

Facilitating Systemic Conflict Transformation Through Systemic Action Research¹

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Introduction

The practice of action research informed by systemic thinking and complexity theory faces a number of key challenges. The first one is the issue of scale. Because action research processes tend to operate at the level of the ‘group’ rather than ‘organization’, ‘community’ or ‘society’, their potential as catalysts for sustainable social and organizational change have been radically limited. A second challenge lies in the need to design processes for learning and transformation which can accommodate the diversity and complexity inherent in most social issues, and a third is the concern to explore credible alternatives to the orthodoxies of *representativeness* as the foundation for legitimate knowledge and *consensus* as the sole goal for dialogue. This latter point is crucial to the discussion about the value added of systemic thinking because systemic solutions will frequently not involve consensus at all but will rather reconstitute the whole system to open up new possibilities for transformation. Experimentation with learning architectures that can respond to these challenges has been at the heart of a number of large-scale systemic projects (Burns 2006, 2007).

The aim of this article is to explore the possibilities that systemic action research offers to conflict transformation. After elaborating on crucial components of action research processes, they will be connected to some of the thinking in other chapters of this book. Coleman et al.’s chapter in particular is important because it clearly illustrates how system dynamics create *attractors*, which structure attitudes and behaviours through social and organizational norms. It is these which lead to the entrenchment of conflict situations:

“Conflict intractability develops when social and psychological processes interact over time to promote the emergence of a stable and coherent pattern of thought and behaviour organised

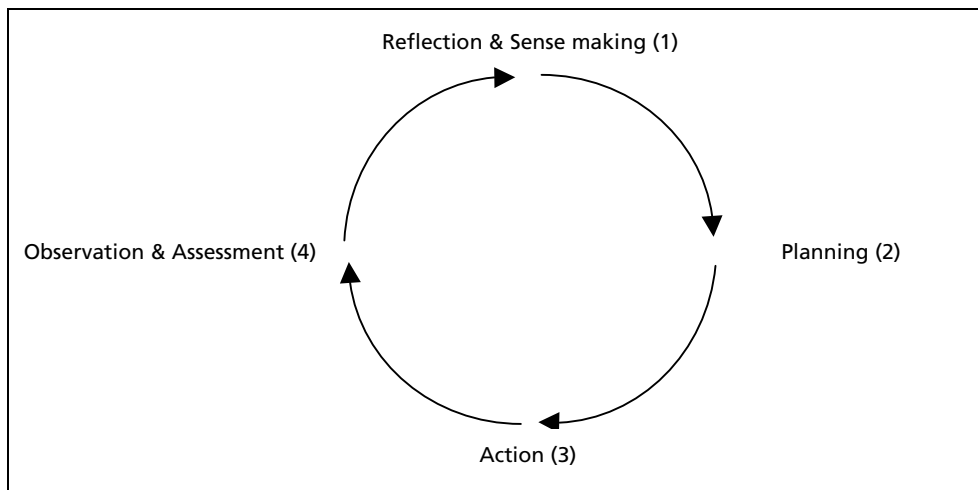
¹ The term ‘systemic action research’ is not new. It has been used in a variety of contexts over the past 15 years or so. Early references (Bawden/Packham 1991; Packham/Sriskandarajah 2005) had a strong agricultural focus. More recently it has been used in the context of intra-organizational change (Cochlan 2002) and more widely to engage with complex social and organizational environments (Ison/Russel 2000; Burns 2003, 2006, 2007; Weil et al. 2005; Burns and Weil 2006). Others such as Flood (2001) have explicitly connected systems thinking with action research. A pioneering example of systemic action research, which has underpinned my thinking, was facilitated by Yoland Wadsworth and colleagues within the Australian Mental Health System (Wadsworth 2001). The focus of these authors is diverse, but they share a concern to take into account the wider context within which issues are situated.

around perceived incompatibilities [...] an attractor refers to states and patterns to which a system's behaviour converges over time" (Schuster 1984).

