A Constructivist Perspective on Systemic Conflict Transformation

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Introduction

This volume wants to introduce the systemic approach to conflict transformation and thereby give a greater understanding of the idea of conflict as a self-organized social process. The aim of our article is to develop a constructivist view on systemic conflict transformation. In contrast to other approaches, operative constructivism tries to grasp the momentum of conflictual processes by introducing observation as a central concept. To begin with, we will explain our understanding of systemic conflict transformation in the context of Luhmann's operative constructivism. We will then present a theoretical foundation for the development of a systemic approach to an understanding of escalation and de-escalation processes, based on securitization theory. Next, we will explain in more detail what we believe should be understood as systemic conflict transformation, before finally illustrating our findings based on an example of resilience and resilience management.

Against this background, we argue that conflict transformation can be seen as a process of de-securitizing and de-escalating conflict systems.

1. The Constructivist Perspective

As outlined in the terms of reference for this edited volume, Berghof Peace Support puts forward a number of elements of systemic thinking. A fundamental premise is the acceptance of ambivalence and contingency, as well as the acknowledgment that analytical models are perspective-dependent and a construction of reality rather than *the actual* reality. Furthermore, systemic thinking implies a dynamic perspective – i.e. a focus on processes, communication, relationships and network structures. Finally, systemic thinking as proposed by Berghof Peace Support means concentrating on human beings (actors) and both individual and collective learning processes.

In an endeavour to apply systemic approaches to conflict transformation to the Sri Lankan situation, Wils et al. (2006, 31) have identified the following aspects as core elements of systemic conflict transformation:

1. systemic conflict analysis and conflict monitoring
2. strategic planning of systemic interventions

3.   engagement with key stakeholders
4.   mobilization of agents of peaceful change
5.   creativity in imagining sustainable solutions

Furthermore, a balance must be found between depicting a system in all its complexity and contradictions, and the need to reduce this complexity to something manageable and amenable to intervention. Wils et al. (2006, 31) thus acknowledge "the need to both recognise the complexity of our work (complexify) and at the same time generate simple insight to guide our actions (simplify), are at the core of systemic conflict transformation and the five elemental areas of work."

Although we would largely subscribe to the concept of systemic conflict transformation as put forward by Berghof Peace Support, there are a few aspects we would disagree with. Most importantly, many of the interventions presented in Wils et al. (2006) and Körppen et al. (2008) seem to put too strong an emphasis on actors. For example, Baechler (ibid.) holds that the role of the individual should be central to all approaches to conflict transformation. Similarly, Glasl (ibid.) stresses the importance of considering the actors' "mechanisms of unconsidered reaction patterns". In his view, conflict transformation strategies must identify the "secret rules" of such unconscious mechanisms and disable them through awareness-raising.

This focus on individual and collective actors and their respective behaviours is by no means a rare phenomenon, and there are certainly good reasons for adopting an actor-centred approach. When it comes to determining entry points for intervening in a conflict, people – actors – are immediately identifiable. Conflicts become manifest through actions – menacing gestures, acts of violence etc. – performed by the people involved. Adopting an actor-centred approach often seems to be the most tangible and promising way forward. While this strategy certainly has its merits, proponents of systemic conflict transformation must also take processes, notably communication, actions (and not actors as human beings) and relational dynamics into account. Systemic thinking stipulates that the whole is always more than the sum of its parts; manifestations are contingent and non-linear and result from the accumulation of various, partly contradictory, partly enhancing processes. Dissecting the whole (social systems) and focusing on its constituent parts (individual actors) rarely results in sustainable strategies. Similarly we cannot comprehend, let alone transform, a conflict by solely working on individual and collective actors. An actor-centred approach must therefore be complemented by a process-oriented perspective and acknowledgement of the role of communication processes and discourses.

As opposed to actor-centric approaches, systemic approaches – and especially approaches founded on systems theory – direct considerable attention to the self-selectivity and self-referentiality of conflicts. Based on this perspective, conflicts tend to escalate due to cumulative effects that the participants can often neither control nor fully understand. Fritz B. Simon has illustrated this by referring to the self-fabrication of causes of conflict within conflict systems:

> "Whichever official and factual causes are given at the beginning of a war, for the most part they have little relation to the mechanisms that account for its continuation. The war creates its own reasons once it has started" (Simon 2001, 226; transl. by the authors).

