

Meta-Conflict Resolution

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One of the major limitations in the conflict resolution field has been the belief by many practitioners that dialogue work, mediation or problem solving workshops are the most vital part of any strategy to resolve conflict. Many courses on conflict resolution are often just training courses on what factors and skills will facilitate such processes. However, the reality is that the approaches required to prevent, manage, or resolve conflicts usually need to be much more comprehensive than existing conflict resolution approaches sometimes imply. Addressing and resolving conflicts usually needs the development of a meta-conflict approach. A meta-conflict approach is one which can address the many facets of a conflict whether these be structural (political or constitutional arrangements, legislation, economic and aid factors, etc.) or psycho-cultural (e.g., attitudes, relationships, divided histories) in a comprehensive and complementary manner (Fitzduff 1988, 2002, Ross 2000). The intent of this article is to look at this more comprehensive approach to solving conflicts, and to articulate what the role should be of conflict resolution (CR) specialists in engaging with these necessities.

Meta Conflict Analysis:

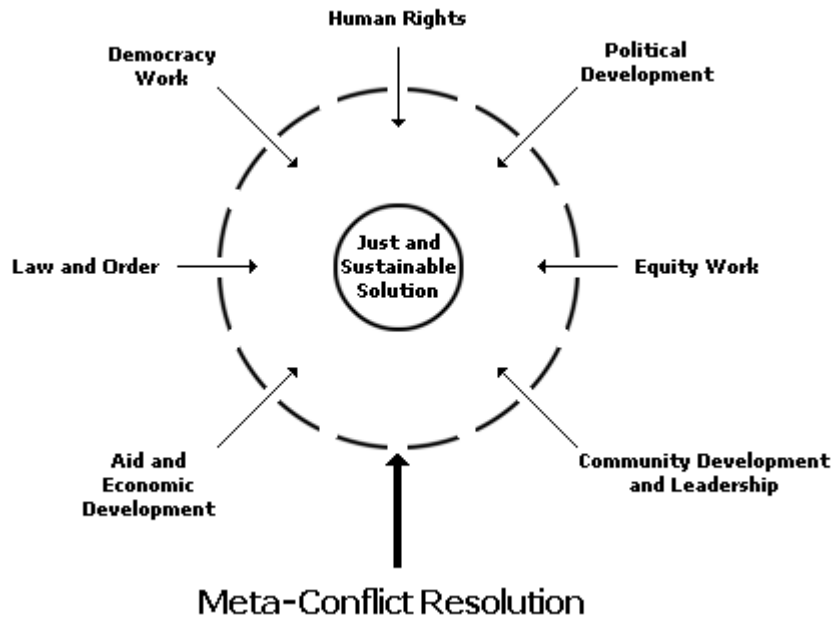
In devising a meta- conflict approach, the first thing to do is to agree on the major facets of a conflict that will need to be addressed. It is important that agreement on such facets is developed in tandem with the various parties to the conflict. It is likely that the parties will differ in what they see as important and in what order they would like to proceed. It is not uncommon to find that those who currently hold most of the power favor psycho-cultural approaches, while those who see themselves as having been excluded from power, e.g., Palestinians in the Middle East, Catholics in Northern Ireland, Albanians in Macedonia, and Tamils in Sri Lanka, prioritize structural approaches that deal with the equalization of power within a territory, or with political secession that will hopefully supply a group with its own territory and power. While these tensions about prioritization are often a cause of great difficulty within mediation processes, what is most important is that all parties are able to see that the spectrum of approaches include their particular priorities in the development of any meta-conflict approach.

The CR practitioner can also assist in ensuring that these approaches are complementary, not competing. Even the most ardent and radical advocates of structural reform can, with good facilitation, recognize that without a context of dialogue, it is much more difficult to attain agreement among communities about issues of territory and justice. Those who are primarily involved in psycho-cultural approaches can also realize that such hard issues cannot be avoided but must be included as part of their programs if such are to be eventually successful.

The following diagram illustrates one possible variant of what a meta-conflict approach might look like. These variables will, of course, be different, depending upon the conflict

context. In addition, they often overlap, and the people and institutions involved in such approaches will need to cooperate where possible to ensure a successfully comprehensive approach to their complementary work.

Meta-Conflict Resolution Contextual Variables Example



CR worker assists contact/dialogue on the above from a CR perspective (Fitzduff 2002)

The Role of the CR practitioner in a meta-conflict approach to conflict.

