

Enriching Conflict Diagnosis and Strategies for Social Change: A Closer Look at Conflict Dynamics

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Enriching Conflict Diagnosis and Strategies for Social Change: A Closer Look at Conflict Dynamics

A response by Friedrich Glasl

From 1 to 10 June 2004 I had the opportunity of gaining some insights into the RNCST's¹ work, collaborating with Norbert Ropers and his team on internal and external matters. For this reason I would like to begin this response by expressing my sincere appreciation for everything that they have accomplished there, in all its encouraging ups and disappointing downs. And knowing from personal experience the extremely difficult work involved in peace processes in Armenia, Georgia, post-war Croatia, Northern Ireland and South Africa, I would like to focus here on making a few suggestions in response to some of the instruments and approaches which Ropers describes. This means focusing on how to avoid interventions which have limited prospects of success, and expanding all the more effectively on others instead. In making these suggestions, I am fully aware of the limits of my perspective and experience.

My thoughts and actions draw on ideas from systems theory, which formed the basis of my doctoral thesis in the field of International Relations (Glasl 1967). Coupled with experience as a conflict researcher, consultant and mediator in meso-social systems (organisations, organisational units and inter-organisational relations), these thoughts also flowed into my habilitation thesis (Glasl 1980), where I used them to demonstrate a contingency theory model of conflict dynamics. In Glasl/Lievegoed 1994 (and later Glasl/Lievegoed 2004) I placed my systems theory approach in the context of Kenneth Boulding's "system of systems" (Boulding 1956). This is how my model of conflict diagnosis should be understood.

1. Enhancing the Usefulness of Conflict Diagnoses

The authors of solution-focused approaches, as developed by Steve de Shazer, often reject conflict analyses on principle, fearing that they will only lead to or reinforce a sense of "problem fixation". According to these authors diagnosis is synonymous with causal research, in the sense of linear cause-and-effect relations. For both theoretical and practical reasons I too reject causal research (as stressed in Glasl 1980), because a "mutual causality" (nowadays called "circular causality") can really be taken as given. Research into causality is futile, because the dynamics of escalation tend to induce further problems which have little to do with the original conflict. I therefore share Ropers' view that conflict analysis should be used to gain insight into the dynamics of a given conflict situation, in order to decide which interventions can be applied where, and how best to apply them.

¹ The Resource Network for Conflict Studies and Transformation (RNCST) was launched in 2001 with the goal of strengthening peace constituencies in Sri Lanka through engagement with civil society partners. After a brief phase of confidence-building, the commencement of peace negotiations between the government and the LTTE and the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 2002 provided the opportunity to focus on direct engagement with major political stakeholders and address almost all the key issues of the peace process. The project is implemented by the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS), under the directorship of Norbert Ropers, and co-funded by the Swiss and German Governments. For more detailed information about RNCST, see Ropers (2008, 9) or www.berghof-foundation.lk.

Leaving this to chance would be unprofessional. Concentrating on five dimensions of conflict diagnosis gives us a more practical image of conflict dynamics.

These five dimensions are briefly indicated below (for further detail see Glasl 2004a, 29-312; Glasl 2004b):

- 1) What are the relevant issues from the parties' points of view?
- 2) Where can the various stakeholders and conflict parties be placed in terms of stages of conflict escalation? And what predictions can be made about this for the immediate future?
- 3) Which stakeholders and conflict parties are involved in the conflict? How are the internal dynamics (structure, systems of leadership, power relations) of the parties' systems structured? Are there any coalitions and alliances at hand?
- 4) How are the relationship patterns between the conflict parties and stakeholders structured? What is the wider structural and cultural context?
- 5) Which basic attitudes towards conflicts or strategic considerations (assumptions about the costs and benefits of their actions) can be identified among the parties and stakeholders? To what extent do religious, ideological or philosophical assumptions shape the parties' basic attitudes towards conflicts?