Thus, systemic approaches prefer to not only look at conflicts from the perspective of the actor but also incorporate the process perspective, which puts more emphasis on the momentum and dynamics of conflicts.

Niklas Luhmann's version of operative constructivism proves to be a good starting point for the development of a systemic approach to conflict transformation. At the centre of his approach, Luhmann refers to George Spencer Brown's concept of observation, which defines observation as the operation of drawing a distinction by means of identification (Luhmann 1990). Consequentially, observation plays an important role in defining conflict from a constructivist point of view. The observer constitutes himself by drawing a boundary between himself and the observed – and by communicating this difference. Such an observation is literally all-encompassing: nothing exists outside of the observed world. On the contrary, the observation creates, or rather alters, the world by means of distinction. However, it is important to keep in mind that observation is contingent, i.e. we define the world; the world does not define us (Rorty 1990). Furthermore, observations have social consequences. Not only do they determine the specific meaning of something but can also determine the respective subjective position. If I perceive someone as an aggressor, this may not only lead to a lasting conflict but also frame my opponent, based on their opinions, to the extent that we become permanent enemies.

Observations can take place in a variety of meaning-based systems. Communicated observations that correlate with other observations have far-reaching social consequences. These communicated observations take place in social systems that also distinguish themselves from their environment through observation.

> "If continuity of observing is to be guaranteed, the observer has to constitute a structured system, which differentiates itself from its environment. The system requires a boundary over which it can observe, and all self-observation presupposes the establishment of corresponding internal differences. […] Observers are only identical with themselves, because in each case they observe over a boundary they have drawn, and other systems can at best observe observers, as they observe but do not take part in their observation" (Luhmann 1990, 79; transl. by the authors).

Hence, systems cannot intervene in other systems; they only can observe other systems' observations.

According to Luhmann, observations are not easily abandoned once they have been communicated. As often witnessed in conflict situations, differentiated systems that are subsequently closed through recursive observations tend to live on. A good example of this is the attempt to restore justice by means of reconciliation. The reiteration and affirmation of past injustice often leads to a continuation of injustice and can prolong a conflict instead of ending it.

Following Luhmann's social systems theory, three elements can be described as essential for the development of conflicts: observation, communication and normative expectations. Conflicts arise when observers perceive incompatibilities between themselves and others and communicate this observation. Communication determines social conflict; without it there would merely be mutual assumptions and accusations, which cannot be observed as such. Luhmann argues that conflicts stem from a negative response to communicated selection. In conflict situations in particular, actors adhere to their normative convictions and expectations.

Once conflicts emerge, a social system develops in which specific types of observations are established. These observations lead to conflict continuation. For instance,

it is often expected that the opposing party acts contrary to one's own wishes and as it is expected to act – even if one knows that the other side will not act accordingly (see Bonacker/Schmitt 2007; Bonacker 2008). Most intergroup conflicts are good examples for such a pattern, and usually include stereotypes and prejudice on both sides.

In summing up this perspective on operative constructivism with respect to conflict research, two aspects are particularly relevant: firstly, conflicts are produced through communication. Secondly, they are composed of communicated, interrelated observations that form social relations.

In addition, against this theoretical background it is assumed that there is no causal relationship between an occasion in the environment and changes within the system. As a consequence, the focus of a particular conflict analysis is less on pinpointing single causes but rather on clarifying how the conflict has been constructed by means of communication. Thus, a constructivist approach to conflict research means focusing on the momentum and self-selectivity of conflicts.[1]

2. Securitization as a Process of Conflict Escalation

From our point of view, operative constructivism offers a sound epistemological starting point developing a theoretical basis for a systemic approach to conflict transformation. In this chapter, we want to expand this approach to conflict theory by taking into consideration the securitization theory of the so-called Copenhagen School. In the mid-1990s the Copenhagen School began to develop a constructivist approach within the context of security studies. Since then, a number of publications have advanced the scope of security studies and adopted the theoretic and methodological approach of the Copenhagen School in trying to explain how certain types of conflicts (such as territorial or ethnopolitical conflicts) develop and progress (see Diez et al. 2006; Pia/Diez 2007; Gromes/Bonacker 2007).

