

Introduction: Approaching Social Change

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Conflict transformation can be defined as “... actions and processes which seek to alter the various characteristics and manifestations of conflict by addressing the root causes of a particular conflict over the long term. It aims to transform negative destructive conflict into positive constructive conflict and deals with structural, behavioural and attitudinal aspects of conflict. The term refers to both the process and the completion of the process.” (Austin et al. 2004, 464/465.) In short, it has the theme of “social change” written all over it.

In 2005, a seminar at the Berghof Research Center brought together experts to discuss the state of the art in conflict transformation theory and practice, especially as it relates to social change theories.

“Can we,” we asked ourselves, in the wake of the seminar, “develop a model of social change that usefully reflects, explains and assists the massive and complex challenge of making peace in violent conflicts?” (Dudouet et al. 2006, 44). The intensive debates during this seminar also brought home two main intellectual challenges: First, to continuously question and test the basic assumptions and values of our approaches. And second, to interrogate closely the building blocks of our field that derive mostly from inter-personal and inter-group conflict and environments of roughly symmetric power constellations – yet are increasingly transferred to the international realm and tested in situations of asymmetric conflict. It is in this context that we present this latest issue of the Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series which explores conflict transformers’ approaches to social change.

When we first embarked on this journey, the list of questions appeared endless; the subject matter seemed to have no boundaries. We started with the basics: What scholarly and practice-orientated writing was out there that could help us understand the ways in which change leads to the formation of (violent)

conflict? How could we grapple with the idea that conflict is an opportunity for change? Was there, in particular, any thinking from the field of systemic theory and system dynamics that could help us formulate more appropriate hypotheses about the ways in which changes in one part of a conflict system would reverberate and have consequences in other parts of the system? What could be learned about the entry points, appropriate means and an appropriate timing/sequencing of measures to create change that would help transform violent conflict? We went on to more specific queries: In the context of research projects underway at both the Berghof Research Center and the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support – on understanding and modelling the transition from violence to peace, and on further developing the *systemic* approach to conflict transformation – it seemed particularly important to understand what agents or driving forces of change exist and operate in situations of violent conflict. What could we glean from the literature and from the experience of practitioners about such agents of peaceful change? Could we generalise about their characteristics? About environments and structural preconditions that would be conducive to their impact? What could we learn about useful steps of engagement and support provided by third-party interveners?

We found that within both scholarly inquiry and concrete conflict transformation interventions there were a lot more open questions than guiding answers. This is echoed in the remark of Christopher Mitchell, the lead voice in this Dialogue, that “the literature dealing *systematically* with the connections between change and conflict is hardly extensive, and that directly dealing with *precise* relationships between change and conflict resolution is even more sparse” (Mitchell in this Dialogue, 2*, emphasis added). It is also reflected in the assessment of Cheyanne Church and Julie Shouldice that “practitioners’ beliefs about change, which are rarely articulated, underpin key decision-making processes in the development of conflict resolution interventions. Beyond this assertion, however, there [is] minimal discussion about defining the concept... [There are] no dominant typologies that lay out the current theories of change in this field and virtually nothing [is] available at present that purports to define, describe or test such theories” (Church and Shouldice 2003, 30 and 38).

This Berghof Dialogue therefore sets out to assess what we have learned about the intricate relationship between conflict and change, specifically in the context of protracted, ethnopolitical conflict. We have gathered scholars and practitioners in the field to help us work through the current state of affairs and to point to areas of tension and useful next steps in approaching social change in situations of violent conflict. As is customary for the Berghof Handbook Dialogues, we start with a lead article that delineates the current debate and points out pressing questions for both research and practice. We follow that with a diverse set of responses on the concepts, ideas and challenges raised from specific scholarly and practical viewpoints. The Dialogue ends with a brief, concluding reflection by the lead author.