While most models of conflict resolution practice tend to be based on linear, cause-and-effect assumptions, interventions in the real world frequently impact in non-linear ways, and outcomes become unpredictable. The assumption that we can bring about a specific type of outcome in complex systems of enduring conflict is highly contestable.² This body of work provides a theoretical rationale for shifting the focus of conflict resolution beyond effective dialogue and localized interventions at sites of conflict, towards transformation of the underlying systemic patterns which structure the conflict. This chapter focuses on how to operationalize such concerns through the practices of systemic action research.

1. The Action Research Process

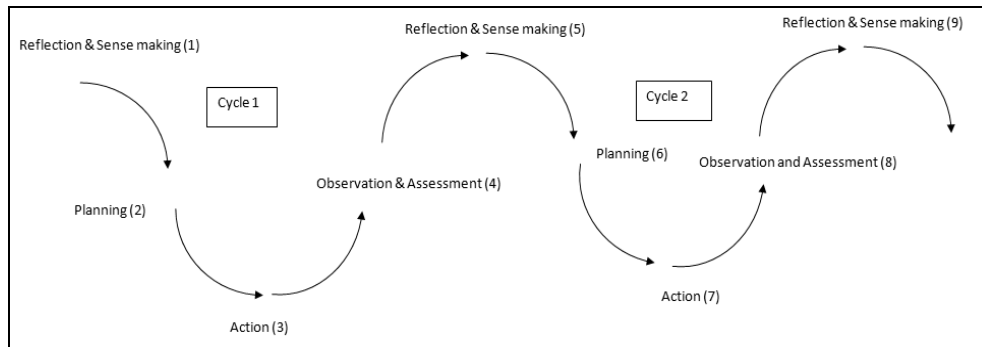
Action research is based on a series of continuous cycles. There are differing versions of this model, but essentially these are the key elements:



A situation, an issue, a problem, or a question is reflected upon by group participants (1). The group begins the process of sense making through storytelling, dialogue, work with images, assessing quantitative and qualitative data, creating and analysing system maps, etc. This enables them to see how diverse elements in a system interact with each other and impact upon each other, supporting a situated understanding of **how** and **why** things happen. This process will typically generate theories of change. Early insights will emerge through dialogue. As the process unfolds, the group begins to plan action (2), to take action (3) and to observe and assess the impact of action. The group is now able to facilitate a dynamic interaction between dialogic and experiential/experimental learning (4). It will then move into a second phase of inquiry, begin-

² See e.g. the Coleman et al. chapter in this volume.

ning with an assessment of the intervention and moving around the cycle for a second time (5). The process is repeated for as long as it is useful, as depicted below (6 to 9 and beyond):



Action research is rooted in the belief that we learn most effectively through action and experience, and that insight can be most effectively generated through the combined expertise of those who have a stake in the issues.

2. Systemic Action Research

There are many versions of action research (Reason/Bradbury 2000, 2007). However, as already indicated, until around ten years ago most centred on groups rather than organizations, networks or larger social systems. While they were able to engage with systemic issues, their focus was inevitably ‘local’, in the sense that issues were essentially seen through the lens of those in the group, and interventions always lay in close proximity to the actors already engaged in the process. This restricted their capacity to impact significantly on the deeper systemic patterns. Participatory forms of action research have been able to support sense-making and generate solutions to problems which are rooted in the views of those most affected. But they have frequently lacked mechanisms to deal with: the unintended impacts of interventions; the refusal of powerful actors to engage; deeper socio-economic patterning that eradicates local innovation and so on. Systemic action research is a way of ‘scaling up’ the action research model so that it can work across systems. It involves multiple inquiries running in relationship to each other. As a result, it is able to bring into view and interact with the many complex inter-relationships which affect interventions on the ground.

The three words ‘systemic’, ‘action’ and ‘research’ are central to our understanding of how change happens.

Systemic thinking is important because it asks us to situate any issue, problem or conflict in relation to all of the factors that will impact on it (visible or invisible). Pictures of these factors can be created through the construction of issue maps by stakeholders in different parts of the system. These will be highly dynamic and constantly evolving. Therefore, a continuous action research process is required which can iteratively evolve pictures. These pictures will reveal:

- underlying patterns and social norms
- complex power relationships between multiple stakeholders
- activity beyond the normal ‘field in view’
- non-linear effects of multiple linear interactions
- different (sometimes contradictory) impacts at different levels of the system.