At its core, securitization theory can be seen as a vantage point for a constructivism-based systemic approach to conflict transformation because one of its core assertions is to explain how an issue evolves into (or is made to be) a security issue and how conflicts emerge and escalate due to securitization processes:

> "With this definition of security, the approach has clearly turned constructivist in the sense that we do not ask whether a certain issue is in and of itself a ‚threat', but focus on the question of when and under what conditions who securitises what issue" (Buzan/Wæver 2004, 71).

According to Wæver, security per se does not exist in a vacuum, but is constructed through communication. Referring to Austin's speech act theory, Wæver suggests that:

> "Security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance itself is the act. By saying it, something is done (as in betting, giving a promise, naming a ship). By uttering 'security' a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it" (Wæver 1995, 55).

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1   For an example regarding conflicts in the Middle East see Stetter (2008). Messmer (2003) and Simon (2001), have developed a conflict theory that addresses the momentum of social conflicts based on the above-mentioned aspects of operative constructivism from a general social systems theory.

Securitization consists of three components:

1. the claim of a threat to survival and a demand for extraordinary measures,
2. the adoption of emergency action,
3. the effect on the relations between the affected units by violating rules that are otherwise binding (Buzan et al. 1998, 25).

Within the concept of securitization, one can distinguish between a securitizing move and securitization itself. Asserting an existential threat and requesting extraordinary means constitutes a securitizing move. An issue becomes securitized only if an audience accepts the allegation that an existential threat exists and approves a response by emergency measures. Thus, securitization is an inter-subjective practice: "(S)ecurity (as with all politics) ultimately rests neither with the objects nor with the subjects but *among* the subjects […]" (ibid., 31, emphasis in the original).

Security is neither something out there waiting to be found nor can it be defined objectively (Wæver 2000, 251). Rather, security is constituted through an inter-subjective practice. The starting point of the securitization concept is the speech act theory developed by John Austin (1962), who demonstrated how we do things with words. Uttering 'security' can be considered as an action (Wæver 1995). An issue may turn into a security issue once an actor presents it as an existential threat to a reference object. An existential threat endangers the self-determination and possibly even the existence of a political unit. Because it refers to the great question *to be or not to be*, a security problem can thus "alter the premises for all other questions" (ibid.). As survival is at stake, the securitizing actor claims that a threat cannot be adequately addressed by ordinary means and must be responded to by emergency measures. Such use of all necessary means breaches the rules of normal politics (Buzan/Wæver 2004, 71; see also Gromes/Bonacker 2007, 2).

From the perspective of operative constructivism, a fundamental problem of securitization theory is that it puts too much emphasis on the crucial role of actors, too. As Buzan and Wæver point out, successful securitization must find acceptance within the audience. "Successful securitization is not decided by the securitizer but by the audience of the security speech act: Does the audience accept that something is an existential threat to a shared value? (Buzan et al. 1998, 31)

Securitization can be understood as a communicative act by which conflict systems and conflict actors constitute themselves. Here we find the link to system theory's concepts of communication and observation. In general terms, securitization is nothing more than threat communication, whereby an observer distinguishes himself (through his own identity) and perceives himself as being threatened by something. An apparent component of this form of communication is self-reference and reference to others. The observer creates a personal threat by means of communication. In Luhmann's terms, a system is created when others join in this communicated observation. In other words: what Wæver and Buzan refer to as successful securitization based on acceptance is essentially identical with the differentiation of a system, i.e. an observer who distinguishes himself from the outside world by means of threat communication. Thus, the issue is not necessarily about two systems that perceive each other as mutual threats, but that continuous threat communication exists, which enables the differentiation of a (sub)system. It is not even necessary that the subsequent communication relates to the

threat in a positive manner. According to operative constructivism, the mere communicative recourse to a threat is sufficient to reiterate the threat itself – even the critical reflection of judging it as exaggerated or self-induced – and reinforce the identity of the threatened observer by means of distinguishing them from the menace.

What is interesting about the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, from the point of view of conflict theory, is that we can define more accurately what a conflict is and how it evolves: "We observe a conflict when actors articulate an incompatibility by referring to another as an existential threat to itself" (Diez et al. 2006, 566). In other words, the differentiation of a threat communication system is equal to the creation of a self-referential conflict system that – based on the premise of general systems theory – tends to continue. Thus, conflict emerges from a perpetual threat communication that Wæver describes as securitization.

