Space Beyond the Liberal Peacebuilding Consensus – A Systemic Perspective

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Introduction: In Search of the Right Recipe

How can sustainable peace be created? International organizations, donors and NGOs have been pondering this question for quite a while now. Even if peacebuilding is a crucial part of their agendas, it is still disputed what the adequate concepts and methods to achieve this goal actually are.

As the term 'peacebuilding' indicates, peace is considered as a particular state of a society to be obtained. It is based on the assumption that each peace process has a beginning and an end and that it can be guided and controlled. It includes the idea that peace can be built – if only the right strategy is developed and adequate tools are applied. The more pro-peace modules, such as demobilization, good governance, human rights, justice sector reform or gender issues are integrated into a peacebuilding programme, the greater the likelihood is of achieving sustainable peace. However, as indicated by political and social realities in countries like Nepal or Sudan, peace is a process with ups and downs, with setbacks and often also with new outbreaks of violence. A society can be more or less peaceful, or parts of a country can be in conflict while in other regions the risk of violence is lower. Rather than a definite end, peace is a highly fragile and dynamic process, based on constant interactions and changes. Absolute peace does not exist.

Nevertheless, what still dominates the debate about adequate concepts and methods to 'build peace' is a more technical, toolkit and 'Ikea-peacebuilding' discourse, based on the belief that significant change within a system can be achieved from the outside – if only the right means are adopted. Often, peacebuilding concepts sound like recipes, as they explain which ingredients are needed to set the pace of the peacebuilding process. And sometimes this does not even exclude military force. Even if this technical understanding – where every single step can be anticipated – has been criticized for quite a while now (cf. Smith 2004; Lederach 2005; Richmond 2007) and even if the importance of local ownership is undisputed, only a few peacebuilding concepts have generated ideas on how to deal with the uncertainty and ambiguity inherent in all social processes.

One of the main aims of this article is to illustrate that the integration of methods from systemic therapy into conflict transformation approaches offers huge potential for including creativity and openness. In addition, they provide new ideas for addressing the blind spots in peacebuilding programmes.

Given that a great variety of valuable concepts for peacebuilding and conflict transformation already exists, the aim of this contribution is not to opt for a purely systemic approach. This is even more true as some of the approaches, such as action research or participative inquiry, are, to a certain extent, very similar to systemic ideas and sometimes differences between them can hardly be seen (Burns 2007b; Flood 2001). Therefore, systemic ideas can and must be combined with other methods. This is also the reason why I am elaborating on *essential components* of systemic thinking and not on a systemic *approach.* Speaking of components highlights in particular the flexibility of these principles – whether or not to implement them can be decided from case to case and they do not need to be applied all together in a predefined sequence.

Before this systemic perspective is characterized, a critical overview on the current debate in the peacebuilding field is provided at the beginning of this chapter. Despite the heterogeneity of peacebuilding concepts and methods, a liberal consensus about the core values does still exist. The critique of the liberal peacebuilding paradigm is nothing new. For more than fifteen years, knowledge transfer from the North to the South in international relations has been critically reflected, for example in postcolonial studies and critical peace research. However, what has only been considered to a very limited extent is the consolidation of liberal peace by the methods applied. Very often, the methods for conflict analysis or the development of indicators serve to guarantee outcomes of the peace process which correspond to the liberal paradigm. A crucial idea of this article is to emphasize that the integration of systemic methods into peacebuilding processes helps to reintegrate discussions of values into strategy development and assists in the re-politicization of peacebuilding concepts.

It will be shown that linear, 'if A then B' and 'logical framework' thinking stands in the Northern tradition of reasoning and is closely connected to European socio-economic history. Therefore, this logic might sometimes appear a bit strange to a pastoralist from Southern Sudan, for example, who lives far away from the capital and is barely in contact with international structures. The distinction 'North-South divide' will not be used in a geographical sense, as educational elites in Uganda or Ethiopia, socialized by international universities, are often as unfamiliar with rural traditions as someone from Berlin would be. Accordingly, many civil society organizations in Africa or Asia are accustomed to using Northern peacebuilding terminology and do not question the liberal underpinnings of their work. The situation looks different in remote regions where indigenous traditions are still vibrant. It will be shown at the end of this chapter that, due to the hybridity of social realities, North and South are not opposites but entities which influence and interact with each other.

Even if, in a globalized world, pure and essentialist cultures are hardly to be found anywhere, cultural differences become evident in the way social, economic, institutional, moral and religious or spiritual relations are understood. Cultural sensitivity in peacebuilding and conflict transformation is therefore crucial, not only with respect to the content of a project and the methods used but also in terms of the patterns of thought it is based on. At the end of this article, emphasis is put on the similarities between systemic thinking and Buddhism, as well as some African cultures. It will be stressed that it is imperative for peacebuilding and conflict transformation to accept that space exists beyond the liberal peacebuilding consensus in terms of different ways of thinking and reasoning.

1. The Liberal Peacebuilding Consensus

1.1 Normative Underpinnings of Peacebuilding

The past twenty years have witnessed an upsurge in peacebuilding and conflict transformation activities. Concepts and methods for strategy planning, conflict analysis, assessment and monitoring have improved substantially. Many donor agencies, international organizations and large NGOs have developed their own frameworks for conflict analysis.[1] A great variety of literature has been produced on how to plan and implement peacebuilding projects and evaluate conflict transformation activities in an adequate way (Austin et al. 2003; Bloomfield et al. 2005; Church/Shouldice 2002; Lederach et al. 2007).

