

## CHAPTER 4.

### THE LOGIC OF A COLLABORATIVE ANALYTICAL APPROACH.

The first three Chapters of this Handbook have tried to deal theoretically and conceptually with the arguments for and against the idea that conflicts are, at least in principle, resolvable and that it is possible to find solutions to even the most protracted and intractable social conflict, however violent. We should note here that, while the violence itself is a major problem, it is not the central problem for a conflict resolution process, no matter how appalling and widespread it might be, and often is. The crucial problem for finding a long term resolution is the goal incompatibility that gives rise to the violence in the first place – or, actually, in the fourth or fifth place, because protracted conflicts usually pass through other stages involving protest, confrontation, hostility and coercion before reaching the point of violence between adversaries.

To talk of “finding a durable solution” seems to imply that solutions lie around the place like stones, waiting to be picked up, and this can hardly be the case given the prevalence of apparently insoluble conflicts in our world. Obviously, there must be some practical tactics or techniques, based upon sound principles of resolution as a process, that can be used to find, devise or create durable and acceptable solutions to the apparently unsolvable. The remainder of the Handbook therefore discusses and demonstrates some of these conflict resolution processes and the practical, step by step techniques that could be used to assist parties in protracted and violent conflicts jointly to create their own resolutions for their own conflict.

The Handbook certainly does not exhaust the possibilities for creating solutions, although I would argue that it does exemplify most of the principles that underlie all problem solving approaches to conflict resolution. However, having presented some ideas about *why* we should think it is possible to develop creative solutions, it does provide some ideas about *how* this might be done, on a day to day, stage to stage basis, using a problem solving logic.

#### 1. Adopting a Problem Solving Mindset.

Paradoxically, the first practical step in initiating any kind of conflict resolution process is an intellectual one. It is necessary to start by thinking of a protracted, violent conflict as a *problem*. This is not a trivial step, though at first sight it seems to be. The point is that it is rare for anybody – adversaries or outsiders - to think of the conflict as a problem. Instead, the normal tendency is to focus on a particular country that commits 'an act of untoward aggression'; on the actions of a terrorist group; on a boundary that is in hot dispute; on an economic arrangement that is causing injustice and unrest. The normal focus is on salient and usually obvious aspects of the overall problem - the violent behaviour involved, the nature of the parties that participate or the incompatible objectives sought. One of these is the thing that appears to be causing all the trouble, so this is the thing that must be dealt with.

Once this customary way of thinking about conflict is accepted, we are caught in a trap of fatalism. Mentally, we accept the inevitability of the violence, the intransigence of the parties and the intractability of the issues. We think of coercion leading to violence as an unwelcome 'fact of life', something that happens regularly from time to time within societies - and frequently in international society. The system, after all, provides for it, and there are methods to deal with it - normally 'in kind', through deterrence, counter-coercion, counter violence. Such methods are, of course, unwelcome to those who have to apply them, at every level, from the top decision-makers down through civil servants, soldiers, policemen, social workers, ordinary citizens. Unpleasant the methods may be, but intractable issues, 'uncivilized' and evil people, irresolvable conflicts make them necessary.

However, it might be that by concentrating our efforts upon the violent conflict as a *whole*, then it may be possible to solve it without resorting to methods that are distasteful in themselves and can easily make the situation worse. If the conflict itself is the problem to be solved, then the rest of a problem-solving logic follows. Parties create the problem by their pursuit of goals to fulfil underlying interests. When these goals happen to clash with the goals of other parties, there is an issue in conflict. Parties respond by pushing harder to reach their goals, so coercion and then violent behaviour may occur. The problem comes into existence.

Note, therefore, that objectives and actions by parties create the problem; not fate, not history, not some invisible, mysterious and immutable characteristic of society, economy or polity. The parties do it. And they do it at all social levels; individual, small group, large group, community, organization, nation state. In principle, if the parties *make* the problem, then they can unmake it. This may not be easy for a thousand reasons, including the fact that every action has consequences and conflict situations tend to become so

dynamic and complicated that hardly anyone can understand what is happening. But the significant point is that it is the parties themselves and no one else, that can finally *unmake* the problem.