Let us examine a simple example: the relationship between government and opposition. This relationship is conflictive by nature because both parties tend to formulate opinions that are mutually perceived as incompatible. We speak of an institutionalized and thus stable conflict within the heart of the political system. The conflict escalates the instant normal political conflict communication turns into threat communication because the opponents on one side are perceived as a threat by the other. Normal observations within the system become securitized observations; the normal observer becomes a threatened observer. The stronger the threat is to one's own identity, the more likely the danger of escalation. To frame an issue as an existential threat is deemed to transfer it to the agenda of panic politics. In most cases, the adoption of extraordinary measures implies escalation. Escalation leads to a violent or more violent conflict, while de-escalation reduces the scale of violence or ends the use of all violent means.

Hence, securitization theory allows an analytical approach to the procedural nature of conflicts, which are constructed by means of communication. Conflicts are understood as self-selective social processes that materialize from the realm of communication. Although securitization theory does not offer a phase model for conflict escalation itself, it provides a number of ideas that would in fact enable a process-related model to take shape (see Diez et al. 2006). Furthermore, it can help to explain how conflicts develop and progress – and essentially how they can be transformed by de-securitizing conflict communication, i.e. by moving issues off the security agenda and back into the realm of public political discourse and normal political dispute and accommodation (see Williams 2003, 523).[2]

The key question, then, refers to how an issue, once securitized, may become desecuritized again. How can the self-perpetuating cycle of securitization and perceived threats be reversed?

We believe that an attempt to de-escalate or transform a conflict must be built on the premise that conflicts are dynamic phenomena, and that aspects such as root causes, identities or narratives are socially constructed. Conflict is neither static nor substantially given; its essence cannot be ascertained and approached in an 'objective' way. Focusing exclusively on human needs and the negotiation of assets may not lead to sustainable peace. Conflict parties may strongly disagree about even the most basic as-

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2   For empirical case studies related to the field of human rights see our research project on Human Rights in Conflict: The Role of Civil Society (www.luiss.it/shur).

pects of a particular conflict, and their interpretations of the dynamics of escalation and de-escalation may be contradictory and perhaps even mutually exclusive.

The concept of securitization offers ways of analysing how identities are socially constructed as threatened identities and of how this may lead to an escalation of conflict (Gromes/Bonacker 2007, 2). As an example, one could think of the term 'axis of evil', which shifted a conflict between the Bush administration and countries like Iran and North Korea to a securitized discourse on existential threats.

Building on what Wæver and Buzan have termed as de-securitization – shifting an issue from emergency mode back to the normal process of political negotiation (Buzan et al. 1998, 4) – we have identified three avenues for reversing the process of securitization: two variants of so-called non-securitization and a form of de-securitization.

Let us first consider the case of de-securitization. This refers to direct interventions aimed at changing the conflict parties' discursively constructed perceptions and the representation of the conflict. Interventions such as joint workshops and scenario-building exercises seek to foster mutual understanding and empathy, and reduce prejudices. As this is perhaps the most prominent approach among proponents of conflict transformation, examples are manifold. Abdi (2008, 73) depicts how two complementary processes – storytelling (including ventilating anger and pain) in order to bring up main issues, followed by a more analytical approach (mapping) to identify repeated patterns and similarities – have been used in Kenya. Both processes put an emphasis on communication and the social creation of meaning. In another example, the Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation (RNCST)[3] conducted a series of workshops in Sri Lanka which were aimed at building trust and a shared understanding of key conflict issues, as well as engaging in some speculative problem-solving (Wils et al. 2006, 21-23).

In discussing a range of tools for facilitating dialogue, Bojer et al. (2008, 14) capture the essence of strategies for de-escalation:

> "All the tools focus on enabling open communication, honest speaking, and genuine listening. They allow people to take responsibility for their own learning and ideas. They create a safe space or 'container' for people to surface their assumptions, to question their previous perceptions, judgements and worldviews, and to change the way they think. They generate new ideas or solutions that go beyond what anyone had thought of before. They create a different level of understanding of people and problems. They allow for more contextual and holistic ways of seeing."