Ideally, a CR practitioner should be a catalyst and facilitator for the discussions about developments in all of the above strategic areas, ensuring that they are undertaken in such a way as to facilitate the prevention of, or resolution of, an emerging or existing conflict. While the practitioner may not have overall responsibility for the development of all of the above, it is important that s/he develops contacts working at senior levels within each of the areas, bringing her/his knowledge and skills of CR to those areas that are relevant to the development of a meta- approach to conflict resolution. (See Tactics section below) The practitioner can thus help assure that the differing aspects are not being developed either in ignorance, or in opposition to the other strategic areas, as can frequently happen in situations of conflict. If not undertaken in tandem, these aspects can often increase, rather than decrease, divisions between the parties. The following are some examples of how this work can be undertaken constructively so as to ensure that it yields conflict resolution dividends.

Equity Work:

Structural problems of inequity, or the deliberate or inadvertent exclusion of particular groups from participation in national or regional resources, are often significant factors in the development of a conflict. In order to address such inequities, state and other

resources are needed to ensure that policy making, including legislation, targeted economic programs, and cultural programs (such as education and the media), are designed to reduce the inequities and thus ensure sustainable peace. Conflict resolution practitioners can assist this process by lobbying for such legislation and assisting the creation of a framework and climate that can help develop equity work and institutions that can ensure it. In addition, practitioners can use their skills to assist in discussions on issues of equality throughout all levels of society. This skill is particularly helpful because social equality is often a very difficult and volatile area for discussion, and it is usually resisted by policy makers and others because of its contentious nature.

Law and Order:

Security forces can play an important role in preventing or mitigating conflict. To effectively assist, it is vital that they are inclusive of all groups in their composition, that they serve all sections of society equally, that they are adequately trained to deal with violence in a way that does not produce more violence, and that they have an adequate repertoire of non-violent approaches to deal with community tensions. CR workers can assist in enabling conversations to happen both within army and police institutions, as well as within communities. They can also help in developing the training that is necessary to secure representative and sensitive forces.

In addition, where possible, CR practitioners can also engage with paramilitaries or illegal armies where such is possible or deemed appropriate. They can assist them in clarifying their goals with their own and other parties and in exploring non-military approaches to such goals. The latter can include lobbying both nationally and internationally to change inequitable structural systems, non-violently mobilizing communities, and ensuring that they have assistance in developing the skills to engage successfully at the political level, both nationally and internationally.

Aid and Economic Development:

Economic work and aid that specifically addresses issues of equity and inclusion is vital in most conflicted societies, particularly where inequitable systems or cultural or political exclusions have been a significant part of the conflict. Such work is fundamental to increasing the economic well being of a conflicted society, while also reducing the inequities often inherent in such. However, if such work is not undertaken in a sensitive and strategic manner, it can increase the differences and hostility between the communities, as communities critically assess who is gaining and who is losing by such development. It is vital, therefore, that CR practitioners find ways to assist governments and international agencies in the development of their programs, helping them to have discussions with all parties to the conflict, and suggesting ways in which economic development and the use of aid can assist as a bridge builder, and not as community divider. Such work can include developing agreed upon criteria for economic and social development, shared funding bodies and processes, and shared institutions for taking responsibility for its development and monitoring its success.

Democracy Work:

Countries in which democracy does not exist often lack the necessary processes to resolve conflicts without violence, hence the need for conflict resolution practitioners to work with those undertaking democracy and governance work. It should be noted however that the existence of democracy in a country is in itself no guarantee that community conflicts will not arise. Unfortunately, some systems of democracy such as majority rule or first-past-the-post systems are often counterproductive to the prevention or management of conflicts, as they often favor one party over others. It is important, therefore, for CR practitioners to be aware of the variety of democratic possibilities that exist and to ensure that these receive adequate attention by those who are responsible for governance issues, and who may need assistance in those other than the normal processes.

The decentralization of power can also provide a way to recognize diversity, and at the same time, engage groups in central participatory and decision-making processes. Thus, consideration will need to be given to possible processes of federalism and devolution of power, which can be developed to accord with emerging needs for greater autonomy and responsibility at a local level. Such arrangements can often defuse political conflict by helping to accommodate collective identities within a state framework. CR practitioners can also help by encouraging work which helps to give minorities legitimate representation and an effective voice in society through systems that integrate power-sharing possibilities, as well as cross-cutting incentives within electoral systems. Such processes can encourage a growth of cross-cutting interest groups that may help to break down the salience of ethnicity and religion in divided societies (Reilly and Reynolds 1999)

Constitutions that favor certain sections of society or certain individuals within society are likely to be a hindrance to the development of effective strategies for countering conflict. CR practitioners can help by ensuring that discussions around any new or amended constitution are comprehensive, as they were in the case of the South African constitution. Such a process can ensure that there is a constitution that legitimizes the rights and welfare of all citizens in divided societies, thus laying down a legal framework which may help avoid divisions in the future.