## 2. Avoiding Traditional Third Party Dilemmas.

The second step is a rather negative one, but it involves understanding some of the shortcomings of traditional, 'third party' approaches to settling protracted conflicts and making sure that problem solving techniques avoid them. Unfortunately, conventional attempts by a third party to *unmake* the problem frequently compound it, at least initially. Conventional outside 'intervention' usually consists of action in pursuit of an immediate and admittedly worthy goal; stopping the violence. Regretably, this goal does not coincide with the goals of the existing parties, unless they are thoroughly exhausted and looking for a (perhaps temporary) respite. They already have their own goals, which (apparently) cannot be satisfied save at the expense of each other. So the intervening party adds a third goal, at least, which clashes and therefore forms another issue.

If the intervening party applies sufficient 'leverage' or power (in the form of either coercion or reward) then it may *subdue* or suppress the conflicting behaviour of the original parties, thus ending the violence. It appears that a central and salient *part* of the problem has been solved and, indeed, it has, in the sense that the violence has now ceased. In the jargon of conflict theory, this is one form of *settlement* of a conflict, as distinct from a *resolution*. Perhaps unfortunately, this kind of outcome is both unlikely to achieve stability in the long run.

If the people of the world could safely place their trust in the settlement of violent conflicts by external intervention in this way, then there might be no need to invent any other method. But faith cannot be placed in it, for three compelling reasons.

First, it tends to be difficult, expensive and dangerous. This is because the goals of the intervening party often clash with those of the original adversaries. So they are likely to fight back separately (or even in temporary combination). Sometimes they fight back so long and so hard that the intervening party has to withdraw in exhaustion and defeat. The experience of the Indian 'peacekeeping' forces in Sri Lanka from 1988 to 1990 is an example of such a failure. The failures in Bosnia up to 1995, the frustrated UN efforts in Somalia, the intervention of the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS) in Liberia during the early 1990's, and the current exercise in regime change and democracy building in Iraq provide other examples.

Second, a genuinely disinterested act of uninvited intervention by a third party is rarer than one might think. In practice, an intervention usually favours the goal of one or other of the original parties. In that situation, what is called a *settlement* when violent conflict has ceased is, in fact, a disguised victory (although, sometimes, only a partial victory) for one party - based upon the assistance of its external patron. Apart from the question of whether faith can be placed in the stability or longevity of such a *settlement*, another disadvantage of this approach is that for every act of intervention on behalf of one adversary, there is likely to be a countervailing act of intervention. Typically, it comes from another party, a *fourth* party to the conflict, and its purpose is to help the other adversary. When this happens, relative power in the conflict situation is likely to return to an approximate balance, which means that the violence is likely to get worse. So the problem of violent conflict is not *un-made* by coercive intervention, it is *re-made*. Consider, in this regard, mainland Greek and Turkish intervention on the island of Cyprus.

Third, intervention leading to a *settlement* should be recognized as a victory for the goal of the intervening party but a defeat for the goals of both the original conflicting parties. The violence ends, but the goals of the original adversaries are usually still there, still at issue. The underlying interests are still unmet. This means that although the problem of conflict is no longer *manifest*, it remains *latent*. Take away the power of the intervening party (the peacekeeping force, the economic aid, the outside guarantees or whatever) and the goals and interests of the conflicting parties are likely to be immediately re-asserted. The problem of violent conflict reappears even years later, as it has in the former Yugoslavia, in Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in other parts of the former USSR following *perestroika*, *glasnost* and the break-up of the Soviet Union.

## 3. A Problem Solving Alternative.

An alternative, problem solving approach has to take these difficulties into account. It has to work within the principles that, if conflict and resultant violence are problems created by the parties themselves and can be stopped finally and for good only by the parties, then it follows that *coercive* attempts to stop the conflict by external parties cannot be relied upon.

Given this logic, the only question is whether parties should be left to solve their own problems or whether attention should be paid to providing them with assistance of a *noncoercive* kind., and what form this should take.