In this commentary I will not go into every aspect of the five diagnostic dimensions, but simply raise certain aspects of the diagnosis, intended to complement Ropers' thoughts.²

(1) Issues

Any attempts which interveners make to categorise the contentious issues in a conflict are irrelevant. As far as I am concerned, all that matter are the topics which the stakeholders and parties themselves identify, their emotional stance on these topics and how flexibly or rigidly they deal with them. Classifications or interpretations made by third parties are irrelevant. This also applies to *Table 2* with its classification of issues into "interest-based", "value-based", "fact-based", "relationship-based" and "needs-based". As Ropers himself says, these different elements always support and reinforce each other in established conflicts, meaning that they are always closely linked. Conflict parties view particular "facts" as being relevant, because they affect their interests and therefore their needs. They also see "relationship issues" as relevant, since it is on account of these that their needs are not met. Nevertheless, practical experience has shown that for potential interventions it can prove fruitful, when recording the issues which the parties report, to pay attention to the *positions* (demands) and *interests* which they articulate in doing so. Also of interest is how greatly the various parties' viewpoints differ on these positions and interests; the central question is ultimately about what *needs* they are based on. After all, an intervention is always about detecting and acknowledging deeper needs, identifying common needs and finding practicable and acceptable means and ways of satisfying these needs.

(2) Stages of Escalation

The main focus of my theory and practice has been research into escalation dynamics (Glasl 1980; 1999) and the consequences which can be deduced from it to facilitate conflict management in meso-social systems. Fisher/Keasley (1991) take up my model of escalation and apply some of the central ideas to macro-social conflicts. Here I would simply like to make a few recommendations

² All references to "the article", and to tables, diagrams and sections refer to Ropers (2008).

for conflict analysis. It is of great help to grasp as clearly as possible which of the conflict parties are involved in the escalation and to what extent, and which have been able to keep more or less clear of it. If certain groups have been largely able to resist getting drawn into an escalated situation, then this gives us an important indication of resources available to these parties. They can assist the peace process by building bridges to the parties who are more entrenched in the escalation. For example in Northern Ireland, since it is very difficult to gain access to militant “hardliners” and extremists, I was able to make contact with the paramilitary organisations via the parties’ political wings. People or groups can always be found who have similar goals to the hardliners, but have avoided being implicated in the escalation. In this case it is of great practical benefit to determine *how* they have managed to avoid being drawn in or getting caught up in offers to form coalitions. South Africa’s impressive transformation from apartheid to a modern democracy was only possible because the leading personalities in the African National Congress (ANC) were never striving to achieve political or military power for its own sake. They were just genuinely convinced that only nonviolent transformation would lead to a form of society in which human dignity is respected. Their ideals for the process of change were consistent with their ideals for the goal they were striving towards: freedom cannot be achieved with prisons, but through enabling people towards autonomy; equality as a principle of law cannot be achieved through oppression, but by taking steps towards the rule of law. I shall return to this question in *point 4* below.

(3) Stakeholders and Parties and their Internal Structure

In my opinion the systemic approach places too little focus on how system dynamics are structured *within* the individual conflict parties, although this plays a decisive role in whether a peace process is successful. By placing “intra-party leadership disputes on peace” into the loops in *Diagram 1*, Ropers does indeed mention this, but this topic deserves much more attention than that. That is to say: which internal forces are the leaders exposed to? How do they view their dependency on voters (audience-directed or self-directed), and other constitutive or legitimising factors? Can they only connect with the prevailing mood in their group, or also counteract it? How much scope do they allow themselves in their mandate – and what can be done in the peace process to give them more freedom of movement, and to secure it?

Based on these ideas, my mediation in post-war Croatia involved a great deal of work with Serbian and Croatian delegates to find and agree on concrete ways of supporting their advocacy work back in their own constituencies. Mediation talks with conflict party representatives often only focus on “selling inwards”, i.e. encouraging the parties to jointly find common solutions. However, it is the subsequent “selling outwards” which later plays a decisive role, i.e. how successful the delegates are in convincing their own “hinterland” (party, voters) to adopt the ideas that have been negotiated. Furthermore, in analysing the conflict parties I would recommend making the following distinctions:

- a) On content: how extreme is the target position which the conflict parties articulate (a unitarian state under Sinhala dominance vs. separate Tamil and Sinhala states) or where do they see themselves between the two extreme positions? That is to say, do they take up “extremist” or “intermediate” positions?
- b) On methodology, or rather strategy: what level of violence or non-violence are they prepared to use to pursue their goals? That is to say, are they “radicals” or “moderates”?