Christopher Mitchell accepted the difficult task of systematising current knowledge on change, conflict and conflict resolution in our lead article. Few would be better positioned to do so: Mitchell is Professor Emeritus of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at the Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) of George Mason University in Virginia, USA. The British academic has, over a career that spans more than 40 years, been part of pioneering approaches to conflict resolution and remains one of the most rigorous scholars in the field, who may respectfully be called a “veteran conflict analyst” (Ed Garcia in this Dialogue, 4). Mitchell sets out to make “a small contribution to the development of a general theory of change and conflict – or, more

* Page numbers refer to the dialogue contributions as published on www.berghof-handbook.net, Dialogue Series, single articles.

particularly, conflict resolution” and to propose “a starting point for the development of a set of theories of conflict dynamics as well as a practical set of guidelines concerning modes and timing of ‘resolutionary’ interventions” (Mitchell in this Dialogue, 2/3). He does so in a stimulating enquiry that explores existing literature along five interrelated questions, in answer to which he is “attempting to produce some general lessons” (ibid., 7):

- 1) What sorts of change create conflict?
- 2) What sorts of change exacerbate conflict?
- 3) What sorts of change diminish the intensity of conflict?
- 4) What sorts of change help to bring about the resolution or transformation of conflict?, and
- 5) What are some of the obstacles to change that themselves need changing before a protracted conflict can begin to move towards a resolution? Who might be able to bring about needed changes, and how?

Focal points of his discussion are the clarification of escalation and de-escalation dynamics, the mechanism of “entrapment” as a major obstacle to change, a systematisation of opportunities to reach moments of “resolutionary change” – prominent among them the idea of creating a learning environment and the distinction between tractable and intractable dimensions – and the elaboration of a set of roles for change agents tailored to the different phases of a violent conflict. He concludes with the proposition that “some clear, detailed and empirically supported answers to three key questions would be of enormous practical help” in providing “practical guidance to anyone seeking to initiate or reinforce resolutionary change processes” (ibid., 21/22). The questions that practitioners and scholars need to explore in Mitchell’s opinion are concerned with *when and how to act*:

- 1) What changes in a conflict will clearly indicate that the adversaries in a protracted conflict are likely to be receptive to suggestions about alternative, nonviolent methods of fulfilling their interests and entering into a new relationship with their adversary?
- 2) How might one best carry out a systematic analysis so as to distinguish those factors which are tractable, in the short or even medium term and given available time and resources, from those which are inherently intractable, so that efforts to change them are most unlikely to succeed?
- 3) If, in order to bring about changes in the minds of key players (decision makers, advisers and opinion leaders), it is necessary to place them in an environment where they can contemplate new ideas, innovative alternatives, potential futures and realistic current options, then how might such an environment be constructed, given the constraints on their time, attention and freedom of action?

The five respondents take different routes from Mitchell’s starting-point: they refine his initial analysis, offer tentative answers to specific questions and challenges, expand the framework of inquiry, critically assess underlying assumptions and question the envisioned end point of the approach, i.e. the objective of creating a general theory of conflict and change.

Ed Garcia, Filipino-born Senior Policy Advisor at the London-based NGO International Alert and a seasoned practitioner in the Asia-Pacific region, moves the discussion to the social and normative aspects of change. Aiming to supplement Mitchell’s initial systematisation on change and conflict, he addresses more specifically the interrelationship of *social* change, conflict and conflict transformation. He argues that all conflict transformers have to address the issue of social change, since a failure to do so, and hence the lack of social justice, lies at the heart of many protracted social conflicts. Four areas of engagement are particularly important in this context: promoting human rights, promoting inclusive governance, catalysing sustainable development and advancing security