In revealing these patterns, opportunities for intervention will emerge.

Action is important because we learn through action. New opportunities and entry points open up in action. It should not be assumed that action follows from analysis: action should inform analysis which should in turn generate new action. As Coleman et al in this volume point out, “leverage points in the system are typically identified over time and reveal themselves through trial and error”. But we need a systematic³ process for trialling, as well as for assessing the impact of those trials. In other words, we need to look at dynamics and patterns within a system, develop localized theories of change, enact changes which test those theories, and identify new opportunities in the process of intervention.

Research is important because our inquiries need to be documented and analysed in order to generate evidence, to move evidence across the system and to test its resonance. For example, if different interest groups produce very different systemic pictures of a conflict, it will be important to systematically compare them. Similarly, it will be important to compare maps over time. This cannot be done effectively through short notes from meetings etc.

Systemic action research has the following **characteristics**:

- It is rooted in a non-linear understanding of social change where interventions typically focus on shifting the dynamics of a system within which an issue or problem is located, rather than attempting to tackle the problem directly.
- It involves **multiple stakeholders** and **interest groups** both on the ground, within the wider system and in more strategic arenas. This allows all of the key players to engage in learning, dialogue and the co-construction of action, enhancing the chances that solutions will be sustainable. Opportunities for action are likely to arise as a result of their juxtaposition and their interaction.
- It is **multi-stranded**. By opening up more than one strand of inquiry we see issues from different perspectives and begin to understand the complex inter-relationships between issues. These various elements of the whole are to be found in different places. They exist in the relationship between formal and informal worlds, the dominant and the dominated, the visible and the invisible and so on. In order to understand the whole, we have to engage with at least a good cross section of them, but they cannot be engaged in the same way in the same places. A multi-stranded process is a necessary condition for operating at scale.

³ Because so many people have confused the words systemic and systematic over the years, the distinction will be clarified here. Systemic refers to a type of thinking which takes into account the wider system within which events occur. Systematic refers to a comprehensive process which ensures that the things we have already determined need to happen *will* happen.

- It **links informal** inquiry and action **with formal** decision-making systems. This approach to inquiry tends to be highly organic. Inquiries bring together people as and when they need to be brought together to make sense and to plan action. However, if these processes are not linked at some stage to formal decision-making processes, then crucial opportunities to restructure policy, dominant social norms and even law can be missed.
- It identifies the significance of issues tracking **resonance** rather than trying to establish the representativeness of views. Opportunities for change are likely to occur where there is highest energy.
- It is highly **emergent** in its design, mirroring the emergence of the phenomena that it is exploring.

It requires us:

- to identify underlying patterns and surfaces and challenge underlying assumptions, identify systemic blockages,
- to identify possible entry points, opportunity spaces and leverage points, and then to actively engage with them discovering where they lead. While we cannot identify leverage points in advance, we can be more intentional about identifying or even creating arenas within which they are likely to emerge
- to bridge between different parts of the wider system
- to identify and catalyse multiple sources of leadership
- to support action in multiple arenas

The following pages outline a loose design for a systemic action research process.

3. Stages of a Systemic Action Research Process

There are many different ways of designing systemic action research architectures, but the following sequencing highlights some typical elements and their relationship to each other:

1. **Exploratory group discussions, interviews, data collection.** In the first stage, the aim is to bring together as many narratives around the central issue as possible.
2. **Multi-stakeholder meeting(s) to analyse early inquiry findings.** Here we can bring together all of the data generated in the first phase. The multi-stakeholder meeting(s) might comprise people from across the conflict terrain who we believe will travel along the whole path. They will comprise people who have been involved in inquiries and some outsiders who can help to reflect on the issues. This stage should identify the lines of inquiry that seem most central to the question in hand, and those that seem most promising for generating action.
3. **Issue based inquiries interspersed with action.** This is the heart of the process. Here we open thematic issue-based multi-stakeholder inquiries to analyse the issues that have been identified. Stakeholders are brought in because of their specific relationship to the key question identified. Typically, each meeting might last a few hours to half a day. The first few meetings are likely to explore the issue in detail, generate maps of likely relationships and seek additional data for sense-making.