The only way to access radicals is by going through moderates, even if they are extremists. In order to achieve any kind of progress in the peace process with regard to the political issues, violent

thinking must first be transformed into moderate thinking, then reinforced and consolidated. Extreme positions can only be negotiated after this has happened. This procedure proved useful during the aforementioned work in Northern Ireland, and has presumably also already done so in Sri Lanka. In any case, I believe that this distinction is more useful than the classification into “primary, secondary and tertiary parties” mentioned in *Section 3.1* and used to categorise the actors in *Table 1*.

(4) Relationships Between the Parties and Contextual Structures

The system dynamics analysis shown in *Diagram 2* seems to be very useful in its approach. Ropers notes that this is one of the RNCST’s most important discoveries, because it enables us to visualise the kind of interrelated impacts that can come into play. It could, however, be made even more useful. Using arrows and lines, this visualisation shows presumed “reinforcing” and “counteracting” impacts which exist between the various elements. This could deliver important and practical insights for peacebuilding interventions, if in addition the actors’ *mechanisms of unconsidered reaction patterns* were to be detected and described. In actual fact it is unconsidered reaction patterns that lead to escalating or de-escalating, reinforcing or inhibiting effects. The reaction patterns are determined by distorted perceptions of events and opponents, by interpretations of these perceptions, by the emotions which they stir up, by conscious and subconscious intentions and needs eventually leading to actions which can trigger escalating or de-escalating effects. Thus the crucial finding is not that these interrelated impacts arise between certain elements, but about which processes or mechanisms arise in the leaders, if for example voters reject the de-escalating measures which said leaders have proposed. This could perhaps be: “I will lose my mandate. I will be seen as a soft or weak leader. My group/party could be perceived as being too soft or too weak. I will not be voted back into office. My group will lose its financial backing, etc.”

If we can identify these unconsidered reaction patterns correctly, then we can (hopefully) avoid letting fears like the ones listed above determine actors’ behaviour, by using targeted interventions. Subconscious patterns and their expressions are made conscious – and this is the only way that such cycles can be broken, by means of responsible decision-making and actions. Escalating reactions develop “automatically”; any de-escalating actions must be consciously chosen, while actors must remain aware of possible difficulties or forces of resistance from among their own ranks. These are the mechanisms referred to in point (2) above to describe the groups who manage to resist escalation, and their ability to immunise themselves against being drawn into it. The method for detecting this kind of automatism mainly consists of consulting key figures and reflecting with them on: (a) what consequences they might fear if they resist the escalating stimuli; (b) what negative sanctions might be imposed; (c) what reasons they have for assuming that these sanctions may be imposed; (d) what alternative options they might have; and (e) what positive and negative reactions they can envisage as a result.

As “hidden” or “secret rules”, the expressions of these unconsidered reaction mechanisms make up an important part of cultural patterns which determine behaviour within the parties’ systems and between parties. They are also part of the conflict parties’ (subconscious or semi-conscious) conceptualisations of the conflict, their patterns of thought and perception. Therefore, in my opinion, the impact of peacebuilding interventions depends greatly on whether or not these “secret rules” can be disabled, by making actors aware of them.

In Ballreich/Glasl (2007) and Glasl (2007) I illustrate in relation to micro- and meso-social conflicts that sustainable conflict management can only be achieved when the key persons have experienced certain turning points. What exactly does this mean? It is a question of

- 1) an “initial turning point”: the “preliminary phase” or “pre-mediation” has led to the realisation that an alternative means of conflict management would be better than continuing the conflict with previous (violent) means;
- 2) a “cognitive turning point”: the conflict parties have arrived at a change of perspective because they know and understand their own perceptions and interpretations, as well as those of their opponents;
- 3) an “emotional turning point”: the conflict parties are in touch with their own emotions and have gained empathy for the feelings and sensitivities of their opponents;
- 4) an “intentional turning point”: the conflict parties are aware of their own deeper needs and both willing and able to respond to their opponent’s needs. This then gives rise to possible options for resolution.