Political Development:

Political groups that favor a particular ethnic, cultural, or religious group are usually a significant factor in developing and continuing a conflict. Such an issue can often prevent politicians from positively assisting the development of agreements and sustainable peace. CR practitioners can encourage the development of more amenable and inclusionary politics by assisting the emergence of new politics, and by assisting the widening of perspectives by existing parties. In some cases, assisting the entry of new parties into the system can improve the possibilities for conflict prevention and resolution. Such parties may be able to break old monopolies, and provide a space for increasingly numerous and powerful voices of those who wish to adopt a more

inclusionary approach. In addition, CR practitioners can aid existing parties in widening their horizons by providing information about how similar situations have been handled elsewhere. For example, they can facilitate meetings with political parties in other countries who have adopted more conciliatory or more inclusionary practices, or they can provide opportunities both separately and collectively for parties to hear about effective approaches to conflict resolution throughout the world. In addition, CR practitioners can assist cross-party communication where such is difficult, or where such can be usefully effected by bringing together differing interest groups such as women or groups interested in particular economic or social development projects.

Human Rights work:

The development of human rights work can be vital to ensuring the creation of sustainable peace in divided societies, as it helps to ensure that principles that safeguard the rights of all within a society are enshrined at national and institutional levels. CR practitioners can assist such work by facilitating the development of agreed human rights norms. Such discussions can be facilitated both within communities and between communities. CR practitioners can help facilitate discussions both at policy level and throughout society about what should constitute agreed-upon human rights norms in, for instance, a new Bill of Rights, or within government or institutions. They can also assist by facilitating conversations about the implementation of human rights agreements, which is usually extremely contentious within a divided society. Such work can help ensure an understanding by all parties about how such norms can assist the development of all communities, as well as the development of sustainable peace.

Community Development and Leadership:

Many of the above approaches can only be successfully developed if there is an adequate base of community development that can assist the promotion of intra- and inter-community discussions and dialogues, as well as the development of more inclusive community leadership. Such work is critical to developing capacity and leverage at community levels if many of the above approaches are to be successful. This can often necessitate separate development in the first place within communities to develop community confidence, as such confidence can be crucial to developing successful bridging and cooperative work between communities. The skills of CR practitioners can be crucial in ensuring that such development does not remain or become ghettoized due to the obvious difficulties by communities in embarking on such work in a cooperative manner. In addition, community development process can be a powerful force for contributing to either the development of new political parties, or to new members entering existing parties who may have a greater capacity for inclusion because of such work.

Other Strategic Areas:

It is important to remember that conflicted societies differ in their need for focus, and that in different contexts there will be other issues which need major attention and the

assistance of a CR practitioner. These can include, for example, environmental issues, including natural resource ownership and management, urban planning, media work, weapons disposal, etc., all of which may need further particular focus in any meta-conflict approach.

A Comprehensive and Complementary Strategy.

What is important about this meta-conflict approach is that it sets the CR expert at the center of facilitating dialogue with a much wider range of actors, so as to ensure that their leverage and developmental activities are brought to bear in attempting to bring about a peaceful society. In a conflict, it is too easy to assume that the prime necessity is to work with those people who are apparently key to any peace process, for example the politicians, or in the case of an armed conflict, military or paramilitary leaders. To prioritize these groups for attention is the strategic temptation for those wishing to see a speedy end to a conflict. In some cases such prioritization may indeed be useful, but it will often, however, prove to be insufficient and will need to be complemented by a wide variety of social and economic development processes that can also assist the resolution of a conflict.

In addition, many conflict resolution priorities are interlinked. If, for example, a significant problem is the lack of equality between communities, without economic development, work aimed at achieving equality will usually be seen as a win/lose situation, particularly for those who currently hold most power over resources. Without work aimed at developing communities and the development of some new community leadership, it is often impossible to shift the party political landscape. In a situation where violence is part of the context, and the military containment of the paramilitaries may be necessary, work that ensures a more trusting interface with the security forces, particularly on the part of minority or divided communities, is necessary. Without work that attempts to decommission weapons, volatile situations will remain violent. Without work that encourages democracy, existing authoritarian leaders may continue to foment violence. And above all, without dialogue work, on all of the above issues, it is usually impossible to address issues of justice and political choices between the communities. The recognition of such a relationship between the many aspects of development in Ireland has been such that there is now new legislation which ensures that all aspects of public life have to take into account the need to foster not just equality between the communities, but also "good relations" (Fitzduff 2002). Hence all existing and developing programs of economic, social, and security development have to integrate bridge building and conflict resolution mechanisms into their processes so as to ensure that they prevent and mitigate tensions between the communities. Much of this mainstreaming of conflict resolution skills within institutions is being assisted by CR practitioners.

