleur.pdf).



# Application and Next Steps

We believe the Systemic Conflict Transformation approach is useful because it provides a strong conceptual framework for analysis, planning and action in conflict zones.

Systemic Conflict Transformation can be used by intermediary organisations that are actively working in the area of conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

By highlighting necessary linkages and common starting points, it also has much to offer to donor organisations; e.g., in the areas of strategic planning, monitoring and assessment, as well as the coordination of donor contributions to the mitigation of violent conflicts. One area in which we see a particular need for better coordinated action by the international community is in the transition phase from peace negotiations to post-conflict relations. Given the broad range of actors and issues that must be addressed during this highly sensitive transition, a systemic approach is especially helpful for:

- 1) identifying adequate support structures;
- 2) managing peacebuilding strategies that include taking different agendas, variable time schedules and diverse resources into consideration; and
- 3) process monitoring.

We are aware that the findings we have presented here are only a first step. More work must be done: systemic concepts and tools require further testing in the field. Hence BFPS is committed to applying the Systemic Conflict Transformation approach in its future peace support projects and through smaller pilot projects. Experience from and reflection on those activities will help further elaborate this approach. In this context, we also are collaborating closely with our sister organisation, the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management.

One of our primary goals is to specifically examine the role of inclusive and systemic support structures in relation to peace processes. This includes, for example, peace funds, peace councils and peace secretariats. Such organisations and institutions not only function as internal agents of peaceful change, but also can foster strategic partnerships with external actors. Another step we intend to take is to develop advice sheets on particular aspects of Systemic Conflict Transformation for which there is a demand.

Currently, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) and the Berghof Foundation for Conflict Studies are working together to further elaborate the Systemic Conflict Transformation approach. In order to strengthen this work, we also seek partnerships with other organisations that take an interest in this area.

## Contact / Orders for the print version of the complete study

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## **What is the unique contribution of Systemic Conflict Transformation?**

SCT is not an attempt to found a new school of thought about civil conflict transformation. Rather it seeks to provide a conceptual framework that will help to further develop peacebuilding and civil conflict transformation, both in theory and practice.

## **SCT is innovative and useful because**

- It helps internal and external actors to better reflect the complexity of conflict systems and their respective sub-systems. On the one hand, a definition of the system's boundaries and the ability to see the elements of the system as combined and mutually influential facilitate the development of a deeper understanding of the conflict and its dynamics. This is the idea that "a system is more than the sum of its parts". On the other hand, the necessary simplification of the complexity of violent conflict permits the identification of do-able interventions.
- Because of the holistic nature of systemic approaches, SCT can serve as a joint reference point for diverse actors and initiatives, for example in conflict analysis and planning and implementation of conflict transformation activities, thus fostering greater coherence and complementarity.
- It helps generate hypotheses about the most efficient and effective interventions within the conflict system.
- SCT focuses on change processes and resources within the conflict system, as well as facilitates the identification of relevant internal actors and better delineates the contributions and roles of external institutions.
- It draws on a wide range of approaches and methods from psychology, family therapy, organisational theory and cybernetics.
- Guiding principles, such as multi-partiality and inclusivity, are operationalised on the basis of a systemic understanding of conflict; e.g., by initiating and institutionalising resource networks for all key stakeholder groups, processes of multi-stakeholder dialogue and/or other peace support structures.

**In this brochure, BFPS provides the central elements and key insights of its work on Systemic Conflict Transformation.**