I am convinced that this generally applies for the key persons in macro-social conflicts as well. This was the guiding principle behind the mediation between Serbs and Croats (and Hungarian-speaking sections of the population) in Eastern Slavonia, which I undertook before the UN forces withdrew from the region. Back then, my main concern was to see the various groups arrive at the inner conviction that a continuation of the hostilities of war would only be detrimental for everyone involved. In order to do this, I followed a methodology which I had developed (Glasl 1999, 113-115) called “consensus about the unwanted future”, asking each of the parties:

- 1) Where will Eastern Slavonia be one year from now, if the current destructive conflict dynamic continues unhindered? What will the situation be like for all the people who live here?
- 2) How does this probable vision of the future make the delegates feel? How would they feel when the continued destruction has become reality?
- 3) What could each of the groups do independently to prevent further deterioration? Are there “doables” which the delegates could undertake on their own initiative, without waiting for their opponent to make the first move?
- 4) How can the images of the unwanted future, the delegates’ fears and initiatives be communicated without giving rise to misunderstandings?

What this activity brought about was that the delegates resolved not to abandon the path of mediation and working together constructively, even if new problems arose. Unless the key leaders have reached this initial turning point and resolved to resist the escalating persuasions and provocations, the unconsidered reaction mechanisms will continue to take their course. Therefore the key figures will keep on falling back into their previous patterns of conflict management. And unless they can at least achieve some level of self awareness, recognising their own thought patterns and beginning to see through how these underlie their reaction mechanisms, they are not likely to take responsibility for their actions and begin to resist escalation. Therefore it is only by raising this awareness and changing the “secret rules” that the compulsive course of events which keeps on feeding into “counteracting loops” can be broken through.

Box 1: Methods: The “U-procedures” and “Plexodrama”

There are proven methods for recognising and describing unconsidered reaction mechanisms: systemic constellation work as developed by Matthias Varga von Kibéd and Insa Sparrer (2003), and also my own methods of “U-procedures” and “plexodramas” (Glasl/Kalcher/Piber 2005). A “U-procedure” begins by getting the parties involved to describe the concrete sequence of events from their own points of view; then in the second stage analysing the factual contributions and influence that

people have had on events. The third stage addresses the unwritten maxims and logic behind behaviour and the exercise of influence; the fourth stage raises the question of whether these maxims should also govern future behaviour. This is the deepest point, at the heart of the analysis. Then in the fifth stage new maxims are formulated; and in the sixth new ways of sharing tasks and exercising influence are negotiated. The seventh stage establishes a new sequence of operations to be followed in the future. In the diagnostic part (stages 1 to 4) this procedure takes us step by step from a description of factual, observable behaviour to the deeper, underlying assumptions and principles which govern behaviour. Only once this critical reflection has taken place can – in stages 5 to 7 of future design – concepts for the desired future be discussed and binding agreements made. (From 1969 onwards I often used this method in South Africa, in order to expose the intrinsic image of humankind which underlay behaviour in the apartheid system.) The “plexodrama” method is very similar to the systemic constellation work and helps to generate a scenario. The people involved identify themselves as individual factors cross-linked in a system. If one factor is changed, the people who represent the other factors describe what effect this has on them. All the statements they make are recorded on a pinboard. This then reveals the interacting mechanisms.

(5) Conflict Parties’ Basic Attitudes and Strategic Considerations

Ropers points out in several places that the way conflict parties conceptualise the conflict plays a major role. My experience working in meso-social systems confirms that knowing about conceptualisations is one of the most important success factors in conflict resolution. In fact I discovered this through my very first activities as an intervener. The way that conflict parties assess the costs and benefits of their previous actions in comparison to the costs and benefits of an alternative conflict resolution strategy determines their dedication to peacebuilding strategies. It is obvious that conceptualisation is very closely linked to discovering and changing unconsidered reaction mechanisms.

In this context it is worth discussing the usefulness of the tetralemma method. I came to know and appreciate the tetralemma method while working with Varga von Kibéd and Sparrer. It can be used above all in peer consulting and supervision situations, to make people aware of limited views (“tunnel vision”) when searching for solutions. This way “blind alleys” can be identified and discarded. Admittedly, this rational insight does not necessarily mean that creative options will be found. The tetralemma method provides the impulse but does not in itself open up new resources. What is still required are creative methods which appeal to people’s imaginative and intuitive capabilities.