At the beginning of the 1990s, the term 'peacebuilding' encompassed activities to be undertaken after the end of violent conflicts.[2] Today, it is a very heterogeneous, even woolly notion. Often it is used as an umbrella term for other concepts such as peacekeeping, peacemaking, conflict transformation, management, prevention, mitigation or reconciliation. Peacebuilding activities focus on "developing structural conditions, attitudes and modes of political behaviour that permit peaceful, stable and ultimately prosperous social and economic development" (Smith 2004, 20).[3]

This implies a broad variety of actors and organizations working on several levels with several means to achieve sustainable peace. For many years now, the discussions within this diversified peacebuilding community have focused on the same flaws, such as a missing coherence between different programmes, a lack of coordination, and a lack of local ownership. Often, the conclusion has been that the impact of peacebuilding activities is stunted by factors such as a great paucity of clear objectives and goals and the often incoherent, short-term manner in which these goals are implemented, as well as organizational rivalry (Fisher/Zimina 2009, 13).

What rarely happens, though, is a solid discussion about the underlying assumptions and norms peacebuilding strategies are based on and how they influence the activities and objectives of a programme. While this has started to change in recent years in the field of peace and conflict research,[4] implementing agencies, such as the UN or bilateral donors, rarely question their moral frameworks and normative assumptions. Instead, they continue to export a liberal understanding of peaceful coexistence, without considering that their underlying hypotheses on how change can be secured influence and determine the results of a programme.[5]

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1 For more details see the websites of UNDP, DIFID, GTZ, International Alert, Care, amongst others.

2 See 'An Agenda for Peace' (United Nations 1992).

3 It would go beyond the scope of this article to jump further into this terminological discussion. Aside from this, there already exits an impressive amount of literature on the issue (Schirch 2008; Smith 2004; Call/Cook 2003; Lederach et al. 2007).

4 See for example: Richmond 2007 and *International Peacekeeping*, Volume 16, April 2009 and the Prio-Project 'Liberal Ethics of Peacebuilding', available at :www.prio.no/Research-and-Publications/Project/?oid =64922 [accessed 30 October 2010].

5 See Körppen (2007), Church/Shouldice (2002, Part II, 29). Also, the Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) stress in the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project the importance of addressing and making explicit theories of change: www.cdainc.com. See the contribution of Chigas/Woodrow in this volume as well.

A critique of international peacebuilding interventions which export liberal frameworks of good governance, human rights, the rule of law and market relations is nothing new. Since the late 1990s the operational strategies of liberal peacebuilding have been criticized for perpetuating the interests and needs of capitalist societies in the Western world (Duffield 2001; Chandler 2009). However, it seems that many peacebuilding activists and analysts do not take part in this discussion, because the liberal underpinnings of peacebuilding concepts are hardly questioned. Donors, international organizations and civil society develop and discuss approaches to conflict transformation and peacebuilding within the confines of liberal peace by seeking its consolidation from a methodological point of view.

But what does the concept of liberal peace actually cover? Today, the way of thinking about peace and conflict processes is still dominated by a post Cold War understanding of how globalized political processes operate. It has mainly been based on a mix of self-determination, liberal democracy, neoliberal economic reform, human rights, humanitarian law and human security. Constructing a well-functioning democratic state which attains its legitimacy through democratic elections is a basic component of almost all peacebuilding interventions. The idea of developing functioning state institutions in so-called 'post-conflict' societies is being justified, as guaranteeing security and stability – in the conflict zones and in the Western world (Duffield 1998).

One of the main aims of liberal peace strategies is to reconstruct societies and their governments in accordance with a Western liberal model of state-building and transform political cultures into modern, self-disciplining and self-governing entities that transcend ethnic violence or fragmentation (Jabri 2007). Frequently, conflict analyses are characterized by a state-bias, and as a consequence peacebuilding is associated with state-building. The root causes for violent conflicts in countries like the Sudan are seen in a lack of democratic institutions, the non-existence of a state monopoly of violence and in absent state structures. In view of the fact that these structures are equated with political and social order, they are also seen as a guarantee for a well-functioning peacebuilding strategy. Liberal peace approaches assume a Hobbesian dilemma: if the state is not capable of exerting control, then chaos must ensue. The degree of modernization, development and democracy is seen as a causal relationship within the liberal peacebuilding discourse, although there is inconclusive evidence between regime type and the stage of development of a society (Helgesen 2010). As a consequence, peacebuilding strategies are dominated by technical and institution-building discourses.[6]

This state-centric perspective has led to a paucity of analyses of political organizations and structures in areas outside the formal control of the state. Informal social networks, native administration or security structures are seldom recognized as valuable entities which regulate the daily life of the people. One reason for this might be that they are not often compatible with Western moral frameworks. However, in the absence of a state social leadership, indigenous social networks can emerge and effectively govern communities (Longman 1998, Mamdami 1999, Sklar 1999).

It must be emphasized at this point that the liberal discourse is very heterogeneous and there is no single common understanding of what liberal state-building peace

6 The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) provides in one of its most recent publications a detailed overview on the current shortcomings in peacebuilding programmes (NUPI 2010).

means. In addition, related activities differ substantially, depending on which level of a society or which track they take place on.[7] The lower the track, the higher the possibilities are for including local traditions of conflict transformation.

