

CORE PAPER III: TECHNICAL & TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES TO CHANGE

What role do you have in conflict? Are you a technician or a transformer? What is the difference?

Much conflict-related work can be seen as potentially transformative, addressing the deep structures of violence, oppression, poverty and ecological destruction. Peace-building and empowerment programmes are examples. There is much also that can be viewed as more technical and tangible. Emergency or peacemaking interventions, small arms reduction programs and security sector reform are often seen in this category. Frequently the two approaches are clearly separated, when they need not necessarily be. Peace work then loses its power to effect real change, and can even become part of the problem it seeks to address. The table below provides examples of how technical and transformative approaches can be characterised.

GOAL		
	Technical Approach	Transformative Approach
Overall Purpose	To end a specific situation: e.g. acute poverty or open conflict: 'negative' peace	In addition, to influence the underlying structure and culture as an integrated element in building something better: 'positive' peace
Agenda	Set by funders and project holders, with some limited consultation with community	Set and continually reviewed with community, in consultation with funders and project holders
Objectives	Achievement of project objectives	Promoting shared vision of/for community, of which project/programme work is part
Priority	Content of programme	Solidarity; relationships as well as content
STRATEGY		
	Technical Approach	Transformative Approach
Focus	A specific piece of work	Building elements of wider change into a specific piece of work
Evaluation	Focus on efficiency and project successes	Efficiency plus bigger picture impact
Learning	Downplaying failures	Failures are starting-points for self-reflection and action learning
Issues	Solve presenting issues	Expand, change, transcend contested issues
Theory of change	Implicit: change in immediate situation will ripple out	Explicit: developed in relation to analysis and systems thinking
Scope	One level, one sector	Multi-level, local-global, alliances across sectors
Time horizon	Project duration / extension	Medium to long term
VALUES		
	Technical Approach	Transformative Approach
Accountability	Primarily to donors	Primarily to identified partners / community
Whose peace?	Power relations are unchangeable: accommodation is necessary	Peace is for whole community, especially the weakest: option to work to change power relations if better future requires it
Self image	A professional doing a good job of work	Agent of change, modelling struggle and transformation
ANALYSIS		
	Technical Approach	Transformative Approach
Context	Project and work-focussed, done by project staff	Adds ongoing conflict analysis & future scenario planning with wider community
Actors	Good working relationship	In addition, works for change of perspective, goals, heart, will, inclusive sense of identity
View of violence	Prevent and defuse it; ambivalent about its use	Race, gender and class dimensions are integral part of violence; transforming the energy into positive outcomes; promotion of non-violence
View of conflict	A problem in the way of achieving goals	Inevitable, an opportunity for development and change, consider options to intensify

It is interesting to note that roughly two-thirds of the headings above can be seen as complementary rather than in opposition to each other. In these cases, a technical approach can lead on to, or contain within it, a transformative one. For example, under 'priority' it requires only a shift of emphasis to include a conscious focus on building relationships as an adjunct to addressing the explicit content or task. This framework, then, demonstrates that the seeds of transformation can be sown in the smallest pieces of 'technical' peace or development work, if only we are creative and courageous. Still, some key elements in the table are almost inevitably at odds with each other. This creates the need to make choices, which will likely have a major impact on the initiatives direction, including whose agenda it is? Who it is accountable to? And whose peace and development it is serving?

Development practitioners may see a parallel in the long-running and sometimes acrimonious debate about the relationship between humanitarian relief and development. In the former case, it is argued; a task is to be done, a humanitarian imperative to be followed. The counterargument is that no action involving human beings can be solely technical, there are social relations involved in every intervention and they can be damaged or enhanced by the action. As a result, much thought has been given to how relief can be done in a developmental way.

So what?

How far do you recognise these suggested patterns? Can you see dangers in either or both approaches? What mechanisms might be needed to bring the two approaches together?

Adapted from: Simon Fisher and Lada Zimina in Peacebuilding at a Crossroads? Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Management, 2009.