2. What Community Development Approaches Add to Peacebuilding

In various places Ropers mentions the relation between conflict processes and change processes. The editors of this Berghof Handbook Dialogue Series have already begun looking into the topic “Social Change and Conflict Transformation” in Bloomfield et al. (2006). For peace processes to succeed it is very important to pay attention to the relationship between peacebuilding strategies and strategies of social change. After all, conflicts are always about efforts to bring about or prevent certain changes to the society or the political system of a state. This is also evident both in the history and the current dynamics of the conflict in Sri Lanka, where the extremists of all groups are striving towards contradictory changes in the nature of the state.

Although structuring change processes, above all Organisation Development (OD), is an important area in systems theory-based consultation, it receives too little attention in the article. By

“community development” I mean something far more strategic than pure grass-roots activities. The challenge of peacebuilding lies precisely in structuring a nonviolent transformation of formal and informal structures (constitution, legal system etc.), intercultural or inter-faith relations and the economic system, in such a way that the powers who had been enemies find a way out of the conflict dynamic and start working constructively to reorganise their society. For this purpose there are several tried and tested methods, which have been used in complex organisational development, regional development and other social change projects. These should not be seen as an alternative to Ropers’ suggested approach, but as a complement to it, offering further support and consolidation for peacebuilding efforts.

Within the scope of this contribution I must now limit myself to a few brief remarks (for further details see Glasl et al. 2005):

- 1) The overall strategy should seek to balance the poles of taking a problem-based or a vision-led approach. (A vision-led procedure is more than a solution-focused approach!) Any one-sidedness will have a destructive effect, because a bias towards problem-orientation could easily reinforce the feeling of hopelessness (problem fixation) whereas a bias towards vision-orientation could lead to unrealistic euphoria. Nevertheless, the energy of both poles should always be put to use for change processes: the repelling force of the problem and the attracting force of the vision.
- 2) The multi-track approach (Diamond/McDonald 1996), which also influenced Ropers’ article, emphasises the importance of approaching subsystems and system levels from various angles and linking up these efforts. I find it important to focus primarily on the subsistence needs of the people affected. This is also suggested by proponents of needs-based mediation (Burton 1990), based on their thoughts and experiences. Vision-led procedures thereby become all the more important.
- 3) Processes of change are processes of development which arise from the continuous interaction of the following basic OD processes (Glasl et al. 2005):
 - a) *Diagnostic processes*: these raise awareness of the problems and their background, how they have arisen and intensified, and resources and strengths which still exist. This forms the basis for consensus about the need for change.
 - b) *Future-design processes*: i.e. developing visions, overall concepts, future scenarios and alternative models, thus focusing people’s energy towards a desirable future which makes the peacebuilding worthwhile.
 - c) *Psycho-social processes*: these are about changing roles, relationships and attitudes, etc. and must be professionally structured to facilitate constructive diagnoses and designs for the future.
 - d) *Learning processes*: these support all the other processes by spreading new knowledge (e.g. about confederations, best practice in other countries regarding security, ways of dealing with the past, etc.) and providing training in new skills.
 - e) *Information processes*: these help to raise awareness among the broader public about what is planned and what has been achieved so far.
 - f) *Implementation processes*: these are not only about putting the negotiated solutions and changes into practice, but also about reinforcing previous goals, targets and plans.
 - g) *Change management processes*: these are necessary in order to professionally plan the processes listed under point 6, providing personnel and material resources, harmonising and coordinating them.

The concept of multi-track diplomacy gives some indication of where in society various interventions can be applied. Basic OD processes are helpful in deciding how to proceed and how the stakeholders can be helped to participate.

- 4) Lastly I would recommend considering ways of including the wider surroundings – in the context of systems theory, the international community – into the peace process, so as to lend it more support.

I am convinced that by combining conflict resolution approaches with community development methods, it will be possible to achieve the goal of taking action in Sri Lanka without resorting to violence, in order to establish a society based on respect for human rights and human dignity. And I am also painfully aware that this is “much easier said than done!”

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See also...

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- Daniela Körppen and Beatrix Schmelzle, *Introduction*
- Norbert Ropers, *Systemic Conflict Transformation: Reflections on the Conflict and Peace Process in Sri Lanka*
- Friedrich Glasl, *Enriching Conflict Diagnosis and Strategies for Social Change: A Closer Look at Conflict Dynamics*
- Günther Baechler, „Emerging Archetypes“: *A Comparison of Patterns of the Peace Processes in Sri Lanka and Nepal*
- Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, *A Sri Lankan Perspective on Systemic Conflict Transformation*
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