Non-securitization may be achieved through shifting the very form of communication. One must bear in mind that for a securitizing move to contribute to securitization, there must be an audience that plays along and accepts the assertion of a threat. The effect of a securitizing move is not pre-determined but is a function of struggles about the alleged existential threat and the adoption of emergency means. "A securitizing move facilitates securitization when it wins the hearts and minds of those persons who decide whether to use extraordinary measures or not" (Gromes/Bonacker 2007, 4). This then implies the potential for de-escalation by intervening in the communication process

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3   The RNCST existed from 2001 to 2008 in Sri Lanka and was implemented by the Berghof Center for Constructive Conflict Management. Its aim was to promote opportunities for a sustainable and just peace by carrying out capacity-building measures, promoting dialogue processes and supporting a network of peace-orientated partner organisations, amongst others.

between an actor who initiates a securitization move (asserts a threat) and the targeted audience: for instance, the authority of the actor asserting a threat could be undermined so that the audience does not subscribe to the securitization move. Against this background, civil society activities could be analysed as a means of fostering and initiating securitization or as a means of resisting it.

Finally, non-securitization can be enhanced through interventions in other parts of the conflict system which have de-escalating repercussions on the securitized issue(s). Technical assistance in the context of a *do no harm* policy could be seen as an example here. Building schools or infrastructure normally have no (de-)securitizing impact but could lead – as a side effect – to de-escalation.

3. Systemic Conflict Transformation and Social Change

Systemic approaches to conflict transformation can thus make a valuable contribution to a) the analysis of a conflict and b) to enhancing the design and implementation of interventions (Ropers 2008, 12). Ropers argues that there has been a relative emphasis on systemic analysis as opposed to systemic interventions in conflicts (ibid., 16).

Nevertheless, today there are a number of proponents of systemic approaches to conflict resolution and transformation who explicitly seek to address the practical side. Scholars and practitioners such as Lederach, McDonald and Diamond, and Ropers go beyond mere analysis by developing systemic strategies for conflict interventions.

However, it is important to caution against putting too strong an emphasis on planning and managing interventions. We believe that if we are to adopt a systemic approach to conflict transformation, a basic premise is the impossibility of exercising direct control. When designing an intervention, we must therefore focus our efforts on creating a framework, an environment conducive to peace processes. We must let go of the idea of designing a detailed blueprint for conflict parties to follow. Nor can we ever be sure that we have considered and adequately anticipated the plethora of systemic factors and responses that may occur during a desired peace process. A more constructive and sustainable approach means embracing uncertainty and contradiction and concentrating on enhancing a system's capacity for self-organization and resilience. Literature on positive social change and organizational development (Glasl 2008), as well as the newly emerging literature on behavioural change in the context of climate change and peak oil, may provide some inspiration here.

Bojer et al. (2008, 12) explicitly ground their approach to facilitating social change through facilitated dialogue in a systemic perspective. They acknowledge that our contemporary life experience is characterized by complexity, inter-relatedness and a high rate of change. In this context, 'answers have a short life-span' – the key to addressing major social issues lies in asking appreciative questions and engaging in meaningful dialogue. Like the editors and presumably most of their contributors in *The Change Handbook* (Holman et al. 2007), Bojer et al. believe in people's capacity to self-organize and solve their own problems. "When formulaic responses are imported or imposed from the outside, they meet resistance and often fail" (Bojer et al. 2008, 13). People do not want to be told what to do. They want to be enabled. Thus, "as

agents of change, we need to be adept at asking questions and at talking and listening to each other" (ibid.). This understanding resonates with Lederach's concept of moral imagination and the reasoning behind various forms of interactive conflict resolution. In the context of peacebuilding, Lederach searches for "simplicity at the other side of complexity" in which "[t]he key to complexity is finding the elegant beauty of simplicity" (Lederach 2005, 31, 66). For conflict transformation you do not have to fully grasp the entire set of complicated rules, interconnections and variables that are part of human interaction. All that is needed is to identify and understand the essence, an influential determinant. In cases of protracted conflict, 'relationship' could be such a core element. If relationships can be ameliorated and rebuilt, further positive change is likely to ensue.

