

Introduction

Addressing the Complex Dynamics of Conflict Transformation

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The social world is characterized by interrelatedness and uncertainty. Trying to influence social processes and induce positive change in a system is therefore challenging. This is even more true when it comes to peace processes, as they are constituted by complex and interdependent issues which interact in a non-linear manner.

Existing approaches to peacebuilding and conflict transformation have tried to address these challenges for quite a while now, and are even quite sophisticated, yet crucial issues in the field still remain unresolved, especially with regard to the multi-layered nature and unpredictability of today's protracted conflicts. Often, long-lasting conflicts detach from their context and develop their own dynamics where the original causes and reasons for escalation fade into the background. As a consequence, it is still an open question as to what the adequate steps to reach 'peace writ large' are, or if it is sufficient to focus on peace writ little (CDA 2010). Conflicts are highly dynamic processes in which it is difficult to attribute causality and to bridge the attribution gap between activities on the micro-level and their impact on the macro-level of a society (Smith et al. 2004).

Still, many projects in the peacebuilding field are based on a linear and dualistic logic. Lederach calls this the "tunnel vision" (Lederach 2005, 118), and uses this metaphor to describe how conflict resolution is understood as a process which indicates how to get from A to B. Against this background, conflict transformation is considered as a tool through which a pathway can be created that cuts through the problems and allows people to reach 'the light at the end of the tunnel'. However, the experience of peacebuilding shows that the creation and development of peacebuilding strategies is a dynamic, non-linear process and should therefore be seen more like "carving a curve through an active volcano" (ibid.).

Even if several studies are critical of this tunnel vision and associated linear logic, only a few things have changed in the way of reasoning, in the models of thinking, and in the way we look at peace and conflict dynamics.

One of the main ideas of this volume is to emphasize that systemic thinking can enrich the theory and practice of conflict transformation. It will be shown that the integration of systemic thinking into conflict transformation strategies offers inspiring potential for addressing some of the main shortcomings in the field. The most promising systemic concepts and methods from different disciplinary and cultural backgrounds

regarding the further development of peacebuilding and conflict transformation approaches are presented and discussed. In addition, the shortcomings and limitations of systemic methods are analysed, as well as the extent to which they need to be complemented with other peacebuilding approaches.

1. Background of the Book

This book is a result of a four-year action research project on systemic approaches to conflict transformation, which started in 2006. After identifying the most important current systemic discourses in disciplines such as organizational development, systemic therapy, political sciences and sociology, we organized a series of workshops on this topic and invited peace researchers, practitioners and systemic experts from various disciplines to discuss their understandings of systemic thinking and the particular relevance for the conflict transformation field. Some of them also contributed to this volume. Two workshops took place in Berlin (2007, 2008) and a third one in February 2010 in Washington D.C. in collaboration with the *International Center for Collaboration and Conflict Resolution* (ICCCR) at Teachers College, Columbia University/ New York and the *Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution* (ICAR) at George Mason University.

During the first project phase we developed guiding questions to be addressed in every contribution, in order to create a common space for discussions about the pros and cons of systemic conflict transformation:

1. What is the particular understanding of systemic thinking and on what kind of systemic approaches and/or methodologies is the article based, and why?
2. Where are the critical issues for applying the respective type of systemic thinking to the conflict transformation field?
3. What is the added value of systemic thinking for conflict transformation and peacebuilding?

Besides this, at the beginning of our project and on the basis of our extensive literature research, we identified five basic principles of systemic thinking, which we found helpful for enriching current discourse in the peacebuilding and conflict transformation field.

Basic Principles of Systemic Thinking

- Thinking in network structures
- Thinking in dynamic frames and thinking in terms of relationships
- Not focusing only on identifying the problems but emphasizing also the solutions which already exist within the (conflict) system
- Accepting ambivalence and contingency and acknowledging perspective-dependency
- Concentrating on human beings and their learning processes

While discussing these key markers of systemic thinking we realized that, from our perspective, the most promising path for designing a conceptual framework of systemic conflict transformation was to combine several systemic concepts from various disci-

plines. For example, ‘thinking in network structures,’ ‘thinking in dynamic frames’ and ‘thinking in terms of relationships’ are basic parameters of the system dynamics concept developed at the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT) by Jay Forrester and his team. The ‘solution orientation’ and the ‘acceptance of ambivalence and contingency’ are pursued in constructivism and family therapy (Schlippe/Schweitzer 2003; Retzer 2006). We consider these systemic key markers as flexible components which can be combined with and integrated into existing peacebuilding concepts. In our view, a systemic approach to conflict transformation is based on a sound mix of pre-existing peacebuilding methods and systemic concepts.

