

CORE PAPER I: INTRODUCING CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION: BASIC PRINCIPLES

1. DIFFERENTIATING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT, RESOLUTION, AND TRANSFORMATION

Let us begin by differentiating theories of conflict management, resolution, and transformation. Hugh Miall¹ provides the following summation:

“Conflict Management theorists see violent conflicts as an ineradicable consequence of differences of values and interests within and between communities. The propensity to violence arises from existing institutions and historical relationships, as well as from the established distribution of power. Resolving such conflicts is viewed as unrealistic: the best that can be done is to manage and contain them, and occasionally to reach a historic compromise in which violence may be laid aside and normal politics resumed.”

Pause for thought: Think of a case where conflict management was applied. What was the outcome? Was it successful? Why or why not? What would you have done differently?

“Conflict Resolution theorists, in contrast, reject this power political view of conflict, arguing instead that in communal and identity conflicts, people cannot compromise on their fundamental needs. However, they argue that it is possible to transcend conflicts if parties can be helped to explore, analyse, question and reframe their positions and interests... Conflict resolution is about how parties can move from zero-sum, destructive patterns of conflict to positive-sum constructive outcomes...”

Pause for thought: Think of a case where conflict resolution was applied. What was the outcome? Was it successful? Why or why not? What would you have done differently?

“Conflict Transformation theorists argue that contemporary conflicts require more than the reframing of positions and the identification of win-win outcomes. The very structure of parties and relationships may be embedded in a pattern of conflictual relationships that extend beyond the particular site of conflict. Conflict transformation is therefore a process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict. Constructive conflict is seen as a vital agent or catalyst for change... This suggests a comprehensive and wide-ranging approach, emphasising support for groups within the society in conflict rather than for the mediation of outsiders. It also recognizes that conflicts are transformed gradually, through a series of smaller or larger changes as well as specific steps by means of which a variety of actors may play important roles.”

Pause for thought: Think of a case where conflict transformation was applied. What was the outcome? Was it successful? Why or why not? What would you have done differently?

As you can see, there is quite a difference between managing, resolving, and transforming conflict. It is important to note that one is not better than another and they are not mutually exclusive. Rather, conflict transformation focuses on the deeper contextual issues of how conflict is managed and resolved. For instance, conflict management practitioners may ask: How do we contain the immediate situation? Resolution practitioners may ask: How do we end the immediate situation? A transformational approach² would seek to understand conflict within a larger context addressing both the immediate issues and deeper causes of the conflict. A transformational perspective asks questions such as: What are the potential and needed change processes that can respond to the immediate issues, as well as the broader setting that creates the crisis? What longer-term vision can we hope to build from the seeds and potential in the current crisis? How do we end something not desired and build something we do desire? What are the processes that the conflict itself has generated? How can these processes be altered, or other processes initiated, that will move the conflict in a constructive direction? This change in thinking about conflict as an opportunity and a process rather than an episodic hindrance that needs to be fixed emerged from several scholar-practitioners.

¹ Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task

² (Lederach 2003,19, 30-31)

2. FOUNDATIONS OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

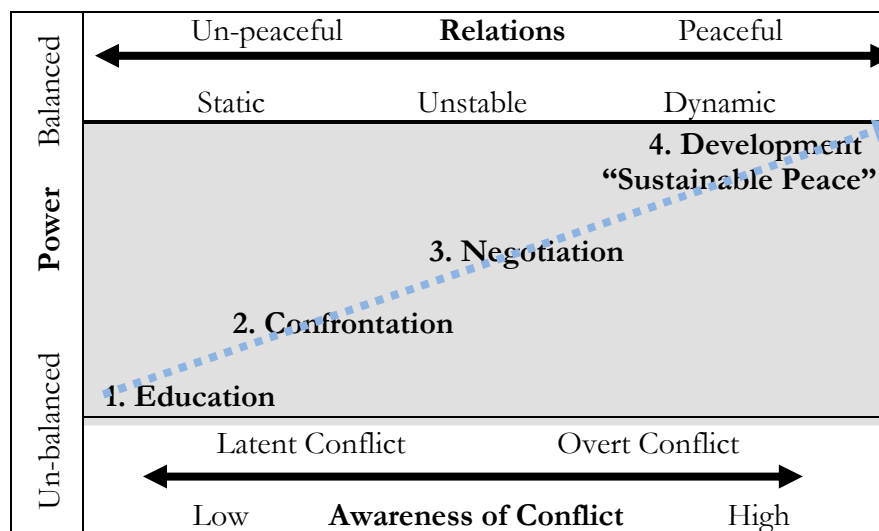
Principle 1: Conflict is normal in human relationships, and a necessary motor of change.³

Johan Galtung suggested that conflicts are normal and inevitable. They arise from contradictions in the structure of society, which manifest in certain Attitudes and Behaviour. “Once formed conflicts undergo a variety of transformational processes: articulation or disarticulation, conscientisation or de-conscientisation, complexification or simplification, polarisation or depolarisation, escalation or de-escalation” (1996, 90). To overcome conflict the parties may therefore “compromise, by deepening or widening the conflict structure, and by associating or dissociating the actors”, which according to Galtung, will result in negative peace - the absence of direct violence, or positive peace - the absence of structural and cultural violence (1996, 116). This concept of positive peace contributed to several of the guiding principles of conflict transformation.

Principle 2: Peace is not a static end state; it is an evolving and developing quality of relationship.⁴

It is how we address conflict, which determines if the outcome is positive or negative. A transformational approach envisions positive peace through a holistic approach that addresses attitudes, behaviors, and contradictions.⁵ Adam Curle (1971) built on Galtung’s definition of positive and negative peace by suggesting that conflicts are transformed “through a shift from unbalanced to balanced relationships... through a process of [education], confrontation, negotiation and development.” If conflicts are resolved without balancing relationships, they are likely to mutate and recur. Curle developed his theory into the following diagram, which illustrates another guiding principle of conflict transformation.

Progression of Conflict Transformation Matrix



³ Lederach (2003, 4)

⁴ Lederach (2003, 20)

⁵ (Galtung, J. 1996. Peace by Peaceful Means, London: Sage.)

Principle 3: Transformation addresses both the immediate situation and its underlying dynamics.

Also contributing to the foundation of conflict transformation, Maire Dugan developed the “Nested Paradigm”, which emphasizes the need to understand the system of conflict by considering the interaction of micro-issues and relationships with more macro systems. As you can see in the adjacent illustration, it is important to analyze and understand the multiple layers of systems underlying the conflict. If interventions only address immediate issues and relationships without addressing the systems underlying the conflict then conflicts are likely to continue, recur, and become increasingly intractable.