After this, the meetings should generate action between meetings. This could take the form of small interventions to test understanding and create change, or larger interventions on the scale of a project. These actions are observed and assessed, and learning takes place in the meetings as the action evolves.

4. **Large event analysis, resonance testing and action planning.** Here we analyse the main messages that are emerging from our inquiry process. This can lead us to construct more formal action experiments, which may be a precursor to major policy change, shifts in our approach to interventions, etc.
5. **Action Experiments.** Action Experiments may last anywhere between three months to a year or two. They will be larger scale systematic attempts at systemic intervention.
6. **Large event to assess implications of Action Experiments.** Here we are likely to involve key institutional players as well as those involved in both the inquiries and the Action Experiments. A large event can include anything from 50 to 100+ people, depending on what is appropriate, pragmatic and helpful. This large event will analyse the data that has emerged from stage five and explore the implications for policy and strategy.
7. **Task groups braided to create policy, strategy, new models.** The final stage is to organize task groups to enact learning across a wider terrain, but these too are subject to learning. As change is implemented, it is documented, reflected upon and modified as a result.

How does the process described above support the analysis of conflict articulated in this book? The conceptual shift from traditional notions of conflict resolution towards systemic conflict transformation is underpinned by three interlinked sets of theory. Firstly, Kurt Lewin's field theory (Lewin 1944, 1952), secondly Michel Foucault's theories of power (Foucault 1984, Clegg 1989) and thirdly complexity theory (Stacey 2003, Coleman et al., this volume), which helps us to understand both the underlying systemic patterning of behaviours and attitudes and the non-linear emergence of outcomes in conflict fields.

Lewin's work tells us that to understand the individual we have to understand the field within which he or she sits. The most fundamental construct for Lewin is that of the psychological field or *life space*. All psychological events (thinking, acting, dreaming, hoping, etc.) are conceived to be a function of this life space, which consists of the person and the environment viewed as one constellation of interdependent factors. Individual psychological processes are, in Lewin's words, "always to be derived from the relation of the concrete individual to the concrete situation, and, so far as internal forces are concerned, from the mutual relations of the various functional systems that make up the individual" (Deutsch 1969).

What follows from the notion of interdependence between the individual and his or her environment is that just as individual action is influenced by the forces which come to bear within their life space, so in turn the system is reconfigured by any individual action. Each action by each individual or group changes the system and therefore changes the patterning perceived by everyone else. Another key concept in Lewin's work is the notion that the status quo represents a balance of forces within the system as a whole, rather than a balance of forces in relation to the specific issue at hand. Fou-

cault significantly develops this notion. He articulates power as a process of constantly re-negotiated relationships evolving in time and space. He talks of:

“The multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation; as the processes which through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens and reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunction and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallisation is embodied in the state apparatus in the formalisation of law, in the various social hegemonies” (Foucault 1984, 92).

“There is not on the one side a discourse of power and opposite another discourse that runs opposite to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocs operating in the field of force relations” (Foucault 1984, 101).

He is describing a highly fluid, highly dynamic situation in which every change in a field changes all of the power relationships. Foucault also talks of the way in which multiple individual interactions create crystallized pathways which take the form of law and/or hegemonic norms.

From here we can draw a number of conclusions which are crucial to our work. Firstly, because phenomena are situated in fields and are interconnected, effective action does not have to be directed at the site of the problem. We can make interventions outside of the conflict arena which have a significant impact within it. Our architecture for learning and change must consequently be able to traverse this wider system in order to identify where these points of leverage lie.

Secondly, very small actions can have a major impact on reconfiguring a system and the combined effect of many small actions within a system can be as powerful as one large intervention. Large interventions tend to be highly visible and attract a counter-veiling force, whereas smaller interventions often have greater chance to take hold before their significance is realized. Furthermore, small interventions can grow, like the proverbial snowball, into major processes of change.

Complexity theory illuminates this process, highlighting the ideas of attractors and emergence. In essence, attractors represent magnets within a system, which have emerged as a result of dynamic interactions within the system. These magnets draw people into behaviours that re-enforce states and patterns which are associated with the attractor. The attractor itself is associated with a particular part of the ‘landscape’:

“Metaphorically, the attractor serves as a valley in the psychological landscape into which the psychological elements – thoughts, feelings, and actions – begin to slide. Once trapped in such a valley, escape requires tremendous will and energy and may appear impossible” (Coleman et al. 2011, this volume).