Tactics:

To undertake the above roles, CR practitioners need considerable skill, as such work usually involves working with a variety of other agencies, often at a senior policy level.

Such work often requires practitioners to use particular methodologies, in order to be effective in influencing prospective partner agencies. In the first place, CR workers need to decide whether they work as "insiders" or "outsiders" in trying to affect agencies whom they believe need to be engaged in meta-conflict resolution, as each approach may require different tactics. Whichever approach they adopt, it requires an understanding of institutional systems and of what works in terms of persuading relevant institutions to graft additional CR processes onto their primary work. It requires identifying and nurturing "champions" for such processes within relevant institutions. It also may mean helping them to develop a coherent strategy for adding such processes to their existing work, including understanding their constraints and helping them to secure adequate resources. It also requires the practitioner to command an understanding of knowledge and examples which will be helpful in making arguments about their adoption, as well as fostering ownership for the adoption of ideas for meta-conflict resolution and being generous with credit for these institutions when they are successful. It also requires staying in continuous contact with others who are also attempting to affect meta-conflict resolution approaches within particular conflict economic or social developmental areas. (Fitzduff and Church 2004)

While the process of facilitating meta-conflict resolution may appear daunting to the practitioner, the results of encouraging such a complementary and comprehensive approach to the resolution of a conflict in any society is likely to be ultimately more successful and sustainable than many of our current piece-meal approaches are likely to be.

Sources of Additional, In-depth Information on this Topic

Additional Explanations of the Underlying Concepts:

Online (Web) Sources

"Do No Harm" Local Capacities for Peace Project.

Available at: <http://www.cdainc.com/dnh/>.

In 1994 the Local Capacities for Peace Project was launched by the Collaborative for Development Action. The project aims to pool the experiences of humanitarian and development assistance agencies, thereby furthering awareness and knowledge about the conflict-worsening impacts of aid. This site provides information about the various phases of the project. It also includes case studies and issue papers relating to the project.

Offline (Print) Sources

Fitzduff, Mari. *A Typology of Community Relations work and Contextual necessities*. Belfast: Policy and Planning Unit, Northern Ireland Office, 1989.

Coleman, P.T. "Characteristics of Protracted, Intractable Conflict: Towards the Development of a Meta-framework." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 9 , 2003.

Ross, Marc. "Creating the Conditions for Peacemaking: Theories of Practice in Conflict Resolution.." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23:6, 2000.

Fitzduff, M. and C. Church. *NGO's at the Table*. Rowan and Littlefield, 2004.

Ury, William L. *The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000-09.

In this book, William Ury explains that it takes two sides to fight and a third to stop it. Based on years of experience as a conflict resolution practitioner, Ury describes ten practical roles that people can play to prevent destructive conflict. He argues that fighting is not inevitable human behavior and that we can transform battles into constructive conflict and cooperation by turning to what he calls, "the third side".

Examples Illustrating this Topic:

Offline (Print) Sources

Fitzduff, Mari. *Beyond Violence: Conflict Resolution Processes in Northern Ireland*. Tokyo, Japan: United Nations University Press, 2002.

In this book, author Mari Fitzduff discusses the various conflict resolution processes that helped bring de-escalation to the conflict in North Ireland. This work provides an outline of the conflict itself as well as outlining conflict initiatives in the fields of equality, diversity, security work, and political and community dialogue. While emphasizing the complexity of resolving a conflict such as that in Northern Ireland, the nature of the resolution processes employed highlights the importance of addressing social-psychological aspects of the conflict.

Harris, Peter and Benjamin Reilly, eds. *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators*. Stockholm: International IDEA, 1998.

This handbook explains how to negotiate peace in countries that are transitioning from a period of protracted conflict, to stable peace. It provides information on how to rebuild countries devastated by conflict, and uses case studies (Bosnia, Fiji, Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea and South Africa) as a means to explain how different negotiation tools and conflict resolution processes can be used to foster a democratic society.

Anderson, Mary B. *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace-or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999-04-01.

This book examines the positive and negative aspects of humanitarian aid by taking a look at this topic through the eyes of actual aid workers.