1.2 Against the Peacebuilding Consensus

Despite this heterogeneity, a general consensus exists about the objectives and goals of interventions to end conflict. The demand for coordinating peacebuilding activities in a better way is based on the assumption that there is a common normative basis for creating peace, agreed by the great majority of international organizations, states, NGOs, CSOs and governments:

> "The peacebuilding consensus assumes that there is a universally agreed normative and cultural basis for the liberal peace and that interventionary practices derived from this will be properly supported by all actors" (Richmond 2007, 111).

One of the aims of this consensus is to develop standards and a universal framework for generating a peaceful world. A certain type of knowledge about peace and conflict is produced, which is transferred to conflict zones through the implementation of peacebuilding approaches. Highly political interventions are depoliticized and neutralized with the argument that a functioning liberal democracy is a crucial component of peaceful co-existence, and part of a universal truth. The same applies for the methods used. Technical terms like 'instrument', 'tool', 'indicator' or 'template' attest that they are considered as apolitical and objective ways to capture reality.

To give an example: many donors and international organizations are working with standardized concepts of quantitative and qualitative indicators, which are highly sophisticated and assist in categorizing and evaluating activities in the field. Nevertheless, they are always based on political assumptions and a specific understanding of the causes and consequences of conflict. If it is assumed that a non-functioning state is the reason why the implementation of the human rights agenda does not succeed, then, as a logical consequence, the objectives and activities developed for the project's 'logframe' focus on building state structures and institutions that guarantee the desired implementation of a human rights agenda. A very common indicator for success is then 'holding elections'. Although it is obvious that 'logframes' have their benefits because they help to define and clarify the goals of a project, its objectives and related activities, they have many limitations. They reinforce the implementing agencies' 'in the box' thinking, rather than being open and creative about changes to the conflict situation:

> "This results from their tendency to reinforce linear, 'if-then' causal relationships between inputs, activities and outcomes. It is this tendency that also leads to an emphasis on the 'quantifiable' when it comes to measurable indicators. It further produces a focus on the project level rather than on the overall policy goals or purposes" (Hoffman 2003, 17).

7 For further information on 'tracks' see Ropers (2002, 43). While he elaborates on three tracks, the concept of Multi-Track-Diplomacy by Louise Diamond and John MacDonald involves nine tracks. However, today it is more popular to refer only to three tracks.

In this mono-causal 'if-then' thinking, it is assumed that social change is a linear process based on a set of certain developmental stages aligned on a linear timeline. The development of a society is seen as a chronological procedure in which specific criteria need to be fulfilled. Peace, development and 'civilization' are closely linked in this discourse (Senghaas 1998, 2004). It is assumed that the more developed and civilized a society is, the less violence will be used for solving problems. The underlying criteria for measuring this peace- and development-process are created on the basis of the socio-political history of European societies. Conflict-prone societies are characterized by chaos and disorder, while the democracies in the West are symbols for order and stability.

As a consequence, exporting order to conflict zones is a crucial underlying hypothesis in many peacebuilding strategies (Richmond 2007, 85; Schlichte 2005b). It also serves as a legitimization for intervention. The more detailed, comprehensive and multi-layered the intervention strategy is, the bigger the chance for successful implementation. If peace is not achieved, the planning is being seen as insufficient or the methods as not being accurate enough.

This rather rationalistic and right-brain dominated view of societal development processes is a very European or Northern way of thinking, which also prevails in peace and conflict research. The idea of a universal and common history of mankind, with European societies as a benchmark, can be traced back to the Enlightenment. It was shaped by Descartes' rationalistic philosophy and the separation of mind and matter. As a consequence, this so-called 'modern view' considers social processes as being measurable and controllable. For the sake of clarity and definiteness, reason should create order and unambiguity out of chaos (Bauman 2005). Ambivalence and ambiguity were two of the most disturbing components for the Enlightenment and modernity. The modern view trusts in the ability of theories and concepts to capture reality. And it is still this logic which 'logframes' and peacebuilding programmes are based on.

1.3 The Tautology of Liberal Peace

Hence, it must be said that the normative underpinnings of peacebuilding programmes are not only manifest in the content and goals of the concepts but in the way the methodologies for them are created and implemented.

In debates about the right methodologies for conflict analysis, monitoring and assessment, it is not reflected sufficiently that methods – rather than being neutral instruments to capture reality – have political implications. International organizations in particular, such as the UN, the World Bank or the donor community, continue neutralizing strategic discussions about project management and still hold full control over the whole programming and disbursement process. The spaces for interpretation of what peace means are controlled by applying peacebuilding concepts and tools based on liberal assumptions. The specific outcomes of a project are defined in advance in a 'logframe' and permit local participation only within the predefined liberal framework. As recent findings about tendencies in peacebuilding show, culturally specific elements of peaceful coexistence are very often excluded (NUPI 2010). Local actors serve only as implementers and the trendy expression 'local ownership' is used to legitimate inter-

vention. Diversity in programming, meaningful local ownership, social justice and sustainable economic empowerment still do not belong to the guiding principles of many peacebuilding programmes (NUPI 2010, 5).

This leads to a tautology, because liberal peace approaches only support local ownership if it adheres to the basic components of liberal peace and if it does not undermine liberal values. According to this, they can hardly opt for participatory or meaningful local ownership, as this could signify cultural conflict transformation practices which are not compatible with a liberal perspective. For this reason, a certain control mechanism with respect to the methods and outcomes of a peace process is inherent to liberal peacebuilding programmes. As a consequence, local opportunities for negotiating peace and bridging the huge gap between interveners and recipients are very limited (Richmond 2007; Mac Ginty 2008).