The interactions which re-enforce established attractors or create new ones can be stimulated, although not directed, through both internal and external intervention. New attractors represent locations within an ecology of conflict from which new forms of activity, dialogue and behaviour might grow – shifting values in the process. This is literally because they attract people’s engagement and commitment despite the dominant power of the status quo. Over time, they can build enough power and momentum to shift the dominant norms. Coleman et al. also point out (and this is crucial) that these attractors may be latent. In other words, dominant behaviours and discourses may con-

tinue to be significantly more visible, while new attractors are quietly gaining power. The effectiveness of any intervention will be heavily impacted upon by those underlying attractors. It is therefore critical that systemic facilitators not only identify the spaces where new attractors might take hold but are also able to see where hidden attractors already lie.

According to Stacey (2003) the key concepts underpinning complexity theory are “self-organisation and emergence which means that the interaction is patterning itself”. Interventions thus impact in a context where everything is already constantly changing and self-organizing. This makes linear understandings of change highly problematic. In dynamic conflict situations, planned interventions quickly become out of date. They will also be subject to multiple unintended consequences because the many different things that are happening (including parallel interventions – often from different sources) interact with each other, changing the terrain upon which the intervention is played out. This means that the overarching architecture which supports interventions needs to be built around a process for continuous learning and appraisal. As Coleman et al. argue, it is crucial to find ways to ‘see the system’, ‘map the dynamic ecology’ and ‘apply network analysis to locate gateways and leverage points’.⁴ But carrying out a detailed needs-analysis of a conflict in advance of action is not enough. This is a point stressed by Dekha Ibrahim Abdi in her papers on the post-election crisis in Kenya 2008: “Analysis of conflicts is a continuous process helping to understand the dynamics as well as to transform the parties in conflict” (Abdi 2009). Detailed mappings of relationships will need to be constructed, but they have to be constantly and continuously reconstructed.

A typical linear understanding of causality also needs to be challenged. The notion that intervention A will lead to outcome B needs to be replaced by something more akin to: intervention A may open up a space for action in this location, which might have an effect on people and relationships elsewhere, which may open up spaces for further action. The only meaningful way to assess these interventions is by observing their effects in action.

Systemic action research processes provide a container within which it is possible to support learning from action as well as the continuous mapping of our learning. Early inquiries are designed to map the system and the complex relationships within it. We can never see the whole system, but by engaging multiple actors we can see more of the system than we would otherwise. A systemic action research process starts from multiple points within a system and engages people in different ways according to what the existing power relationships make possible. Sometimes it may be through sitting down in a café and having a cup of tea, or talking to people at a water point, or in the street where they are hanging out. Sometimes it might be in a small exclusive meeting (of, for example, women facilitated by a woman). Sometimes it may be through an inquiry group that is specifically working on the issue. After each meeting, we enrich our picture of the situation. We draw maps and then overlay the different maps onto each other in order to expand our picture, pick up tensions between them, and identify underlying patterns. A network analysis can help identifying spaces for engagement that we previously did not see and can highlight possible new entry points for engaging with

4 See e.g. the chapter of Coleman et al. in this volume.

systemic conflict. However, these may not be the places where we have the most leverage. This is more likely to be discovered in the process of action and intervention itself.

Another concern, which is strongly resonant throughout the work of Coleman et al. and the systemic action research approach, is the issue of time. This is partly because change takes time and partly because the underlying constellation of attractors may be moving on a different timescale to the change that is apparent on the surface. Action research approaches are designed to take time into account. Unlike ‘negotiations’ or ‘deliberative learning processes’ a range of different insight-generating encounters are catalysed. These are supported by close documentation. This allows insight to be built up cumulatively over time as different accounts are brought into relation to each other. By documenting discussions across a field of inquiry (a conflict zone and its wider system) we can begin to see patterns over time. Participants can be reminded of the insights that were generated earlier, and these can be transferred sensitively from one arena to another. The action research process is designed to ensure that the time needed to enact and assess the impact of action is built into the process. Similarly, the idea of feedback is central to the action research process and is built into the classical action research cycle.