2. A Short History of Systemic Thinking

Brief overview on the main systemic discourses

Because the spectrum of systemic discourses is quite broad, we would like to give a brief overview of systemic thinking. Systemic approaches emerged at the beginning of the last century as a critique of the reductionism which generates knowledge by separating and extracting single elements out of a system and studying them in terms of cause and effect (Bertalanffy 1968). In contrast to this, it is a crucial principle of all systemic approaches to understand phenomena as an emergent property of an interrelated whole; hence, a phenomenon cannot be fully comprehended by analysing its constituent parts. Whereas all concepts or theories which encompass elements of systemic thinking would agree that ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts’ and that within a system the particular elements are connected and interact with each other, they differ in some basic assumptions.

In general, systemic discourses can be divided into two main strands: first and second order cybernetics. Systemic thinking rooted in the field of first order cybernetics, such as Norbert Wiener’s research on communication in the animal and in the machine (Wiener 1948), focuses on the human being as a biological system. He assumes that social relations function in the same way as biological processes and can therefore be controlled and influenced from the outside. Another crucial characteristic of systemic approaches from first order cybernetics, such as Wiener’s concept or Stafford Beer’s “viable system model” (Beer 1994), is the assumption that it is possible to observe a system in a ‘neutral’ way and to gather information about it without influencing or interacting with it. These theories regard the observer and the observed as two separate entities.

Scholars from the field of second order cybernetics such as Heinz von Foerster or Gregory Bateson, which strongly influenced concepts of psychotherapy and family therapy (Retzer 2006, Schlippe/Schweitzer 2003), argue that the observer and the observed interact with each other. According to this, ‘neutral observation’ or analysis of a system is not possible because the observer becomes a part of the system that they observe. Therefore, the results of the observation depend on the perspective one adopts. Against this background an objective truth does not exist because every observation is based on the interpretation of the observer. Hence, interacting with social and political systems means always dealing with uncertainty and contingency.

In addition to this, between the different strands of systemic thinking it is still an open question if it is necessary to enter the system to carry out an intervention on it (Flood 2004), and to what extent it is possible to initiate and control processes of social change. On the one hand, from a more systemic-constructivist point of view, it can be argued that social processes can be influenced only indirectly; for example, through a change of context which might contribute to the irritation and mutation of the system itself (Luhmann 1987; Wilke 1999, 2001). On the other hand, approaches based on Forrester's concept of system dynamics state that social processes themselves can be modelled to a certain extent (Forrester 1968). These first order cybernetic approaches influenced management and organizational theories, such as Peter Senge's "Fifth discipline" (1990).

Systemic thinking and conflict transformation

In the social and political sciences, systemic approaches have been used for analysing political systems and conflicts for quite a while now. The main focus has been on analysing political conflicts on a macro-level (Deutsch 1963; Luhmann 1987; Wilke 1999, 2001).

In contrast, the discussion of systemic ideas in the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation started only recently. It is assumed that systemic thinking offers some inspiring insights on how to capture and transform the complex dynamics of ethno-political conflicts (Lederach 2005; Collaborative Learning Projects 2010). The background to this discussion is that during the last fifteen years the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation has become increasingly popular and many donors, as well as peace practitioners, have engaged in this field with high expectations. In hindsight, this enthusiasm appears somewhat similar to the hopes which accompanied the take-off phase of development cooperation a couple of decades earlier. In the meantime, both areas had been through a process of disillusionment with the realization that there are no simple recipes to achieve either development or peace.

The response from practitioners and development and peace agencies, as well as scholars, was diverse. On the one hand, efforts were undertaken to emphasize the need for clarifying in detail the indicators of 'success' and to encourage a systematic reflection in the form of 'logframes' on the causal links between different variables which would have an impact on these indicators. On the other hand, some experts started to explore the ways systemic thinking might help to bridge the gap between the majority of interventions which were located on a micro-level and the macro-political peace they wanted to achieve at the end of the day.

This exploration resonated well with parallel developments in other areas of applied social sciences and in the management field, where people were searching for better tools to cope with unpredictability, rapid change and unexpected consequences. They tried to make use of insights from complexity sciences and chaos theory to develop tools for practitioners in the peacebuilding field to better cope with the challenges of non-linearity in human interaction. One of these groups, organized around the Human Systems Dynamics Institute, also addresses issues of conflict escalation, de-escalation and peacemaking (Owen 2004; Eoyang 2005). They define conflict as a

pattern in a complex adaptive system and stress that it is necessary to create 'meta-stability' to cope with violence-generating differences. This can either happen through revising the borders of the system or by revising the way the exchanges of information, energy and resources within the system are organized.