2. The Systemic Perspective

2.1 Crucial Components of Systemic Thinking and Their Consequences for Conflict Transformation

Integrating systemic principles into existing approaches to conflict transformation inspires creative ways of thinking, and helps to handle the complexity and non-linearity of peace processes. It will be shown below that these systemic components assist in developing a deeper understanding of the conflict and its social and political dynamics. The aim of this article is neither to present a systemic 'approach' as a solution to all existing shortcomings in the peacebuilding field, nor is it considered as an alternative to liberal peacebuilding. Rather, the following systemic principles introduce innovative ways of thinking about peace and conflict dynamics and might be useful in uncovering some of the blind spots of the liberal peace discourse. Additionally, they provide creative methods for strategy development, assessment and conflict analysis. Instead of pretending to capture and represent reality, a crucial component of systemic methods is that space is arranged for exposing underlying assumptions about change, as well as discussing different value systems.

On the ambivalence and contingency of conflict dynamics

This article is based on a constructivist understanding of systemic thinking, rooted in post-modern philosophy. Heinz von Foerster (1995) and Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979) have shaped the notion of 'second order cybernetics' for this strand of systemic approaches to differentiate them from a more technical understanding of the concept. First order cybernetics, which arose in the middle of the last century with Norbert Wiener's control and communication theory (Wiener 1948), or Stafford Beer's "viable system model" (Beer 1959), influenced management and organizational theories, while ideas from Bateson and Foerster have been applied in family and psychotherapy as well.[8]

8 See for example Retzer (2006) and von Schlippe/Schweitzer (2003).

Both strands of cybernetic approaches agree that the whole is more than the sum of its parts and that within a system its particular elements are connected and interact with each other. One contentious issue, which is also very relevant for conflict analysis methodologies, is the relationship between the observer and the system being observed. Systemic approaches based on a more technical understanding assume that it is possible to observe a system in a 'neutral' way and to gather information about it without influencing or interacting with it. They stand in the tradition of occidental science and the Cartesian world view, as they regard the observer and the observed as two separate unities.

Scholars from the field of second order cybernetics, such as Heinz von Foerster or Gregory Bateson, emphasize that the observer and the observed interact with each other. According to this view, a neutral observation or analysis of a system is not possible because the observer becomes a part of the system they observe. As post-modern philosophy illustrates, knowledge never exists independently of the observer but always in relation to the context in which the observing subject itself is situated (Foucault 2000). The results of observation depend on the perspective one adopts. Social systems do not exist per se but are the results of processes of description.

As a consequence, it is assumed that reality is constructed by communication and that knowledge always depends on perspectives. Against this background, the liberal idea turns out to be only one of many narratives. Looking with a systemic lens at social and political processes means acknowledging the existence of various narratives and accepting the ambivalence of reality. Interacting with social systems is accompanied by a cognitive deficit, rooted in the subjectivity of experiences (Fischer 2001). This means that it is only possible for us to draw conclusions on the basis of our own experiences, but they might be wrong for other people in a similar circumstance. Therefore, the idea of capturing reality in an overarching theoretical framework for explaining how social processes and social changes function is based on wishful thinking. There is no universal way to peace.

Thinking in terms of relationships and focusing on patterns of interaction

An essential assumption of a systemic understanding of social processes is the non-linearity of interaction between single elements within the system. The focus of a systemic conflict analysis rests therefore on the patterns of interaction and the dynamics of relationships among the system's actors, rather than on their individual characteristics. It is not the quality of a single factor which reinforces a conflict or helps to achieve sustainable peace. What counts is the manner in which the different factors interact and what kind of context they occur in. Within complex conflict systems the differentiated parts exhibit properties which they owe specifically to being components of a larger whole.

As Bateson's communication theory is crucial for the systemic perspective developed in this article, some of his basic ideas will be outlined in the following. In "Steps to an Ecology of Mind" (1972) it is outlined that communication processes are based on circular interactions – so called *feedback loops*. This relates to the idea that A and B are not connected in a linear mono-causal manner, but in a reciprocal way. The feedback mechanisms on which all communication is based are circular and self-referential by nature. In the closed 'circuitry' of a feedback loop, cause and effect cannot be cate-

gorically isolated. They modify each other in a continuous process where input and output, perceptions and performance, interact. Besides this, the nature of social processes is characterized by the *punctuation* of communication by the dialogue partners. The term *punctuation* was used by Bateson to illustrate the arbitrariness of the starting points of a communication, as they depend on the interpretation of the speaker. Paul Watzlawick, in his third axiom of communication, explained this with an example of disputing spouses.[9] The husband is very passive and has withdrawn, while the wife is constantly criticizing him. She argues that she is grumbling about his passivity, while he says he has withdrawn because she is grumbling all the time (Watzlawick et al. 2000, 58). This complex interaction between perception and action is the key to a system's self-organization and its self-stabilization.

Punctuation plays a crucial role in the peacebuilding and conflict transformation field as does the identification of the root causes of conflict, and defining obstacles to change is fraught with controversy. Often, each conflict party and each analyst follows their own assumptions about the root causes of a conflict.