sector reform. “Profound social change,” he argues, “will come about only by putting pressure on those unwilling or unable to yield to the needs and aspirations of vulnerable populations” (Garcia in this Dialogue, 2). How such pressure can be applied and supported nonviolently, Garcia elaborates in three steps: by presenting ethical guidelines that would ground the efforts of peace practitioners, by reflecting that the best roles for third parties are those of “enabler” or “facilitator”, and by underlining the importance of building peace constituencies in order to sustain moments of revolutionary change. He bolsters his reflections with examples from his work and travels in the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Chris Spies, Peace and Development Advisor for the UNDP’s Social Cohesion Programme in Guyana, also offers insights from the point of view of (development) practice. He stresses that “change and conflict, like development, are about people, not things” (Spies in this Dialogue, 5), and consequently digs down to the personal aspects of change. He focuses on the centrality of ownership and teases out important principles and methods in creating environments and attitudes that allow people to change, and to sustain such change into the future. He responds directly to Mitchell’s concerns that “members of parties in conflict have to be placed in a position where they can contemplate alternatives” (Mitchell in this Dialogue, 19): “The difficulty, of course, is that conflicts are quite the worst environment for bringing about significant changes in goals, interests and underlying beliefs. In such circumstances, the predominant ideas about learning and changing involve beliefs that it is the other side that has to learn; and that hurting them is the best way of bringing about such learning” (ibid., 17). Spies offers a process to break down this complex and occasionally intimidating challenge and presents it in his framework for developmental change, which ultimately builds on the crucial capacity for respectful listening.

Listening for implicit theories of change used by practitioners is what the next respondent has done. **Ilana Shapiro**, Acting Director and Assistant Professor for the doctoral programme “The Psychology of Peace and Prevention of Violence” at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, USA, has done extensive research into the theories of change underlying conflict intervention programmes, specifically programmes dealing with racial equity in the US. She shares her insights and presents a useful overview of different levels of analysis – from the individual level of changing perceptions, attitudes/emotions or behaviours, and the inter-personal or inter-group level of changing relationships, to the macro level of changing structures, institutions and systems of conflict. She suggests extending Mitchell’s framework of inquiry: “Explicitly mapping these different theories of change,” she claims, “lays a foundation for future testing and evaluation of divergent approaches and helps revise and refine both theory and practice to the benefit of each” (Shapiro in this Dialogue, 4; echoing a call by Church and Shouldice 2003). She continues: “For scholars, building theories of change from theories in use includes a reciprocal process of developing grounded theory, comparing it with existing research literature, testing emergent hypotheses and dialoguing with practitioners about the findings and new questions. . . . For practitioners, examining theories of change implies an intra- [and inter-] organisational process of reflection and dialogue about both espoused theories and theories in use, retrospective analyses of programmes and their impact and more conscious planning, experimentation and evaluation of new programmes” (Shapiro in this Dialogue, 7).

The final two respondents critically review some of the assumptions and values underlying Mitchell’s approach.

Vivienne Jabri, Director of the Centre for International Relations and Senior Lecturer in International Relations in the Department of War Studies at King's College, London, UK, delivers a tightly argued critique of underlying assumptions, both epistemological (how we know things) and ontological (how we believe things to be). She wants explicitly to “delve below the surface, unpacking the various commitments that inform” Mitchell's article (Jabri in this Dialogue, 3). Jabri unearths two main issues: that of positivist vs. constructivist agency, and that of the need for relocating conflict resolution in politics. She argues that practitioners and scholars who undertake interventions into violent conflict need to take into account “the substance of change, the particularity of distinct conflicts, the discourses that surround them, the relations of power that enable some while constraining others, the various practices of legitimisation . . . , all taking place within complex global matrices of power” (ibid., 4). Yet conflict resolution, as a field, is found guilty of “somehow extract[ing] itself from social and political theory, so that its language is rendered neutral, a management consultant's toolkit” (ibid., 5). Jabri points in particular to the problematic consequences of a generic, almost “formulaic” representation of, for example, the roles of agents of change (Mitchell in this Dialogue, 18-21) that cannot, as she argues, reasonably inform the practice of conflict resolution or transformation as there “is no way that this analysis can . . . inform on the consequences or desirability of these roles and their applications” (Jabri in this Dialogue, 6).

