A systemic approach to conflict transformation builds on best practice in the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation and combines this with systemic methods from family therapy, organisational development and cybernetics. Given that a great variety of valuable concepts for peacebuilding and conflict transformation already exists, the aim of a systemic understanding is not to reinvent the wheel and to present something completely new, but to offer ways forward in challenging areas.
**Complexity reduction and creativity in imagining solutions**

Undoubtedly, nowadays, multi-level and multi-actor approaches are needed to address the complex nature of protracted (ethno-)political conflicts. However, comprehensive and holistic approaches to conflict transformation very often develop into overwhelming and over-complex strategies, which tend to lose focus and sight of the essentials. While it is important to reflect on all the key issues and actors of the conflict system and their respective interrelations, the real challenge is to draw meaningful conclusions. As Peter Senge has pointed out, the art of systemic thinking lies in seeing through complexity to the underlying structures generating change. This “seeing through complexity” can be supported by tools, but requires also a certain degree of systemic intuition, where one needs to cope with contingency, uncertainty and non-linearity of peace processes. For this reason, from a systemic point of view, peace processes can be modelled only to a limited extent.

The theoretical background of each systemic concept has a strong influence on the extent to which we assume peace processes can be influenced from the outside. In some strands of systemic thinking, for example Jay W. Forrester’s system dynamics, it is assumed that social processes themselves can be modelled and that certain dynamics in the conflict system can be predicted in advance. It is argued that, to a certain degree, a conflict can be observed in a “neutral” way and information can be gathered about it without influencing or interacting with it.

From a systemic-constructivist point of view a neutral observation or analysis of a system is not possible because the observers become part of the system they observe. Besides, the results of observation depend on the perspective one adopts. Against this background it is assumed that social processes can be influenced only indirectly, e.g. through the change of the context which might contribute to the irritation and mutation of the system itself. In this vein, the principle of resonance is crucial for developing a conflict transformation strategy. This means that strat-
egising is considered as an open, creative and dynamic process which is constituted by ongoing action and reflection. Instead of designing the whole strategy at the very beginning and then implementing it, it takes shape during the process itself. What characterises this kind of systemic approach – outlined for example in the recently published book *The Non-Linearity of Peace Processes* – is testing which issues resonate with the interests and needs of the various stakeholders and trying to find out where the energy flows within the system, rather than defining problems in advance.

**Thinking in relationships and patterns of interaction**

A basic assumption of all systemic approaches to conflict transformation is the non-linearity of interaction between single elements within the conflict system. The focus of a conflict analysis based on systemic thinking rests therefore on the patterns of interaction and the dynamics of relationships among the system’s actors, rather than on their individual characteristics. It is not the quality of a single factor which reinforces a conflict or helps to achieve sustainable peace. What counts is the manner in which the different factors interact and what kind of context they occur in. Within complex conflict systems the differentiated parts exhibit properties which they owe specifically to being components of a larger whole. Hence, A and B – or cause and effect – are not connected in a linear mono-causal manner but in a reciprocal way.

This dynamic plays a crucial role in peace and conflict processes, where the identification of the root causes of conflict, and defining obstacles to change are often fraught with controversy. Each conflict party and each analyst follows their own assumptions about the root causes of a conflict and about who is responsible for an outbreak of violence. Hence, different narratives are a crucial component of every conflict situation – and its transformation. Often, the narratives harden against each other if left unexplored.
Systemic methods of conflict transformation

Tools from systemic therapy, such as circular questioning, are useful for conflict transformation too. The basic idea of this methodology is to help the interviewee to shift into the role of another person and to generate new information within a particular system. Whereas direct questions like “Where do you see the main challenges for your peacebuilding programme?” can be used to gather content-related information, circular questions are helpful in gaining new perspectives and insights into a well-known situation. For example, the interviewee can be asked to shift into the role of a colleague, a member of a conflict party or donor through questions such as:

*How would person A describe your plans and programme activities?*

A second tool worth mentioning is the tetralemma, a “tool” which originates in traditional Indian reasoning and Buddhist philosophy and is frequently used today in the fields of family therapy and organisational development to stimulate “thinking outside the box”. It aims to break with a bipolar perception of the world, and the perceptions of problems as “di-lemmas”. Whereas “western” or “European” logic follows a binary view in which “either-or” thinking dominates, it is a crucial proposition of the tetralemma that there exist at least four options on each perceived problem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Tetralemma</strong></th>
<th><strong>Position A</strong></th>
<th><strong>Both A and B</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>None of this – but also not this</strong></td>
<td><strong>Neither A nor B</strong></td>
<td><strong>Position B</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The fifth position “none of this but also not this” is not easy to understand. It tries to indicate that there are further options and issues that are relevant for the perceived problem but which can only be discovered through a process of action and reflection. In a programme evaluation in South Africa, the tetralemma was used to get different ideas about the future of the programme activities out into the open, including hidden and less conscious issues:

The tetralemma is a process tool, which means that we do not know all the positions from the very beginning: they are created and formed through the process of working with the tetralemma.
References and Further Reading


Online Resources