In Aceh/Indonesia, for example, it was highly disputed as to which stakeholders or which structural causes could be considered as obstacles to change. For Acehnese nationalists the conflict was essentially about identity, arguing that it involved the 'rediscovery' of ancient Acehnese nationhood. Closely related to this was the struggle for self-determination. For the Government of Indonesia, on the other hand, the conflict arose out of grievances in Acehnese society about issues concerning economy, human rights or religion. Acehnese nationalists downplayed grievances and emphasized what they see as fundamental incompatibilities between Aceh and the Indonesian state (Aspinall 2005).

As this example shows, different narratives are a crucial component of every conflict situation. Often, protracted conflicts develop their own dynamics so that the original causes of the conflict might not even be the most important ones any more. Instead of focusing on the causes of a conflict, paying attention to the actual narratives of the conflicting parties and their patterns of interaction are more relevant, as they tell us a lot about the parties (or factions within the conflict parties), their key concerns and options, as well as their relationship to each other.

A basic criterion of conflict analysis from a systemic perspective is mapping the positive and negative feedback loops of the conflict system together with all relevant actors as the basis of a joint workshop. This can also be done sequentially, as it is often challenging or even impossible to bring together representatives from all conflict parties in one workshop. One of the basic ideas of feedback loop mapping is to outline and link multiple perspectives of the particular situation and to obtain a more complex picture of reality. Consequently, the aim of a systemic conflict analysis is not to produce 'objective' knowledge about the conflict but rather to help parties to engage with each other by visualizing and discussing their relationships among each other.

9 It was Paul Watzlawick, together with Don D. Jackson and Janet H. Beavin, who popularized Bateson's communication theory with his five axioms of communication in 'Menschliche Kommunikation' (1967). In contrast to Bateson's theory, Watzlawick's five axioms are quite easy to understand.

Solution-oriented thinking and creating of reflective capacities

As is shown in systemic approaches in organizational development and family therapy, solution orientation is an important criterion of systemic thinking. Instead of defining a problem from the outside, the focus is on supporting the solutions which already exist within the system. This principle has far-reaching consequences for the strategic planning of an intervention. In general, until now, a peacebuilding programme is developed after a team of experts have conducted an analysis and identified several causes for the conflict situation. Donors and international organizations exert full control over the analysis of the situation and the definition of the problem, arguing that it is a scientific and therefore neutral way of gaining knowledge about a situation. As a consequence, local structures that are supportive to peace are sometimes overlooked or already existing peacebuilding projects are not taken into account.

From a systemic point of view, a possible starting point could be, for example, to map the well-functioning structures and initiatives in a region and identify the dynamics which exist between them – together with relevant stakeholders. Often, this joint exercise is not possible with the conflict parties themselves. For this reason, these mappings can be done sequentially and separately as well. By mapping the situation and discussing the interactions of several actors and factors, the first steps for an adequate intervention can be deliberated. Hence, this systemic way of analysing a situation in a conflict region helps to bridge the gap between conflict analysis and strategy building, because discussing the strategy is a crucial part of systemic conflict mapping. It is essential to integrate the position of the intervening party in this map as well.

In addition, tools from systemic therapy such as circular questioning help to prevent a problem definition solely from the outside. They stimulate the reflective capacities of the system itself. The basic idea of this methodology is to assist the interviewee to shift into the role of another person and to generate new information within a particular system (Schlippe/Schweitzer 2003, 140). Whereas direct questions like 'where do you see the main challenges for your peacebuilding programme?' can be used to gather content-related information, circular questions are helpful to assist the interviewee and the interviewer in gaining new perspectives and insights into a well known situation. For example, the interviewee can be asked to shift into the role of a colleague, a conflict party member or donor through questions such as:

- How would person A describe the relationship between you and person B?
- A person leaves the country today and comes back in a couple of years; how would this person see the fruits of your work?

These are only a few examples of how these questions can be used. Schlippe and Schweitzer (2003) provide further examples and methods of circular questioning.

The principle of resonance: Process-oriented strategy development

A systemic intervention is based on the principle of resonance. The crucial idea is to consider a peacebuilding strategy as an open, creative and dynamic process which is constituted by ongoing action and reflection. Instead of designing a peacebuilding strategy at the very beginning and then implementing it, a systemic strategy takes shape during the process itself. What characterizes this kind of strategizing is testing which issues resonate with the interests and needs of the various stakeholders and try-

ing to find out where the energy flows within the system, rather than defining problems in advance.

Due to their openness and process orientation, systemic strategies can quickly adapt to changes in the context. Besides this, the creation of a causal chain of output, outcome and impact is less important. The idea is to leave enough space for defining the desired outcomes together with all relevant stakeholders during the process. Keeping in mind the non-linearity of social processes this kind of strategizing is a very logical consequence. It transcends the technical understanding of peace processes as it addresses ambivalence and uncertainty. As the extensive debate about bridging the gap between micro-, meso- and macro-level for assessing the impact of a peacebuilding programme has shown, it is impossible to schedule and plan programme activities in a linear manner and anticipate single steps of a project in advance. The results of many evaluations indicate, that most projects do not reach the desired impacts (Smith 2004). This does not mean that impact chains are senseless; on the contrary, they can be useful because they provide opportunities for project teams to discuss their assumptions about change. They are only a waste of time if they are handled like construction manuals which need to be implemented.

