19 Transforming Conflict

Nina Bernarding and Beatrix Austin

"It is possible to solve a conflict and not change much ..."
John Paul Lederach

In the face of violent conflict, there are three main impulses. The first is immediate: to stop it. The second is a medium- term one and focuses on dealing with the wounds resulting from the violence. The third, a long-term one, is to change the underlying conditions that have led, and may lead again, to violence. We understand conflict transformation as a comprehensive approach that attempts to achieve the last of these three goals, without neglecting the others.

There is a considerable range of approaches to working on conflict. At the Berghof Foundation, conflict transformation was chosen as

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION | a complex process of constructively changing relationships, attitudes, behaviours, interests and discourses in violence-prone conflict settings. Importantly, conflict transformation addresses and changes underlying structures, cultures and institutions that encourage and condition violent political and social conflict over the long term.

a guiding principle because it is seen as the most deep-reaching and holistic conceptualisation of the constructive changes needed to build a long-lasting peace that is perceived as just.

The concept of transformation

We define conflict transformation as a complex process of constructively changing relationships, attitudes, behaviours, interests and discourses in violence-prone conflict settings. Importantly, conflict transformation addresses and changes underlying structures, cultures and institutions that encourage and

On terminology …

Conflict transformation is often contrasted with several other approaches: *conflict management* (activities undertaken to limit, mitigate and contain open conflict), *conflict resolution* (activities undertaken over the short term and medium term dealing with, and aiming at overcoming, the deep-rooted causes of conflict, including the structural, behavioural, or attitudinal aspects of the conflict), and *conflict settlement* (achievement of an agreement between the conflict parties on a political level which enables them to end an armed conflict). Proactive prevention of violent conflict is also an important aspect of the conflict transformation repertoire (→ Preventing Violence).

condition violent political and social conflict. The term is used in the works of several "founding figures" in peace and conflict studies (among them Adam Curle, Johan Galtung, Louis Kriesberg, Kumar Rupesinghe and Raimo Väyrynen), but it has been elaborated most specifically in the works of John Paul Lederach and Diana Francis.

Conflict transformation is a non-linear and unpredictable process, involving many different actors in moving from "latent and overt violence to structural and cultural peace" (Dudouet 2006). This long-term process requires transformative changes on many levels and dimensions, as outlined in the table overleaf:

What does this mean in practical terms? Take, for example, Kenya and the violence and political crisis it experienced in the wake of contested general elections in 2007/2008. On the one hand, the Kenyan National Dialogue and Reconciliation Process, initiated by the African Union, was tasked to take immediate measures to stop the violence. On the other hand, the mandate also included reconciliation and social justice issues in the medium term and constitutional, legal and institutional reform in the long run to address the root causes. And while initially the process focused on the ruling and opposition parties, it later included people at the local and community level as well. (The 2017 flares of election violence in the country, however, also remind us that transformative change is rarely quick or all-encompassing. It needs to be defended and re-asserted, and result in change that shifts citizens' trust in their institutions.)

Third-party engagement

While in any violent conflict-setting there are people committing violence and others benefiting from the conflict, we also always find people working towards peace and peaceful change from within society – the agents of peaceful transformation. They are able to embrace one of the central principles of conflict transformation: that conflict is not a bad thing in itself; indeed, it is often

Dimensions of transformation	
Type	Transformative changes …
1. Context transformation	≡ in the international or regional environment
2. Structure transformation	≡ from asymmetric to symmetric relations ≡ in power structures ≡ of markets of violence and civil war economies (in conflicts dominated by economic motives of material profit)
3. Actor transformation	≡ of leadership ≡ of goals ≡ inside the political parties
4. Issue transformation	≡ in transcendence of contested issues ≡ towards constructive compromisis ≡ of issues (policies)
5. Personal/elite transformation	≡ of perspective ≡ of heart ≡ of will

Table 3, source: Hugh Miall, 2004

a driver of necessary change. It is the violence in waging conflict that brings harm.

External experts, such as policy-makers, researchers and non-governmental workers, can support these agents of change, e. g. by connecting them, or offering ideas, expertise or negotiation

support. However, external engagers should not only support the agents of peaceful transformation. They also need to understand the motivations of the so-called "spoilers". As Dekha Ibrahim Abdi puts it when referring to the violent actions of the youth in Kenya: "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."

Moreover, it has become clear that conflict transformation efforts need to encompass many levels, tracks and sectors: governments and non-state actors; women and men; youth; conflict parties and peace envoys; and representatives of diaspora and business. External engagement can play an important role in supporting and connecting the different actors and levels.

The engagement of external actors rests on specific principles, which form a code of conduct. One important set of principles describes the respect for local capacities and ownership, inclusivity and multipartiality 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.