From the observations articulated above, we can begin to articulate a number of further critical principles to underpin our intervention strategies:

1. **There is a need for multiple intervention streams.** Conflicts are characterized by competing world views, competing interests, and stakeholders that cannot work together in the same space. To get a picture of the whole it is crucial to start working from multiple points across that whole. Furthermore, there is no way of knowing where the most effective entry points within a system are likely to be, so it is important to engage in as many locations as possible. Often this will mean opening up inquiries in some of the less obvious places connected to the central issue. As Abdi points out:

“Peacemaking [...] needs to [take] into consideration the contributions of diverse actors, including women, youth and militia, and even spoilers as they have an influence on the conflict” (Abdi 2009, 7).
2. **Action is as important as dialogue.** (i) Issues can be radically reframed and boundaries of view can be changed through experience rather than dialogic intervention (ii) Doing things together is crucial because it breaks through the taking of positions, and because through doing things we create relationships which bring about a different order of understanding. I would go further to suggest that even to walk together while talking can make a massive difference to relationship-building: building a relationship is about ‘knowing’ a person, not just hearing their position. (iii) Through action, landscapes change, opening up new ‘doors’ and ‘entry points’.
3. **Constructive system change can be achieved without stakeholder consensus.** Interventions can be made to support systemic reconfigurations where no single solution has the support of all parties. This connects to point (1) above because it relies on multiple points of engagement enabling a change in part of a system which will have an impact in others, irrespective of any agreements that may emerge across parties.

4. **Understanding ‘energy’ patterns within a system is crucial to identifying opportunities for sustainable change.** It is vital to develop processes which allow us to follow energies and to identify resonance within the system. Where we find such resonance we are likely to find both energy for change and new ‘entry points’. These can be envisioned as micro-level attractors that have the potential to become the sort of systemic alternate attractor pools that Coleman et al. describe in this volume.

4. Some Illustrations

In the following section, two stories will be presented which directly inform this discussion on systemic conflict transformation. In the first, the peace worker Seline Korri from Kenya describes a situation in the 1990’s in which the Pokot drove out the Kikuyu (Burns 2007, 44). She tries to talk with women in the community about what has happened, but no-one is prepared to talk. She then simply spends time in the community going about the normal business of shopping and so on. At the market she talks casually with the women about their lives. One of the women tells her about the difficulties the women have in getting salt. They now have to dig for salt in locations which expose them to danger. She tests the resonance of this narrative by talking about the issue of salt with other women. They have similar stories to tell. They are receptive to being brought together to talk about *this* issue. It turns out that the reason they now face this situation is that the Kikuyu used to bring the salt. Together, the women decide not to cook with salt. Their husbands start to complain about the horrible taste of the food, which opens up a dialogue between the men and the women and eventually leads to the Kikuyu being invited back into the area.

This story illustrates a number of the concepts described earlier. Firstly, the issue of salt opened up space to seed an alternative attractor around quality of life. It was identifiable as an entry point as a result of the resonance between stories and the energy which was associated with it. Secondly, the way in which the conflict had been framed was in terms of land rights. The way in which it became reframed was in relation to the role the Kikuyu played within the community. This illustrates the importance of broadening the boundaries of what is seen as relevant and important. Thirdly, this reframing could not have taken place through an abstracted dialogue. It emerged as a result of action. Fourthly, we can see that neither the ‘entry point’ nor the action was centred on the conflict. The power to shift the system dynamics came from interconnected parts of the wider system.

The second story is an example of intergroup conflict. This relates to the issue of ‘female genital mutilation’ or ‘female circumcision’, which was told to me by Caroline Toroitich (Burns 2007). This is an issue which is characterized by deeply entrenched views threaded through multiple narratives. NGOs working from a human rights narrative are rescuing young girls and taking them into refuges. The question at the heart of their intervention might be, “how do we protect these children from abuse?” But there are many other actors who have strong views. A perspective from the young girls themselves might be, “why am I being taken away from my home?” The central ques-