The circularity of conflict dynamics

Nevertheless, a more systemic variant of an impact chain would be a feedback loop mapping which integrates the non-linear dynamics of every peace process. Referring to one example prepared for an evaluation of the peacebuilding programme run by the South African organisation Sinani,[10] this method is explained in more detail in the following. The loops below show that the development of community structures is a highly complex and circular process which is influenced by reinforcing and counteracting dynamics. Amongst other activities, the programme, which aims to achieve community development, encompasses working with young men and providing job opportunities for them. This leads to an increase of jobs and to a decrease of political violence in the communities, and, as a consequence, this activity stabilizes the community structures. This dynamic is indicated by the loop on the right of the diagram below.

Despite these positive dynamics, many counteracting factors do exist within the community which undermine the goal of empowerment. This circle is indicated by the loop on the left hand side. It shows the interconnectedness of different patterns of violence. Some of them, for example criminal and political violence, might be connected only by a huge time delay (indicated by the two lines) and acted out by generations that might not even remember the times of political violence themselves.

10 See also the contribution by Khuzwayo/Meintjes/Merk in this volume.

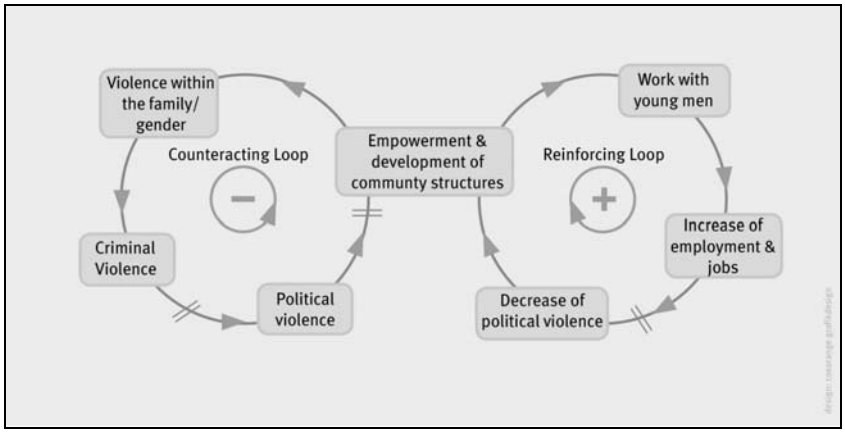

Figure 1: Community Development in KwaZulu-Natal

This feedback loop mapping exercise illustrates that community development does not grow in a linear fashion, but that it is a highly fragile process which risks setbacks and new outbreaks of violence. For this reason, those planning a peacebuilding strategy must be well aware of these interactions and their time delays. In order to contribute to lasting stability and development of the community it is not enough to work with young men but also to address the problem of violence within the family, for example.

Such loops of patterns of interaction within a conflict system can be prepared for each project activity. Afterwards, they can be related to each other in a complete mapping of the whole strategy in its respective context. Mapping exercises are always a combination of analysing a situation and discussing steps for intervention. They can be prepared with focus groups or, if feasible, with all relevant stakeholders during a two or three day workshop.

These mappings help to address the issue of scaling-up activities as well. With the principle of resonance it is possible to check what patterns of interaction are of crucial importance in various subsystems or groups of people. In his systemic approach to action research, Danny Burns[11] explains the idea of scaling-up as follows:

> "Wherever we are working with a group on issues that people think may be a fractal of the wider systemic pattern, they can firstly be played back into their source environment. Then we can play them into cluster meetings. If there is a strong resonance at cluster level, then we can take it out to the whole system level. This enables us to deal with the problem of scale" (Burns 2007a, 192).

Another interesting and helpful method for understanding the dynamics of the wider system, and the various interrelations within it, is circular dialoguing (Hummelbrunner 2000; Baumfeld et al. 2009). This assists in taking into account complex linkages between people and groups of people on different levels of a society. The first step of a circular dialogue is to collect information about the system by interviewing people. In the next step, this information will be fed back into another system and cross-checked with perceptions and assumptions in other groups with different people. Results are presented to them to see and hear how they reflect on them. Afterwards, the same pro-

11 See also his article in this book.

cedure can be applied on a different level of the system and results can be cross-checked with groups at different levels. This method is also very inspiring if it is used for creating a systemic evaluation strategy (Körppen et al. 2008).

3. Cultural Sensitivity and Systemic Thinking

3.1 The Methodological Consolidation of Liberal Peace

It will be outlined in the following that the integration of systemic methods into peacebuilding practice has many benefits with respect to creating comprehensive local ownership. Systemic thinking, rooted in post-modern philosophy, reintegrates subjectivity into conflict analysis, assessment and strategy building and rejects the idea that an objective knowledge about a conflict situation exists. It also questions the necessity of always agreeing on a consensus, as unity is seen in the diversity of the solutions, which are manifest in different ways of thinking and reasoning about a conflict situation. As has been already shown, methods such as circular questioning do not try to capture an objective reality but rather create a space for exposing different narratives and different ways of thinking about a conflict.

Although formats like interactive conflict resolution, with their focus on problem-solving workshops, also intend to create space for exchange between conflict parties, they are still based on a linear and problem-oriented logic. Furthermore, they consider social change as a linear process which is determined by a sequenced set of predefined steps: first to analyse different perceptions, then develop a common understanding, and create models for possible solutions, amongst others.[12]

In formats like these, there is no space for a more circular or complex understanding of social change. For this reason, they operate only to a very limited extent in a culturally sensitive manner and continue instead to export 'Northern' and liberal values. They are based on a specific kind of knowledge about the dynamics of peace processes, which is transferred to the conflict zones by applying this dialogue format.