Another systemic initiative was linked to the invention of 'multi-track diplomacy', i.e. the proposition that protracted conflicts need a multiplicity of 'tracks' of pro-peace engagements beyond the traditional inter-state diplomacy. Inspired by systemic thinking, Louise Diamond argued as early as 1997 that to transform 'conflict habituated systems' it is necessary to work towards 'sustainable peace systems' with a holistic understanding of change including beliefs, behaviour and relationships.

This approach has been further developed to apply a 'whole systems' approach to complex global issues, including peace and conflict transformation (Diamond 2008). It is very much in accordance with a couple of other initiatives to particularly emphasize the capacity of systemic thinking to connect the multiplicity of global challenges, to pay attention to emerging networks and learn how to 'read' and 'listen' to how systems are transforming and where there are promising entry points and leverage for change (Meadows 2009).

In the scholarly literature, apart from the contributions and currents of thinking which are included in this volume, an influential strand is the "Transcend Method" of conflict transformation initiated by Johan Galtung (2000). Graf/Kramer/Niculescu (2011) have developed this approach further, using complexity thinking as a meta-framework for conflict transformation. They argue that a "complex conflict transformation" might be best served by combining a systemic conflict analysis with an understanding of the deeper socio-cultural and historic dimensions of the conflict, as well as with a pragmatic, socio-therapeutic dimension of (inter-)action.

The utility of systemic thinking was also developed in several action research projects, some of which are represented in this volume (Woodrow/Chigas, Ricigliano, Burns). One of them, the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP), played a key role in promoting systemic thinking as a tool to improve the understanding of the gap between the majority of micro-activities in conflict regions and the aim of achieving some impact with respect to 'peace writ large'.

In the management sphere, systemic thinking was from the start very much linked to the need for organizational learning (Senge 1990) as the best way to make use of systemic insights for navigating complex developments in organizations. In principle, these insights are also highly relevant for the effectiveness of peacebuilding activities because they are in most cases also delivered in an organizational context. But so far this area of research and practice is still in its infancy (Hopp/Unger 2009).

3. Structure and Content of the Book

The contributions of this book can all be interpreted as a result of the efforts by scholars, practitioners and policy makers to enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. The structure of the book follows two organizing principles: the first part focuses on conceptual debates about approaching peacebuilding issues

from a systemic perspective. Authors with different theoretical backgrounds, such as sociology, peace research, action research and constellation work discuss the advantages and disadvantages of integrating systemic thinking into peacebuilding strategies.

In the second part, the same question is discussed from a practitioner's point of view. Various systemic approaches are presented and the consequences of their implementation in the field are discussed. A basic conviction of all systemic approaches is that processes of complex social change cannot be controlled in any direct or linear manner. The focus has to be on enabling the drivers for constructive change within the system itself. In several contributions the implications of this conviction are explored with respect to the planning, intervention, monitoring and evaluation of peace promoting initiatives.

Conceptualizing systemic thinking

The first section of the book presents a great variety of concepts with a systemic background. They range from a meta-theoretical and academic perspective to a practical hands-on concept with systemic constellations in the field of organizational development and family therapy.

In academia, systemic discourses can be found in constructivism and in chaos and complexity theory, amongst others. The possibility of developing a model which is able to represent reality is highly contested in systemic theories based on constructivist concepts and second order cybernetics. As already been pointed out, these theories posit that it is not possible to capture reality as such because each assertion is the result of a subjective interpretation.

Sirin Bernshausen and Thorsten Bonacker emphasize in their contribution that, from a constructivist point of view, it is crucial to analyse communication processes and concepts of observation. Following their argumentation, a combination of Luhmann's operative constructivism and the securitization theory of the Copenhagen School offers a sound epistemological starting point for the development of a theoretical basis for a systemic approach to conflict transformation. Moreover, the integration of resilience management into this theoretical framework guarantees a 'healthy' social system that is capable of preventing the outbreak of conflicts.

Systemic approaches which are rooted in chaos theory emphasize the importance of considering a conflict as a self-organized system of patterns. It is assumed that despite divergent information and contradictory external influences the system's behaviour consistently converges on the same pattern of destructive thought, affect and action which can not be dissolved by linear interventions. This is exemplified in the article on dynamical systems theory written by Peter Coleman and his team. They argue that chaos theory and its related concepts, such as the idea of attractors, prove to be helpful for conflict analysis. The focus of interest in this research strand is mainly on developing a coherent and testable theoretical model that links the different parts to the underlying structures and dynamics that account for intractability in conflict processes.

