



## 18 Researching Conflict Transformation

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*“Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice.”*

Kurt Lewin

Conflicts are inevitable components of human development and social change (→ Addressing Social Grievances). Violence in conflict, however, is not inevitable. Conflict transformation research seeks to explore conditions, strategies and policies for sustaining patterns of non-violent behaviour among conflict parties, particularly in protracted social and ethnopolitical conflicts. It aims to support conflict parties in building, restoring and maintaining constructive, just relations in order to abolish the use of force as a means of interaction. In this context,

**PARTICIPATORY (ACTION) RESEARCH** | accumulates knowledge and enhances understanding of how social interactions function, while at the same time intervening in a direct and practical way. In order to ensure ownership and inclusiveness, it involves the actors being studied in the process on an ongoing basis. In this sense, it is particularly well suited to the endeavour of conflict transformation.

conflicts and their management should not be looked upon as simplistic linear phenomena that start, escalate and stop for all actors and all sectors in the same way (→ Working on Conflict Dynamics). The interdependent and systemic dimensions, as well as the dynamic nature of conflict therefore need to be more fully understood.

### **Research and practice informing each other**

Conflict transformation research does not encompass a grand theory, but generates theory elements from field research and from close interaction with practitioners and the conflicting parties themselves. Nevertheless, it is theory-guided. Of particular importance is theorising that addresses the differences between inter-personal and inter-group → Conflict Transformation, and between symmetrical and asymmetrical conflicts. Moreover, research on conflict transformation incorporates knowledge of various disciplines (political science, sociology and social psychology, history, anthropology, ethnology, law, communication, education and more).

Conflict transformation research can be considered a specific strand of peace and conflict research which pays particular attention to bringing about supportive conditions for practical progress in peacemaking and peacebuilding. It starts from the premise that concepts and theory must evolve in a continuous, reflec-

tive and critical exchange with practice, which involves putting concepts to the test in practical settings and debating their validity with practitioners from many backgrounds and in many localities. Strong links to the field of policy are also required, by consulting national and international decision-makers during the research design stage, and feeding the results back to them in the form of targeted recommendations. In brief: theoretical approaches should contribute to developing new political and social strategies, and conflict transformation practice should inspire ideas on theory.

Whenever conflicting parties, practitioners and policy-makers are involved in research, it is essential to consider the diversity of actors' interests. By bringing the actors to the fore, deeper socio-cultural and behavioural aspects of action and decision-making can be explored in the context of change. Following this methodology, the research agenda is influenced and shaped increasingly by those who are immediately affected by its results. The growing interest of practitioners in becoming involved in inclusive patterns of research has begun to narrow the gap by reconciling the communities of research and practice, by motivating both towards collective learning and by encouraging researchers to collaborate with practitioners to create reflective feedback loops. Collaborative research in joint teams, aimed at supporting conflict transformation, increases the knowledge of how different actors, processes and structures contribute (or not) to peace-building processes. The Berghof Foundation considers inclusive, bottom-up, participatory and reflective methods of research – of which action research elements are an important part – a great opportunity for generating the knowledge and support necessary for sustained conflict transformation.

### **Action research: participatory, inclusive and change-oriented**

Action research can be useful in this context as one of several research methods. The first projects evolved in the 1970s, mainly in the university sector and in work with marginalised groups and

urban districts, but also in community projects in Latin America, most often led by social psychologists. The purpose of action research is to undertake studies into the conditions and impacts of various forms of social action. It also aspires to influence social action; in other words, it is normative in focus. Its agenda concentrates on specific social grievances.

The main objective of the research is not to test theoretical hypotheses but to bring about practical change in the problematic situation which is the subject of study. This is viewed as a holistic social process: individual variables are not isolated and collected as “objective data”; instead, data collection itself is interpreted as part of the social process. Action research involves the use of qualitative approaches based on empirical social research, including the evaluation of project reports, participatory monitoring, individual or group interviews with project participants and members of the target groups, and surveys, but also ethnographic methods and creative forms of investigation such as theatre. The methods aim to exert direct influence on events within society. The researcher temporarily abandons his or her distance to the research object and is intensively involved, during certain phases, in the process being studied. The subjects being observed and studied are not cast in a passive role but participate actively in the debate about objectives and in data collection and evaluation. For the researchers, a precise definition of roles and ongoing self-reflection are essential.

Action research therefore not only attempts to accumulate knowledge and enhance understanding of how social interactions function; it intervenes in a direct and practical way. In order to ensure ownership and inclusiveness, it involves the actors being studied in the process on an ongoing basis. Academic findings are thus translated into practice, and research concepts and theoretical constructs are subjected to practical testing at the same time. The continuous feedback of results to project participants, through workshops and discussion of interim and final reports, is essential. Designed for a longer timeframe, action research

## The action research process



Graph by: Christoph Lang

Figure 9, source: Berghof Foundation

can provide valuable information about the opportunities for, and limits to, peacebuilding strategies. For instance, the Berghof Foundation trains female ex-combatants in four countries to collect video testimonies from their peers in order to document and analyse the challenges and opportunities faced by female members of armed movements in the wake of post-war political transitions. This knowledge produced by insider experts will then be integrated into training and capacity-building programmes for resistance and liberation movements and shared with international peacebuilding agencies.

### Practical needs determine appropriate research methods

It is certainly true that not every peacebuilding measure can be accompanied by a comprehensive research project, as in most cases those who fund peace practice will finance short-term evaluations at best. Nor can action research be considered the one and only approach or method – in partnership with others, the Berghof Foundation implements a multi-method approach integrating qualitative, quantitative and experimental methods. As described above, substantial action research requires long-term field research, which does not usually correspond with the budgets and funding lines of academic (or other) donor agencies. Furthermore, not all practical engagement lends itself to being the object of research, especially given the discreet confidential settings required for effective peace processes. Nevertheless, in order to improve knowledge of peace practice, the underlying ideas of action research can help in designing and implementing projects that aim to support the creation of inclusive structures and sustained practices of non-violent interaction. These include, above all: respect towards those who are subjects of the study, clarification of the roles and aims of those who conduct the research, involvement of the stakeholders in the development of research questions and hypotheses, and transparency of results through the use of feedback loops.

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#### References and Further Reading

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