Systemic conflict transformation

Systemic approaches to conflict transformation have been explored under different "labels": some call this type of work holistic, some multidimensional. Building on family therapy and systems analysis, at the Berghof Foundation, we have chosen the term "systemic" to describe a particular and important set of approaches to managing the complexity and challenges of conflict transformation engagement. Its basic principles (developed by Daniela Körppen and Norbert Ropers, among others) are:

- thinking in network structures
- thinking in dynamic frames and in terms of relationships

- emphasising solutions which already exist within the (conflict) system rather than just focusing on identifying problems
- accepting ambivalence and contingency as well as acknowledging perspective dependency
- concentrating on human beings and their learning processes

These principles translate into practical mindsets, attitudes and procedures: working closely with key stakeholders, mobilising key agents of peaceful and creative change, putting an emphasis on system-wide conflict analysis and conflict monitoring, investing in strategic planning of systemic interventions and pursuing creativity in solutions. Any systemic engagement is an ongoing cycle. First, there is observation, which has to be longer-term and include a change of perspectives. Then follows work with and within the conflict/conflict transformation system, which leads to change and the evolution of all involved. This, in turn, requires renewed observation to reflect on theories of change and impacts observed, but importantly also on mistakes made and misunderstandings that have arisen (See Figure 10, see also → Learning Together). Any intervention should in this way focus on the complexity of the conflict system and embrace both internal and external factors and actors.

Critique and open questions

Conflict transformation is not without its challenges and critics. It calls, some will argue, for such wide-ranging and deep-reaching change in the social fabric that it seems far-fetched or naïve. Some argue 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, a distant vision, rather than a fully implemented programme. But the Berghof Foundation believes it is vital for achieving sustainable peace that lasts generations. In any case, (systemic) conflict transformation cannot be planned and implemented by one actor alone – it takes many different contributions. How these

contributions can be elicited, connected and made to add up to "peace writ large" is a serious challenge. Currently, the Berghof Foundation is exploring scenario planning and process design as one inclusive, creative and tangible approach (Bojer 2018). An important area of improvement highlighted in the evaluation of conflict transformation practice is that effective, long-term work requires some form of institutionalisation (and resourcing), a topic discussed often under the heading of Infrastructures for Peace.

The systemic engagement cycle

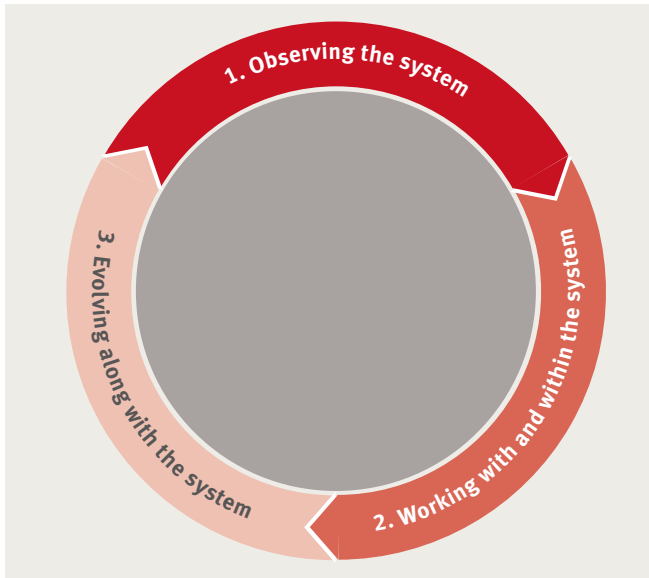

Figure 10, source: Barbara Unger and Oliver Wils, 2006

References and Further Reading

Diana Francis (2010). *From Pacification to Peacebuilding: A Call to Global Transformation.* London: Pluto Press.

Daniela Körppen, Norbert Ropers and Hans J. Giessmann (eds.) (2011). *The Non-Linearity of Peace Processes – Theory and Practice of Systemic Conflict Transformation.* Opladen/Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers.

John Paul Lederach (2003). *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation.* Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

Audra Mitchell (2011). *Lost in Transformation: Violent Peace and Peaceful Conflict in Northern Ireland.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Online Resources

Mille Bøjer (2018). Transformative Scenarios Process, in Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation, online edition, https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Handbook/Articles/bojer_handbook.pdf.

Véronique Dudouet (2006). *Transitions from Violence to Peace: Revisiting Analysis and Intervention in Conflict Transformation.* Berghof Report No. 15. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Papers/Reports/br15e.pdf.

Owen Frazer and Lakhdar Ghettas (2013). *Conflict Transformation in Practice: Approaches to Conflict Transformation – Lessons from Algeria, Denmark, Egypt, Kenya, Morocco, Tajikistan and Yemen.* Geneva: Cordoba New Forum, http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Conflict_Transformation_in_Practice_2013.pdf.

Hugh Miall (2004). *Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task, in Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation,* online edition, https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Handbook/Articles/miall_handbook.pdf.

Barbara Unger and Oliver Wils (2006): *Systemic Conflict Transformation: Guiding principles for practitioners and policy makers working on conflict. Berlin: Berghof Foundation for Peace Support.* https://www.berghof-foundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Other_Resources/SCT_Systemic_Conflict_Transformation_Brief.pdf.