Daniela Körppen, Researcher at the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support in Berlin, Germany, and a PhD candidate specialising in systemic conflict transformation, elaborates on Jabri's critique by calling attention to three aspects of Mitchell's approach which she finds problematic. First, his stance of generalising instead of contextualising will arguably widen the existing gap between conflict transformation theory and practice. Second, his chosen roles for change agents, in her eyes, reveal an implicit overreliance on third-party, external interveners to “fix” conflicts, whereas it can be argued – in line with systemic thinking – that to enable conflict transformation, resources must be mobilised from *within* the conflict system. Third, she warns against a positivist, linear and monocausal approach to conflict interventions, and favours an approach which reflects that every intervention becomes itself part of a conflict system and needs to be analysed and planned accordingly. She concludes: “Given that there is already a large number of different peacebuilding and conflict resolution and transformation theories, which (implicitly at least) address the relationship of peace and change, or conflict and change, the discussion of social change should focus less on developing a new meta-theory, but instead on linking the existing approaches to practice” (Körppen in this Dialogue, 2).

Contributors to this Dialogue are reflective practitioners and scholars, and in collecting the responses to Mitchell's article, it was interesting to note what diverse routes they took. One question poses itself: Do practitioners and scholars talk to each other in a language that each can hear and understand? Can we, amidst this critical dialogue, find seeds for a common approach to the challenge of social change?

A number of themes and topics stand out as particularly salient. They have found expression in the various contributions to this Dialogue, some with broad consensus, some remaining controversial.

- First, there is the issue of *individual and social change*, some would even say individual *versus* social change – and the related question of what conflict transformation can hope to influence.

Its goals, as we have seen in the beginning, are far-reaching, encompassing individual and structural change. Its instruments, it has repeatedly been argued, are much more suited to interpersonal, small-group conflicts. Mitchell's approach suggests that whereas there are tractable and intractable dimensions in every conflict, crucial escalation and de-escalation paths are human-made, and can thus be influenced by working with the people involved, particularly at decision-making levels. Garcia approaches the issue more from an advocate's standpoint, thus asserting that social change is necessary and a goal worth striving for, while not specifying what the nitty-gritty details of this process look like. Spies asserts that processes of learning and change are ultimately about people and that the learning of some key people can create ripple-effects in the larger social fabric. Shapiro shows that conflict interventions indeed start at diverse levels of analysis and assume different levels of influence – it is in her contribution that the issue of what needs to change (first) becomes most tangible and reveals its potentially counterproductive consequences. Jabri and Körppen argue that a positivist way of approaching the challenge of social change necessarily neglects the way in which the individual and social are interwoven, and in which the endeavour of conflict transformation is an inherently socio-political struggle. Thus, while there seems to exist a tentative consensus that both levels – the individual and the social – can and must be influenced, we do not yet understand very clearly how the transfer from one level to the other works, builds up and is sustained.

- A concern that runs through all contributions is the *quality of change processes*. It takes various forms: Mitchell's emphasis on creating learning environments in order to break patterns of entrapment; Garcia's proposition of guiding principles; Spies' framework for the development of "dormant faculties" and emphasis on respectful listening; Jabri's call that politics – particularly the politics of inclusion and exclusion, of symmetry or asymmetry of power – must enter much more prominently into the equation. They all remind us that the way in which we engage and pursue the objective of social change will have a profound influence on the outputs and outcomes we help to create. This leaves us with the challenge to continue to look closely and critically at our assumptions, analyses and actions in an ever-evolving circle of critical (self-) examination.
- The third prominent issue is the question of how best to *sustain change* after having initiated it, presumably in the direction of a more just and peaceful state. Garcia points out that peace constituencies spanning generations, levels and sectors must be mobilised and certain "pillars" erected, including the adherence to human rights, truly inclusive processes of governance, accountable security forces and economic development. All contributors remind us that these are long-term, and, in all truth, probably never-ending endeavours. Conflict, as Spies formulates a key assumption of conflict transformation, is "a necessary and inevitable dynamic in all human relationships" – which is why "process is as important as outcome" (Spies in this Dialogue, 3/4). And while Körppen confesses some unease related to Mitchell's outcome-orientated formulation that "solutions can be found", it can be considered a shared conviction that the transformation of conflict, and the inducement of social change, is a task that will pose itself over and over again.¹
- A fourth issue taken up by most contributors is the role of *change agents*. More specifically, some debate centres around the question of the relative importance of *third-party* interveners ("outsiders") versus *insiders*. One of the criticisms concerning Mitchell's attempt to systematise