The main aim of this last section is to emphasize that cultural sensitivity is not only important with respect to the content of a peacebuilding project, but also in terms of the methods used. Instead of transporting liberal values, they need to provide space for discussing different value systems.

3.2 The Interweaving Elements of Cultures

However, the demand for culturally sensitive peacebuilding approaches and methods is challenging, as often it is based on a dualistic view: the local culture on the one hand and international or 'Northern' cultures on the other. Both are regarded as two separate

12 See Ronald J. Fisher's review on uses of interactive conflict resolution in 'International Conflict: Methods and Techniques' (Zartman and Rasmussen) Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997. For detailed considerations of the differences between ICR and systemic methods, please see the contribution by Oliver Wolleh in this volume.

units. But, as has been pointed out by many authors from postcolonial studies, reality is characterized by hybridity. There is neither a homogeneous liberal approach as such, nor do pure African or Asian cultures still exist.

The concept of hybridity was shaped by, amongst others, Homi Bhabha and is very relevant for peace and conflict research and practice as well. With respect to the colonization era, he describes it as a process by which the colonial authority undertakes to transform the identity of the colonized –"the Other" – within a singular universal framework, but then fails to produce something familiar and creates a new hybrid identity. This new identity emerges from the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and colonized (Bhaba 1994, 1996).

The validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity is therefore questionable. Bhabha positions hybridity as an antidote to the belief in invariable and fixed identities or cultural entities. A pure local culture can rarely be found. For this reason, Bhabha speaks of a "third space" which has been created through the interaction of Western or Northern civilization and the colonized (ibid.).

It is exactly this idea of a *third space* which can be useful for peacebuilding as well as conflict transformation, because it indicates that through the interaction between the interveners and the intervened a new space or system is created. This is a highly dynamic and non-linear process which cannot be captured with the dualistic categories that many peacebuilding strategies are based on, such as inside/outside or global/local. As has been already said, political and social reality is constructed by self-organizing and emerging networks of action and reaction.

3.3 About the Differences Between Cultures

Despite this hybrid reality, cultural differences still exist. They are manifested, for example, in the style of arguing and thinking about peace and conflict dynamics. Thus, criticizing the liberal peacebuilding consensus on the one hand focuses on the liberal content of many peacebuilding projects, but on the other it is also necessary to question the patterns of thought the concepts are based on.

While the importance of these different ways of thinking is well-documented in the fields of psychology and anthropology,[13] it is rarely an issue in peacebuilding and conflict transformation. For peacebuilding strategies to be efficient it is necessary to take into account the socio-culturally constituted ways of understanding, not only conflicts and how they can be resolved, but also more profoundly how social, economic, institutional, moral and religious/spiritual relations are understood in different cultures. The latter phenomena incorporate both culturally specific and general aspects that need to be understood in any attempt to reveal the conditions for successful conflict transformation. The unique modes and tools of thought and collective behavioural patterns associated with different cultures are resources that need to be studied, acknowledged, and drawn upon in times of peacebuilding and transformation (Ratner 2002).

13 See for example Nisbett's 'The Geography of Thoughts' (2003). The author has shown, that Westerners and East Asians think about and experience the world differently because of differing ecologies, social structures, philosophies and educational systems. These differences are rooted in ancient Greece and China, have survived into the modern world, and are still shaping ways of reasoning and thinking.

Even if it is obvious that cultural patterns of thought are, however, also increasingly subject to influences from a wide range of globalization processes and institutional dynamics that span both micro- and macro-levels, they still influence ways of thinking and reasoning in the non-Western world. It has already been mentioned that a linear and dualistic logic seems to be more familiar to Western or Northern cultures. Additionally, it was outlined that this world view is a consequence of European socio-economic history and can be traced back to the Enlightenment. In the following, emphasis will be put on different patterns of thoughts inherent in Buddhism and African cultures, to underline that a mono-causal linear logic is not a universal truth but a specific narrative rooted in a specific worldview.

The interconnectedness and interrelatedness of different elements within a system is not only a basic principle of systemic thinking but can also be found in the Buddha's teaching of Dependent Origination. It is said that everything and everybody exits only in relation to other beings and things, and undergoes constant changes while responding and reacting to them (Der-Ian Yeh 2006, 91). The whole world is seen as a network of interactions:

> "At the macro level the universe is represented and seen from a Buddhist viewpoint as a network of jewels, an interconnected and interdependent web of nodes, each of which simultaneously reflects all other hundreds of thousands of nodes in the web. All other nodes would simultaneously reflect this specific node" (Der-Ian Yeh 2006, 92).

Based on this world view, peace or peacebuilding is not considered as a definite end but rather as a constant, contingent and interactive process. It is an ongoing interaction between our actions and the world. As several studies about peacebuilding and Buddhism have already elaborated, many commonalities exist between systemic thinking and Buddhism (Shen/Midgley 2007; Der-Ian Yeh 2006).

For this reason, it can be assumed that a very rational and linear understanding of a peace building process and the construction of linear impact chains might not appear very familiar to a person with a Buddhist background. A fluid, organic and flexible approach would probably meet needs in some regions in a more adequate manner.