It is important to redefine conflict as an opportunity for change. Fundamental transformation often emerges out of chaos, confusion and conflict. Kraybill believes that "the aim should be to use conflict as a moment, or more precisely, a series of moments of rich opportunity to contribute to human development" (2004, 2). The absence of constraint allows people to explore and expand their personal boundaries; and conflict is thus confronted in a sustainable manner. Lederach refers to the initiation of transformation as a serendipitous phenomenon that cannot be enforced. According to Lederach, serendipity is "the wisdom of recognizing and then moving with the energetic flow of the unexpected. It has a crablike quality, an ability to accumulate understanding and create progress by moving sideways rather than in a direct linear fashion" (Lederach 2005, 113ff). A similar kind of reasoning is also detectable in Burton's concept of *pro*vention, as well as in the writings of the late Adam Curle and several others involved in conflict resolution (Burton 1990; Curle 1995). Conflict parties need to have a positive vision worth striving for in order to come together and embark on the often protracted and painful journey towards conflict transformation. Such a vision, however, cannot be imposed but must be developed 'organically' by the conflict parties themselves. Various strategies for positive social change thus have envisioning – or scenario building – exercises built into the process.

Facilitating a systemic approach to conflict transformation is about being able to see underlying patterns, to sense emergent common ground and congruence that the conflict parties are unable to see at that stage. Conflict parties create a – common – conflict system by means of distinctions through which they observe themselves and their environment. The central question here is about which distinctions have been applied, i.e. is the opponent perceived as a threat to one's own identity and thus classified as an enemy, or merely seen as an opponent in a competition. People immersed in conflict are often unable to recognize interdependencies and the repercussions of their own actions. This means they observe with a blind spot, i.e. in the moment the observation takes place they cannot see how or what they are observing.

> "The observer, who observes his own observations with his accustomed differentiations, only sees what he already knows. The observers enmeshed in the conflict use themselves as a reference point, going around in circles and thus creating the condition for an escalation of the conflict, which can no longer be dealt with by those observers; it cannot be expected in a conflict, that one recognizes one's own attributional tendencies" (Bergknapp/Jiranek 2005, 106; see also Luhmann 1990, 52).

A facilitator or third party intervening in a conflict will inevitably become part of that very system. There is no position outside the system, and as an observer, the facilitator participates and reproduces a (conflict) system using their observations. Their position is to be the observer of the (conflicting) observers, exposing the observers' blind spots and therefore the underlying assumptions and attributions of the conflict parties. A skilful facilitator thus does not pretend to be neutral or impartial. Rather, they should be transparent about personal motives and preconceptions, and capitalize on the ability to empathize with the conflict parties and appreciate their respective concerns. However, it can be detrimental to become too immersed. The facilitator still needs to be able to adopt an outside perspective – a bird's eye view on the conflict. It is the combination of the above trends that constitutes the added value of a *systemic* facilitation of conflict transformation: immersing oneself into the dynamics while maintaining some analytical distance as a precondition for assisting the conflict parties in realizing their interconnectedness, and forging more constructive relationships.

Systemic conflict transformation requires a concerted, multi-faceted approach. Abdi reminds us that "in doing analysis, you don't just look at this as a political crisis and then just do political analysis; whereas some drivers are in politics, you really need to look at environmental factors, social relations, economic sectors" (Abdi 2008, 73). Interventions must take place at different levels and within different parts of the system. Attention must be paid both to structures and processes. Both 'direct interventions' (de-securitization) and 'indirect interventions' (non-securitization) should therefore be implemented alongside each other – the more diverse and spread-out our points of intervention, the higher the chances are that some of them are going to be successful. As elaborated above, de-securitization refers to a direct intervention aimed at fostering empathy and mutual understanding, and thereby transforming both the relationship and ways of communication between conflict parties. Non-securitization, on the other hand, refers to more indirect approaches, either by preventing a security move from developing into fully-fledged securitization by intervening in the communication process between actor and audience, or by intervening in another part of the conflict system which then has positive repercussions on conflict dynamics.

4. Systemic Conflict Transformation and Resilience Management

Approaches to systemic conflict transformation benefit from a transdisciplinary approach that combines insights from different fields, as well as complementing academic research and theoretical insights with practical knowledge derived from concrete interventions. Questions that are at the very core of systemic conflict transformation – how to transform relationships, induce attitude and behaviour change and facilitate a holistic approach to problem-solving – may be tackled through approaches and concepts developed in other disciplines. Considerable overlaps exist in terms of objectives and encountered challenges, for example, within recent approaches to tackling the twin problems of climate change and peak oil (CC/PO). The Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, for instance, advocates a 'whole systems approach' to problem

solving; responses must be multifaceted, conditional and have to be framed in terms of both political and social acceptability (Tyndall Centre 2006, 7).[4]