tion from the hospitals that are now carrying out the practise may be, “how do we keep women safe by ensuring that the procedure is carried out in a clean and sterile environment?” The key issue for tribal chiefs might be, “how can I protect my community and its traditions?” Each actor carries out actions to answer their own question, but the outcomes are not linear. For example, because the practise is constructed as a rite of passage which makes a woman marriageable, she may not have an economic future without it. This has led to many of the ‘rescued’ children finding themselves as sex workers. Similarly, because the hospitals are carrying out the practice, they find that they are part of a narrative which legitimizes it – “the hospitals are carrying it out so it must be OK”. Working on an issue like this requires an architecture which allows us to engage separately with the different groups and then bring them together when some openings are identified or some energy for change becomes visible. Furthermore, as we have seen above, a positive outcome is not likely to emerge through consensus but rather through a re-configuration of the system. Possibilities, as signalled earlier, will emerge through trial and error. In this case, attempts at implementing alternative initiative ceremonies were tried – and failed. Such failure contributed to new learning to underpin new possible actions.

Some observations about the anti-poll tax campaign in the UK emphasize, too, that a multiple-strand approach is crucial (Burns 1992). The campaign was characterized by street demonstrations, riots, firebombing of offices, a major non-payment campaign, attempts to block the courts, community resistance to bailiffs and letter writing to Members of Parliament. Despite the fact that the different protagonists of each of these activities would never have been able to sit in a room together, let alone agree to a common strategy, these quite contradictory approaches to change actually re-enforced each other. The non-payment campaign may not have had real traction if the demonstrations had not created an atmosphere of rebellion and the letter writers had not created a fear that ‘respectable people’ had become concerned.

The active promotion of multiple strategies within a movement opened up possibilities for different attractors. People were initially motivated to do what they had an affinity for doing. Because they did not have to choose between plans of action (the effectiveness of which would have been, in any case, impossible to assess) or enact things that they did not believe in, they remained actively involved as these different strategies played themselves out. Over time, they gravitated towards the strategies that appeared to be working. Within a few years most had gravitated towards the non-payment strategy, and this resulted in the largest campaign of civil disobedience in UK history.

We can see from these examples a clear articulation of the concepts developed earlier in this chapter. Firstly, systemic solutions do not need to emerge from consensus. Indeed, they may be less likely to emerge from consensus because an agreed strategy may not lead to the solutions with the highest energy being pursued. Secondly, by nurturing diversity and complexity we open up possibilities for alternative attractors which have a chance of shifting the system dynamics:

“It is the collapse of complexity that promotes conflict intractability. When distinct issues become interlinked and mutually dependent, the activation of a single issue activates all other issues. The likelihood of finding a solution that satisfies all the issues is correspondingly diminished” (Coleman et al., 2011, this volume).

Mittleton-Kelly makes a similar point when exploring the implications of complexity theory for organizational change:

“A complex evolving system is one of intricate and multiple intertwined interactions and relationships, and/or multi-dimensional influences and links, both direct and many-removed. Connectivity and interdependence propagates the effects of actions, decisions and behaviours through the ecosystem, but that propagation or influence is not uniform as it depends on degrees of connectivity” (Mittleton/Kelly 2003).

What flows from this is that a crucial task of a facilitator or mediator is to increase connectivity, and through increasing connectivity, increase diversity. Ricigliano’s emphasis on the importance of building “networks of effective action” (Ricigliano 2003) and Coleman et al.’s highlighting of the importance of “negotiation chains” signals the significance of networks in bringing diversity back into the system and creating the conditions for positive, latent adaptive attractors to emerge (Coleman et al 2011, this volume).

However, it is worth pointing out that increasing connectivity can take a wide variety of forms. One example might be working with diaspora groups outside a conflict zone. Within systemic action research processes we frequently use peer dialogue and peer research as a starting point for negotiation chains, allowing us to engage people that would not want to engage with us, but will engage with people whom they trust. This opens up possibilities for dialogue, either directly or indirectly.

These scenarios are purely illustrative but they signal the need for a different sort of process which recognizes high levels of complexity. Systemic action research is a process designed to engage effectively with non-linearity, multiple interests and continuous change (both local and in relation to deeper systemic patterns). It is a proactive process which seeks to maximize the conditions under which connections will be made, opportunities opened up, and action taken, all with the possibility for break-through.

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