If this were an ideal world, it would undoubtedly be best to leave the parties to themselves. Standards of education and rationality would be high in this ideal world and facilities would exist to which they could turn for assistance if, in their own judgement, they needed to. But our world, even with some 'New World Order', is far from ideal, and the fact is that parties in violent conflict are not only subjected to heavy, constant, external pressure of a forcible kind. They are also faced with a complete absence of disinterested, professional, non-coercive assistance.

Problem-solving approaches represent one attempt to provide such assistance. Any problem-solving initiative starts, continues and concludes with some third party devoting its attention to the interests of *all* the parties in a given dispute, as determined by those parties themselves. It involves the principle of putting adversaries in a situation where they can explore the possibilities for new options leading to a 'win-win', or variable sum solution to what can be recognized as a mutual problem. A major task for the third party is not to use leverage nor to search for a bargained compromise, but the provision of a safe venue in which productive discussions might take place, maximizing the chances of a genuine exchange of ideas, of free-ranging analysis and of the noncommitting exploration of options. This is not an easy task.

#### 4. The Need for Self Examination.

Moreover, being a *disinterested* and *professional* third party presents problems, even when those acting in the role have no direct interest in the fortunes of the adversaries or the outcome of the conflict under analysis. Using a collaborative and analytical problem-solving approach does not automatically insulate those practising it from the problems of 'neutrality' or 'impartiality' familiar to those using any form of third-party intervention (conciliation, mediation, good offices), although the approach's underlying principles do help to prevent personal predispositions interfering with the conduct of an exercise.

As Nikita Khrushchev once said, 'There are no neutral men', and even the most disinterested professional is by no means value free, as our discussion of third party 'peacekeepers' indicated.

At the start of any problem-solving exercise, therefore (as with other forms of intermediary work), it is always wise for potential interveners to examine their own motives for undertaking the proposed initiative and becoming 'third parties'; to consider the values that might affect their handling of the process; and to review their assumptions (both theoretical and practical) about the nature of the conflict and about the third-party role in which they are about to become involved. 'Being a professional' involves, as a first step, making oneself aware of one's own goals and values in undertaking any problem-solving exercise.

**SEE EXERCISE 4.1 at the end of this Chapter.**

#### 5. Principles of Problem Solving.

At the end of Chapter 1, I laid out some conflict resolution principles which seemed to me to be a basis for approaching a protracted conflict through problem solving. This, I argued, could be a means for finding or creating an acceptable and durable solution. These seven basic principles involved putting key members of the parties in conflict [that is, those who *made* the conflict and therefore can *unmake* it] in a setting where they:

1. Can be made aware of the possibility of a positive sum solution for their conflict.
2. Can become aware that the problem is not solely of their adversary's making.
3. Can become convinced that there is a potential negotiating partner on the other side.
4. Can explore each other's underlying interests, aims and values.
5. Can explore the likely future costs of continuing present policies.
6. Can jointly explore alternative means of achieving their basic interests.
7. Can examine obstacles to achieving their basic interests through alternative means.

Practically speaking, this means that, if a complete problem solving "service" is envisioned to help parties to a protracted, violent conflict work their way towards a resolution, the procedure involves the following:

- (1) Arrangements should be made and agreed whereby key representatives of the parties in dispute meet in a secure and non-threatening environment, in the presence of a panel of 'facilitators' who facilitate the exchange and provide useful ideas, process and alternatives;
- (2) The panel of facilitators should be appropriately competent, knowledgeable and properly qualified in relevant disciplines and practical experience;
- (3) The initial objective of the first and subsequent meetings should be to analyse the conflict in all aspects that the party representatives deem relevant, and to examine options for moving the conflict towards an acceptable solution.

In a perfectly successful meeting (workshop) or series of meetings, the parties would emerge with a resolution of the conflict, in the sense of an outcome that satisfies their underlying interests and their goals. In a wholly unsuccessful workshop, the parties would leave having lost nothing but the time of their representatives. In most workshops or workshop series, participants emerge with new insights and options; with ideas about alternative means of achieving both sets of goals (rather than only one side's); with a new sense of the probable costs of continuing the coercive strategies employed up to that point; and with some procedures established for moving towards a solution and some principles conceived on which that solution might be based.