1. It should be noted that the point on the horizon towards which conflict transformation and social change strive ("justpeace", in Lederach's term) relies on a basic assumption that is not a given. As Shapiro notes in passing: "[M]uch literature in the field of conflict resolution tends to eschew theories about inherent aggressive drives, prejudiced personalities, or more Hobbesian views of human nature. ... This focus on external rather than inherent causes of human conflict provides a hopeful view of human capacity for consciously changing themselves and their human environment" (Shapiro in this Dialogue, 4). Even a cursory glance at current events in global politics will serve to remind us that this assumption is not universally shared. This does not, by any means, discredit it.

potential roles of change agents is that there is an implicit overreliance on *external* agents. In contrast, Spies, Garcia, and Körppen explicitly state that there is no replacement for insiders and *internal resources*. While third parties can therefore play a facilitating role when things get stuck, “there is no alternative to local ownership” (Spies in this Dialogue, 3; for a discussion of the problematic aspects of this catchphrase see Reich 2006). How to act in ways that turn this conviction into a reality remains a challenge in most conflict interventions.

- Associated with the insider/outsider issue, and intimately linked with assumptions guiding present analysis and intervention practice, is a final issue that crops up regularly: that of *asymmetry of power*. This entails the searching critique that our intervention repertoires are not well suited to situations in which the parties to a conflict are inherently unequal. Jabri formulates this most pointedly with respect to Mitchell’s generic categories: “All are equalised, when in actuality – and in the conflicts that matter in present-day global politics – there is no such equality” (Jabri in this Dialogue, 3). This leaves us in a position where we need to re-examine and possibly realign our categories of analysis and modes of engagement (a challenge taken up by Dudouet 2006, forthcoming).

Regarding the *practice, theory and politics* of change, the contributions to this Dialogue have shown that these component parts of social change present separate challenges, yet are interwoven in many ways, some of which we are only beginning to understand. Bridging the gap between theory and practice, but also between conflict transformation and politics, is a continuing challenge. A positivist and a constructivist approach, in particular, have come up against each other, suggesting an underlying struggle of paradigms. While there are distinct and relevant advantages to the constructivist stance, such an approach to the practice of conflict transformation which will leave a tangible imprint on the politics of conflict and peace has yet to emerge. If we follow the lead of most contributors to this Dialogue, one thing is clear: the further development of a theory of social change needs to accommodate practice, not simply in providing empirical answers, but by integrating practitioners into the process of generating questions.

As usual with the Berghof Handbook Dialogues, we do not end with certainties or recipes, but rather with a refined set of questions and suggestions of where to focus our attention. After all, the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation aims to provide a platform for exchange between different experiences, cultures and organisations, and to present diverse perspectives. We hope that this Dialogue has been successful in providing such a forum for “fostering dialogue between scholars and practitioners such that relevant research findings are consistently translated and disseminated to practitioners and practitioners play a key role in shaping research agendas about change and conflict resolution...” (Shapiro in this Dialogue, 7). It has, in our opinion, certainly contributed greatly to mapping and systematising the current state of knowledge about social change and conflict transformation.

We wish to thank all those who have so far shared their thoughts, ideas and experiences and we now encourage readers’ reactions and reflections, which should be addressed to the editors via the Berghof Handbook website (www.berghof-handbook.net).

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See also...

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- Beatrix Schmelzle and David Bloomfield, *Introduction: Approaching Social Change*
- Christopher R. Mitchell, *Conflict, Social Change and Conflict Resolution. An Enquiry*
- Ed Garcia, *Addressing Social Change in Situations of Violent Conflict: A Practitioner's Perspective*
- Chris Spies, *Revolutionary Change: The Art of Awakening Dormant Faculties in Others*
- Ilana Shapiro, *Extending the Framework of Inquiry: Theories of Change in Conflict Interventions*
- Vivienne Jabri, *Revisiting Change and Conflict: On Underlying Assumptions and the Depoliticisation of Conflict Resolution*
- Daniela Körppen, *The Circularity of Conflict Dynamics. A Critical Review*

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