Methods from systemic therapy, such as the tetralemma, can be a useful way to capture this non-linear and complex world view. It originates in traditional Indian reasoning and Buddhist philosophy and stimulates "thinking out of the box" (Varga von Kibéd/Sparrer 2005, 77). Whereas 'Western' or 'European' logic follows a binary view in which 'either/or' thinking dominates, it is a crucial idea of the tetralemma to indicate that there exist at least four options for each perceived problem. It intends to break with a bipolar perception of the world, and the perceptions of problems as 'di-lemmas'. Given that the tetralemma is a process-tool, this means that we do not know all the positions from the very beginning; instead they are created and formed through the process of working with the tetralemma. It is like a landscape which changes while you are walking through it (Varga von Kibéd/Sparrer 2005).[14]

Non-linear thinking is also a crucial component of many African cultures.[15] They believe that webs of relationships exist between organisms and objects, and are there-

14 For examples of its application in the peacebuilding field, please see Körppen et al. (2008) and Ropers (2008).

15 See also the contribution of Merk et al in this volume.

fore less interested in identifying causal relationships within a system. A very well-known concept in this regard is the principle of Ubuntu: 'I am because we are and we are because I am'. Whereas 'Western' psychological concepts regard the self as an autonomous entity, African psychology sees the personality as context-based as well. Personhood is defined in terms of its relationships with the family, community or status or position within a group (Mkhize 2004, 27). For this reason, systemic methods of conflict transformation can help to bridge the gap between more technical international peacebuilding discourse and local ways of dealing with conflicts.

Hence, a culturally sensitive approach to conflict transformation needs to be aware of these differences and needs to take into account that local ownership is important with respect to strategy development as well. Local ownership does not mean hiring people from the region only to then let them implement pre-designed programmes. How can meaningful local ownership be achieved if local cultural practices are rarely integrated into peacebuilding approaches? (NUPI 2010, 15) Often, local traditions of conflict transformation are excluded because they seem to be incomprehensible and incompatible with international norms. In countries like the Sudan, the situation looks a bit different with respect to the community level, where traditional methods of conflict transformation play a crucial role. On the other tracks, however, no culturally specific components can be found and the peacebuilding strategies are dominated by a liberal peacebuilding discourse.

Given that an intervention based on systemic thinking is more process-oriented, and as it is not designed in advance, it provides for a more participatory approach with regard to strategy building. Additionally, it is more open to integrating and reflecting different (cultural) perspectives and values. A systemic 'approach' to conflict transformation can be seen more as a facilitation of already ongoing activities in a conflict region and therefore provides more space for local ownership and the discussion of various types of knowledge about peace and conflict dynamics. One of its main aims is to create a space for exchange between the conflicting parties, and thus is something like a rite of passage, a contemporary support to outline and further develop solutions for a peaceful future.[16]

Conclusion: The Space Beyond the Liberal Peacebuilding Consensus

One of the main benefits of integrating systemic components into conflict transformation relates to the provision of space for re-politicizing the liberal peace discourse. If systemic thinking is rooted in the field of post-modern philosophy and builds on concepts of second order cybernetics, it offers opportunities for reintegrating subjectivity into the methodological debate about adequate approaches. It does so first and foremost by abandoning the idea that models are neutral and objective 'instruments' to capture

16 A very inspiring approach to describing such a transformation process is the 'rite of passage' concept from systemic therapy. This ritual consists of three steps, the ritual of detachment, the threshold ritual and the ritual of reintegration. It would go beyond the scope of this article to explain it more in detail. For further information please see Retzer (2006, 83-87).

the dynamics of conflicts. As has been emphasized, approaches like interactive conflict resolution are based on political assumptions and include a certain type of knowledge, corresponding to European or Northern world views, in which the focus is very much on the individual and on its capability of resolving conflicts through dialogue. As is shown in Sinani's contribution in this volume, the Zulu culture, instead of concentrating on the individual, puts more emphasis on the community and on the spiritual balance within the system, which also includes ancestors. Due to their process orientation, systemic methods such as conflict mapping integrate local perspectives from the very beginning and do not consider a specific type of knowledge about the conflict to be superior. Using a mapping exercise, the needs and interests of several groups of people can be filtered out in a more culturally sensitive manner. Given that systemic methods operate in a solution-oriented way, they give less importance to the definition of a problem in advance but focus on identifying local structures which are supportive for a non-violent transformation of the conflict instead.

Hence, from a systemic perspective it is imperative to be aware of the space beyond the liberal peace consensus, which is still vibrant, despite the hybridity of cultures. This space appears in different ways of thinking about socio-economic, political and religious or spiritual conditions of life. As has been shown, many countries in the South are more familiar with a non-linear understanding of social and political realities. This space beyond the liberal peacebuilding consensus also relates to the fact that not everything can be captured with analytical methods because ambiguity, uncertainty and emotions are essential parts of all communication and every interaction. For this reason, cultural sensitivity is highly important not only with respect to the content of the peacebuilding programme but also in regard to the methods applied, as well as the patterns of thought the strategy is based on.

However, as already mentioned, this does not mean that all existing concepts need to be substituted by systemic approaches. This would overstrain the capacity of systemic methods. In addition, organizations in the South very often feel comfortable with the *do no harm* approach or an analysis of the root causes of the conflict because they help to gain useful insights about a conflict situation. They can easily be integrated into process-oriented systemic strategy building, as has been described above.

In the end it should be recognized that systemic thinking runs the risk of being technocratic and dogmatic if it is understood as *the* new and alternative model for conflict transformation, seen as being able to address all existing shortcomings in peacebuilding concepts, such as bridging the gap between the micro- and macro-level. If this is the case, systemic thinking will be only a continuation of the liberal peacebuilding discourse.

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