Against the background of a critical reflection on recent discourses in the field of peace research, Oliver Ramsbotham points out that the most challenging current conflicts in the world are characterized by "radical disagreement" between the disputing parties. In his opinion, the existing paradigms of dialogue work and conflict resolution

through communication are not capable of guiding the transformation of these radical disagreements. Based on the example of the Israel/Palestine conflict, Ramsbotham proposes a new approach to address radical disagreement which emphasizes the need for a strategic engagement of discourses. He considers his chapter as a supplement to a systemic approach to conflict transformation in those cases where linguistic intractability has so far resisted all conventional efforts to positive transformation.

The discussion about adequate methods for analysing conflicts and planning peacebuilding projects has been dominated by liberal peace discourses for quite a while now. One aspect of a liberal understanding of peace is the assumption that what constitutes peace is universally accepted. Liberal democracy, neoliberal economic reform, human rights, humanitarian law and human security are considered as crucial parameters for a peaceful society. One of aims of Daniela Körppen's article is to put emphasis on the normative underpinnings of liberal peace and to illustrate that the operational strategies of liberal peacebuilding are faced with mounting critique with regard to their legitimacy and efficiency (Lidén/MacGinty/Richmond 2009). In addition, it is argued that by claiming they are universally true, these strategies lead to a de-politicization of peacebuilding concepts. This article outlines that the integration of methods from systemic therapy and organizational development into conflict transformation approaches offers a huge potential for reintegrating the discussion of values into peacebuilding discourses. Re-politicization of peacebuilding concepts starts where universal (liberal) norms are contested and questioned.

That systemic ideas are very close to the basic ideas of action research is emphasized in several contributions in this book. Sometimes, differences between systemic ideas and action research can hardly be seen. Participatory forms of action research have been able to support sense-making and generate solutions to problems which are rooted in the views of the most affected. But they have frequently lacked mechanisms to deal with the circularity of social interactions and the refusal of powerful actors to engage. Danny Burns argues in his contribution that systemic action research is a way of scaling up the action research model so that it can work across systems. It involves multiple inquiries running in relationship to each other. As a result, it assists in bringing into view the many complex inter-relationships which affect interventions on the ground.

As said above, very promising insights for peacebuilding and conflict transformation are coming from organizational development and family therapy. Due to the practical orientation of their work, systemic experts from this area can enrich the development of methods for peacebuilding and conflict transformation. Dirk Splinter and Ljubjana Wüstehube give an overview of a particular approach of systemic work, which is a relatively unknown field in the English-speaking world: systemic constellation work. It has achieved some prominence in psychotherapy and organizational development and has recently also been applied to helping parties and interlocutors in ethnopolitical conflicts. As the authors show in their contribution, the added value of systemic constellation work is threefold: it assists in revealing hidden conflict dynamics, it facilitates a better understanding of the conflict parties' emotional experiences and it leads to the identification of new strategies for action.

Implementing systemic thinking

The second part of the book focuses on the practitioner's point of view. Against the background of case studies from Sri Lanka, Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, Georgia-Abkhazia, Kosovo, Guinea-Bissau and South Africa, several systemic methods are presented and the consequences for integrating them into conflict analysis, strategy planning and evaluation are reflected upon.

Luxshi Vimalarajah and Suthaharan Nadarajah elaborate in their contribution how systemic thinking, in particular second order cybernetics and system dynamics, can contribute to a better understanding of the complex conflict web. Drawing on the 2001-2006 Norwegian-led international intervention to end Sri Lanka's protracted ethno-political conflict, the authors explicitly point out the inherent subjectivity of every conflict analysis and emphasize that the intervener or analyst is always part of the system they observe. With reference to the Sri Lankan case, the authors illustrate that systemic approaches can also be part of the liberal peace agenda.

Norbert Ropers concentrates on Sri Lanka in his contribution, too, and identifies several added values from a systemic perspective on the situation in the country. In his opinion, one major advantage of a systemic approach lies in the fact that the analysis of the protracted conflict is combined with reflections about possibilities for peaceful solutions. Moving from armed conflict to sustainable peace means working on the transformation of the existing conflict system and, at the same time, creating new peaceful relations. He considers peace processes as 'corridors for systemic change'. By using this term he draws the attention to both aspects of transformation and intends to overcome the fixation on the root causes and the reinforcing loops of violence. Ropers considers Peter Senge's analytical method of using archetypes as a helpful classification for typical patterns of interaction in a conflict process, and indicates how they can be transferred to conflict transformation. This is demonstrated in an in-depth analysis of these mechanisms – using the example of Sri Lanka 2002-2005.