Resilience is a concept that features prominently in recent social-ecological systems thinking. At the heart of this recent resilience perspective is a dynamic, process-oriented view of a complex system situated in an unpredictable and non-linear environment. A resilient system has developed a set of strategies for responding to and actively shaping its environment; they include among others an appreciation of diversity and constant renewal, re-organization and transformation. Resilience inherently refers to the capacity of a system to change and self-organize (as opposed to lack of organization or organization merely in response to external factors). In doing so, resilient systems are capable of absorbing shocks, or disturbance, without fundamentally changing their basic configuration – i.e. their structure, identity and way of functioning.[5] Ideally, resilience has a reinforcing tendency whereby a system is able to learn from disturbances and adapt to (slightly) altered circumstances[6] (Norberg et al. 2008; Walker et al. 2002).

Resilience management (Walker et al. 2002) has one or more of the following objectives:

1. to move from a less desirable to a more desirable regime,
2. to prevent a system from moving into undesired configurations in the event of external stresses and disturbances,
3. to foster and safeguard those elements that enable the system to renew and reorganise in the aftermath of fundamental change.

Applied to systemic conflict transformation, resilience and resilience management imply normative assumptions about the process of transformation and desired outcomes. The first step would be to support a transformation from conflict (the less desirable regime) to peace. The second task is then to make that peace sustainable – i.e. resilient. This corresponds with Wils et al. (2006, 22), referring to the objectives and strategies of a conflict transformation programme aimed at increasing the ability of societies to deal with underlying factors that perpetuate conflict.

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4   Like conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts, effective action against CC/PO is likely to involve controversial, drastic and sometimes rather unpopular measures. In this context, 'agents of change' have experimented with a variety of participatory methods and tools for engagement. These include, for instance, campaigns, polling and public consultations aimed at a large audience as well as various kinds of deliberative workshops, scenario-building and envisioning exercises conducted with a particular set of stakeholders (IPPR 2008, 5-8).

5   Note that sometimes, especially in mainstream ecology, resilience has been referred to as return time following a disturbance, assuming that there was a single equilibrium ('balance of nature') which can be either attained or not. The concept of resilience *engineering*, for instance, refers to a single equilibrium view of a predictable, linear world where the ultimate goal is to maintain efficiency of function and constancy of the system. The rationale would best be summarized as "resisting disturbance and change, to conserve what you have" (Folke 2006, 256).

6   It is important to bear in mind that resilience as such is not necessarily a desirable feature. Systems can be very resilient to changing configurations that are detrimental to social welfare – examples being protracted conflict, oppressive regimes or carbon emissions. A more normative synonym for resilience may be the concept of sustainability, which generally includes particular assumptions about which systems configurations are desirable (Walker et al. 2002).

Adopting a resilience management approach for systemic conflict transformation has a number of benefits, not least as a constant reminder to adopt a systemic perspective and take into consideration potentially contradictory dynamics that occur at various scales and in different sub-parts of the system. This again resonates with the assertion in Wils et al. (ibid., 69) that "the core challenge of a systemic approach to conflict is to link the activities on the different levels in such a way that they help to mobilise the system's own resources to transform the conflict." Similarly, Bojer et al. (2008, 14) highlight that:

> "[t]he variety of dialogue methods available to us today have emerged in different situations but in response to quite similar needs and discoveries. They are part of a wider shift that is happening as complexity and diversity increase and people become more aware of their interdependence, and hence their need to hear each other, to understand, and to collaborate."

Likewise, operative constructivism and the Copenhagen School suggest that attempts at de-escalating security issues happen within the conflict system.

Resilience management draws on a variety of participatory and workshop-based methods such as envisioning exercises, scenario planning, modelling, the deliberation of alternative models, and stakeholder evaluation of the process and resulting implications for policy and management options (Walker et al. 2002). This approach "not only involves managing substantive and affective resistances and blockades but also – and especially – taking account of ownership by stakeholders. What is required, then, is an open-ended shared learning process that can be stimulated by means of 'paradoxical interventions', creative techniques and knowledge transfer" (Wils et al 2006, 64). However, it cannot be stressed enough that the actual value of participatory and dialogue-based workshops lies in them being a seedbed for a somewhat shifted – i.e. transformed – form of communication which fosters the kind of sustained communication and relationships that are the glue of a resilient society.[7]

Furthermore, a resilience management framework can make a valuable contribution to a process-oriented (dynamic) conception of de-securitization and conflict transformation. According to Ropers, "conflict transformation can 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" (2008, 15). This is exactly what resilience management is all about – namely, preventing a particular system from moving into an undesirable regime from which it is difficult or – in the worst case – impossible to recover (Walker et al. 2002).