Ideally, participation in a workshop or a problem-solving exercise should involve neither issues of formal recognition nor processes of formal negotiation. It should be an academic analysis of situations, processes and possibilities, nothing more. The approach is modest but potentially highly effective. In our experience, there is no better way of dealing with the problem of violent conflict which is deep-rooted and, hence, protracted.

The following chapters describe some of the steps needed [including typical obstacles to be overcome] for arranging and conducting such workshops and for following up and evaluating the effects of what are, in effect, meetings of enemies and adversaries who are usually continuing coercion and violence while the workshops take place. The process starts from the very beginning by examining the problem of readiness for such an initiative.

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### **EXERCISE 1.1: An Exercise in Preliminary Self Analysis.**

#### Background

Potential third-party interveners, whether traditional mediators or those using recently developed collaborative problem solving approaches, do NOT plunge headlong into protracted, deep-rooted conflicts, radiating goodwill and process skills and hoping that this will get them accepted by the parties and lead towards a successful resolution of the conflict!

A great deal of preliminary analysis goes into deciding when conditions for an intervention are 'ripe', and how an intervention ought to be planned in order to 'gain entry' to 'the' conflict most appropriately (see Chapters 2 and 3).

Moreover, some self-analysis (at least) needs to be undertaken early on in the initiative into the third party's own perception of its motives; its relationship to the conflict and to the parties (even if the former is only tenuous or through another, similar conflict); its assumptions about the conflict it is considering interfering with; and any hidden agenda that the third 'party' and the individuals directly involved in its activities might be importing into an already tangled and difficult situation.

#### Exercise Scenario

Imagine that you are members of a small North American or European based research organization considering the launching of some intermediary initiative into the situation of deep-rooted, protracted conflict in the West African country of Zandia. (See the country profile of the Republic of Zandia at the end of this Handbook.)

Your Director and immediate superior have formed you into a 'Planning Group' for the exercise and have directed you to carry out a preliminary analysis of the possibility of undertaking some initiative (an informal dialogue, a problem solving workshop series, an academic conference) in the near future that might lead towards a resolution of the conflict.

Two other recent, exploratory initiatives carried out by ECOWAS and (more informally) by the Colville Center of Atlanta, GA, appear to have made no progress in bringing the parties together. Why, your Director has enquired, should we expect to have any greater success?

#### Exercise Task

Carry out the following analytical tasks and write a brief summary of your conclusions for your Director:

(A) Answer the following questions about your, and your organization's, proposed role in the conflict and in a process of conflict resolution:

- (1) Who are 'We' and what have been/are our relationships with the parties that appear to be 'core' in this conflict?
- (2) How might these relationships affect our reception?
- (3) What are our own motives for/objectives in undertaking any such intermediary initiative?
- (4) In what ways (however seemingly remote) are we personally or organizationally involved in (a) this particular conflict; (b) this type of conflict? How might this affect our judgement?
- (5) What sort of a conflict do we think this is? What parallels do we draw between this and other, more familiar conflicts?
- (6) What are our assumptions about the sources, main features and likely outcomes from this type of conflict?
- (7) On what are our assumptions based and how reliable are they? What experience have we had of this type of dispute?
- (8) What don't we know about this type of conflict that we feel might become important?
- (9) What sort of a final outcome to our initiative do we (a) anticipate; (b) hope for; (c) approve of ?
- (10) What sort of outcome would we (a) disapprove of; (b) try to avoid? Why?
- (11) If we become involved as an intermediary, under what terms and conditions will this occur ? How do we explain and have these terms accepted by the parties ? Under what circumstances do we terminate our initiative and withdraw?

(B) Add two further self-diagnostic questions that you feel your Director has left out – and answer them.

(C) Go home and read Louise Diamond's and John Paul Lederach's chapters in *Into the Eye of the Storm*.

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