The article by David Stroh focuses on identity-based conflicts in Israel and Palestine. Stroh introduces the key principles involved in understanding Senge's concept of system dynamics, such as feedback loops, time delays and unintended consequences, and explains in detail the working of three 'archetypal dynamics': shifting the burden, conflict goals and escalation. The argument here is that knowledge about these archetypes can help third parties and moderators to reflect on the unintended implications of actions, to reassess goals and beliefs, to ask different questions and to explore different and more creative leverage points for intervention.

While most authors in this volume opt for the integration of single components of systemic thinking into existing peacebuilding concepts, Robert Ricigliano underlines the importance of a systemic theory for peacebuilding and develops the so-called "SAT model". He classifies this model as prescriptive because it elaborates on how to make changes in the system and think holistically. Against the background of the conflict situation in Afghanistan, Ricigliano points out that using systemic thinking is necessary for improving peacebuilding practice, but it is not sufficient for making macro-level change. Crucial principles of his systemic theory are interconnectedness and dynamic causality. In addition, it includes a series of tools (causal loop dia-

gramming, pathway analysis, scale analysis and a programme planning matrix) which are designed to help peacebuilders work more strategically and holistically.

Peter Woodrow and Diana Chigas agree with Ricigliano on the shortcomings of linear causal chains to trace the impact of a community programme at the societal level. Their article summarizes and reflects on how the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP) in Kosovo, Guinea-Bissau and Sri Lanka has engaged with systems thinking. One of the main efforts of their work in the field has focused on developing practitioner-friendly ways to design systems maps of conflicts and use them as a basis for the programming of intervention strategies. Woodrow and Chigas also point out that progress has already been made with respect to the integration of systemic methods and conflict analysis. However, the creation of systemic theories of change is an area that merits further attention. Besides this, they argue that in the conflict transformation field analyses are, at best, rough approximations of reality – and we will never be able to predict with certainty the outcomes or impacts of our peace interventions. Nevertheless, we can increase our ability to obtain constant feedback through more effective monitoring processes, both of the context and of our initiatives. A step in the right direction is engaging in adaptive management that enables changes in programme directions in response to feedback about the programme and about the political environment. For this reason, they suggest that, in a systems approach to programming, the ‘M’ in Monitoring and Evaluation might be more important than the ‘E’.

Systemic-constructivist thinking has inspired the development of innovative and creative approaches in various areas of psycho-social work, particularly in counselling and in organizational development. Oliver Wolleh discusses methods from systemic therapy with respect to their applicability to conflict transformation, especially in interactive conflict resolution. Against the background of the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue process, the author demonstrates that insights from applied systemic psycho-social work can enrich a field which in the past has been primarily dominated by rational-intellectual approaches. After introducing both concepts the author argues that the notion of ‘client’ from systemic therapy can assist in explaining the dynamics amongst the participants in a dialogue workshop. A crucial criterion of this systemic concept is its process orientation. The task of the ‘therapist’ is to transform the behaviour and the attitudes of the client so that they become a ‘true client’, i.e. a person who acknowledges that they themselves have to change in order to obtain a change in the whole situation.

The advantage of systemic thinking lies not only in enriching methods for strategy planning and conflict analysis. Systemic components in a peacebuilding approach can function as a bridge builder between ‘western’ concepts of peacebuilding and African cultures. This is exemplified in the South African case study of the community-based organisation Sinani. In a process of continuous action and reflection, Sinani has developed its own approach of peacebuilding and community development, which combines African philosophy with systemic thinking and participatory interventions. As shown, the Sinani Model is based on a fluid, organic and non-linear theory of change which includes basic components of systemic thinking. Juba Khuzwayo, Berenice Meintjes and Usche Merk underline that thinking in relationships and admitting that social interactions are based on non-linear principles, can be found, for example, in both the African principle of Ubuntu, and in systemic approaches from the field of family therapy and psychotherapy which have been integrated into systemic conflict transformation.

Last but not least, we would like to thank all the authors who have contributed to this volume for their commitment. Very warm thanks go to our colleagues and friends who participated in our workshops for their inspiring thoughts and the vibrant discussions we had¹, as well as to the Berghof Foundation which has made this publication possible with a generous grant.

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1 Special thanks goes to Timo Lange for his editorial assistance.