



3 Conflict Transformation – Theory, Principles, Actors

Conflict transformation is ... about transforming the very systems, structures and relationships which give rise to violence and injustice.

Responding to Conflict

In the face of violence, there are three main impulses. The first is an immediate one – to stop it. The second is a medium-term one – to deal with the wounds resulting from it. The third, finally, is a long-term one – to change the underlying conditions that have led, and may lead again, to violence. Conflict transformation is the comprehensive approach that attempts to achieve the last of these three goals, without neglecting the others.

There continues to be considerable terminological variation, overlap and even contradiction in how different actors (or authors) define various approaches to working on conflict (→ conflict prevention, management, resolution). At Berghof, conflict transformation was chosen as a guiding concept because it is seen as the most deep-reaching and holistic conceptualisation of the constructive changes that are needed to build a just peace.

The concept of transformation

Conflict transformation is best described as a complex process of constructively changing relationships, attitudes, behaviours, interests and discourses in violence-prone conflict settings. Importantly, it also addresses underlying structures, cultures and institutions that encourage and condition violent political and social conflict. The term is used in the works of several “founding figures” in peace and conflict studies (Adam Curle, Johan Galtung, Louis Kriesberg, Kumar Rupesinghe, Raimo Väyrynen), but it has been elaborated most specifically in the works of John Paul Lederach and Diana Francis.

It is a multi-dimensional, non-linear and unpredictable process involving many different actors in moving from “latent and overt violence to structural and cultural peace”, as Véronique Dudouet has put it. It is particularly pertinent in situations of protracted and asymmetric conflict involving social justice issues. Especially in such settings, it is an approach that calls for long-term engagement and political skill.

What does this mean in practical terms? Take, for example, Kenya and the violence it experienced in the wake of contested elections in 2007/2008. Dekha Ibrahim Abdi described this context as one where it was tempting to think that it was just a matter of getting certain political actors and the youth they mobilised under control. Yet she underlined: “You don’t just look at this as a political crisis and then just do political analysis; whereas some drivers are in politics, you really need to look at environmen-

Transformers of Conflict

Type	Examples
1. Context transformations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Change in the international or regional environment
2. Structure transformations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Change from asymmetric to symmetric relations ≡ Change in power structures ≡ Changes of markets of violence
3. Actor transformations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Changes of leadership ≡ Changes of goals ≡ Intra-party change ≡ Change in party's constituencies ≡ Changing actors
4. Issue transformations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Transcendence of contested issues ≡ Constructive compromise ≡ Changing issues ≡ De-linking or re-linking issues
5. Personal/elite transformations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Changes of perspective ≡ Changes of heart ≡ Changes of will ≡ Gestures of conciliation

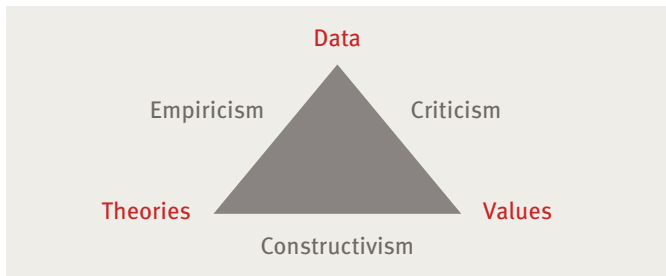
Source: H. Miall 2004. Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task, in: Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation, online version.

tal factors, social relations, economic sectors [...] – and people said yes, we need a solution to the electoral violence, but we really need other solutions, too”. This required a whole-system approach which engaged with actors at the local community level

as well as with the international mediator Kofi Annan. It encompassed a short-term focus on ending the violence, as well as reflection on what would make young men less susceptible to taking up arms. And it dealt with social justice issues and identity, livelihoods and political power-sharing, the aim being to achieve institutional and structural transformation in the long run.

Theory, practice and principles

Conflict transformation does not flow from or aim for a grand, all-encompassing theory. Rather, it tests and generates theoretical propositions through field research and interaction with practitioners. Arguably, although based on empirical approaches and qualitative methods, it is, nevertheless, theory-guided and value-driven.



Source: J. Galtung 1996

The aim of constantly testing theory and practice against each other is a core principle of the work that has been done at Berghof in recent decades, captured in the *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation*, work on systemic conflict transformation, and conflict research, peace support and peace education activities.

Conflict transformation rests on specific principles. They form a code of conduct for researchers and practitioners alike and are not always easy to achieve in the real world of peace project management. One set of principles describes how we should relate to those with whom we work towards conflict transformation: they include respect for local capacities and ownership, inclusiveness and multi-partiality of processes, and fair play. A second set describes the personal qualities that are needed in engagement for conflict transformation and peacebuilding: empathy, humility, self-reflection, and the tenacity and perseverance to achieve incremental change over the long run, often in the face of serious setbacks.

Agents of transformation

In any setting of protracted conflict there are agents of violent change or resistance but also agents of peaceful change. Any process of conflict transformation must find and connect the drivers of peaceful change, but also understand the drivers of violence and war: the “spoilers” of peace processes. In the words of Dekha Ibrahim Abdi once more: “You don’t see them as a problem, but you see them as people needing to be understood [...] and then they become part of the strategy development.” It has become clear that conflict transformation efforts need to encompass many levels, tracks and sectors: diasporas, governments and non-state actors; women and men; conflict parties and peace envoys. It is important to link the top, middle and grass-roots levels of a conflict setting, always mindful that peace is made from within the society in conflict rather than by external experts and interveners, even if the latter may bring much-needed and welcome ideas and support.

Open questions

Conflict transformation is not without its challenges and critics. It calls for such wide-ranging and deep-reaching change in the social fabric that it may actually intensify conflict in the short

run by proposing a disturbing process of change which touches (and threatens) beliefs, relationships, power, positions and status. Some claim that it can only be a guiding notion rather than a fully implemented programme. Others propose prioritisation, for example with an emphasis on relationship-building. In any case, conflict transformation cannot be planned and implemented by one actor alone – it takes many different contributions. How can they be elicited, coordinated and brought together? Exclusion of local actors in this context raises suspicions of “social engineering” and of veiled forms of western dominance. Systemic approaches have been explored as one potential way of managing this complexity (→ systemic conflict transformation).

References and Further Reading

- Francis, Diana (2010).** *From Pacification to Peacebuilding. A Global Call to Transformation.* London: Pluto Press.
- Galtung, Johan (1996).** *Peace by Peaceful Means. Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization.* London: Sage Publications.
- Lederach, John Paul (1997).** *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies.* Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.

Online Resources

- Interview with Dekha Ibrahim Abdi (podcast),** www.berghof-foundation.org › Glossary › 03 Conflict Transformation
- Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation,** online version, www.berghof-handbook.net
- Véronique Dudouet 2006.** *Transitions from Violence to Peace. Revisiting Analysis and Intervention in Conflict Transformation.* (Berghof Report No. 15.), www.berghof-foundation.org › Publications › Conflict Research Publications

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