Perhaps the most important message from resilience management concerns the issue of management. Complex adaptive systems – both in the social and in the natural world – defy linearity, smooth change and ideal-type scenarios.[8] Moreover, social-ecological systems are subject to thresholds, hysteretic change and market imperfections. Agents usually have imperfect knowledge, hold preferences and respond to a va-

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7   Homer-Dixon has coined the concept of a 'prospective mind': "If we're going to choose a good route through this turbulent future, we need to change our conventional ways of thinking and speaking. Too often today we talk about our world as if it's a machine that we can precisely manipulate. […] We need, instead, to adopt an attitude toward the world, ourselves within it, and our future that's grounded in the knowledge that constant change and surprise are now inevitable. The new attitude – which involves having a prospective mind – aggressively engages with this new world of uncertainty and risk. A prospective mind recognizes how little we understand, and how we control even less" (Homer-Dixon 2006, 29).

8   See also Homer-Dixon (2006, 24).

riety of incentives (Homer-Dixon 2006; Walker et al. 2002). In light of such complexity it comes as no surprise that conventional top-down management approaches, focused on maximising efficiency and identifying optimal command-and-control solutions to a problem, often fail in the long term. A more constructive approach would be to develop a set of policies or rules – incentives and disincentives – rather than detailed prescriptions, and to establish boundaries for corridors of action rather than trying to implement tight lines of action. Walker aptly states that "[t]he outcome we seek, therefore, is a set of actions that will maintain or enhance resilience of the desired (or at least acceptable) set of trajectories" (Walker et al. 2002). Indicators for a resilient (social) system include:

- *social diversity* – people with different (complementary) abilities, skills and views (Wallace/Wallace 2008)
- *social capital*: interlocking networks of social networks – varying in both size and density of interconnections (Wallace/Wallace 2008; Smith 2008)
- in-built *redundancy* and *modularity* – the opposite of efficiency and stream-lined processes – which increase the ability to absorb shocks and maintain essential functions (Smith 2008)
- *adaptive capacity* which encompasses constant learning, flexibility and readiness to experiment and adopt novel solutions, and an ability to develop generalized responses to broader classes of challenges (Walker et al. 2002)

In the context of systemic conflict transformation, these criteria can be particularly useful when applied to relationships in general and the formation and support of agents of peaceful change in particular. A social system that exhibits several of the above criteria – most importantly adaptive capacity and social capital – should be fairly well equipped for engaging with stresses such as securitizing moves, or full-fledged conflict, in a constructive manner.

Summary

In the first part of this article we introduced Luhmann's operative constructivism as a promising avenue in outlining a systemic perspective of conflict transformation. Observation, (social) communication processes and normative expectations are at the heart of Luhmann's systemic approach. The observer defines themself by drawing a boundary between themselves and the observed and by communicating this difference. A differentiation between 'us' and 'them' and the social construction of (in)security plays a key role in the process of securitization. Once established and communicated, such binary categories may become a reference point and basis for further responses and actions that may reinforce perceived and securitized differences. Conflict as such is an inevitable part of social life. As long as it is dealt with in a constructive way, conflict can in fact become a seedbed for innovation and change. However, escalation – or securitization – often means the closing down of options. Once positions become entrenched and identities are perceived to be under threat, windows of opportunity for constructive dialogue narrow. The conflict has thus become dysfunctional and securi-

tized. To reverse this mutually reinforcing spiral, we must focus on the processes of observation and communication, as well as the relationships between the conflict parties. Resilient systems are sufficiently diverse and dynamic to prevent securitization from happening. Securitizing moves are counterbalanced within the social system, while ongoing communication fosters genuine and constructive dialogue and constantly reminds people of their interdependency and the benefits of cooperation. In this sense, resilience management constitutes a form of conflict prevention. Moreover, resilience management offers a scenario of a 'healthy' social system that societies in conflict may aspire to. Coupled with the three strategies for de-securitization and non-securitization discussed above, the concept of resilience provides an innovative approach to systemic conflict transformation.

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