

## Foreword

This book is about systemic approaches in conflict transformation. In brief, systemic thinking as such is largely about mobilising and utilising epistemology for ontology. Being both a cognitive paradigm and a method, systemic approaches initially entered the realm of conflict studies in the 1950s and 1960s and increasingly captivated related discourses towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the last few years, they have become very popular in peacebuilding practice as well. How can we explain the growing appeal and spread of systemic analysis and processes in the theory and practice of conflict transformation?

It is hardly surprising that systemic thinking, like many innovative concepts, originally evolved from a crisis. Such a crisis also became apparent in traditional conflict management and conflict studies, mainly constituted by an increasingly obvious discrepancy between the high complexity and interdependency of social conflict – and a comparably under-complex strategy and toolbox used by stakeholders (in the first instance, states), to handle this complexity properly. This dilemma may have contributed to a better understanding that there is no simple and linear path for conflict management where it is dependent less on a negotiated compromise between peers, such as states (even democratic ones), regarding certain issues, but on transforming the system as such. For example, a negotiated compromise among states on mitigating the risks of climate change may still not prevent climate collapse from eventually happening. Nuclear arms control will not necessarily prevent the ‘have-nots’ from seeking possession of such weapons, as long as the existing nuclear powers are not ready to disarm themselves. ‘Peace deals’ between or within states which build on the violation of human and minority rights will hardly be sustained. Unlike simple problem-solving (‘silver-bullet’) approaches, systemic thinking seeks to explore the deeper construction of conflicts and their dynamics, and tries to better understand the inter-linkages and interdependencies of their components, and the underlying interests and the driving actors, as well as intervening and interfering processes. In addition, the progress of systemic studies in the 1980s and 1990s has fostered skills for better comprehending the non-linearity of social interactions in the social sciences, in organizational development and in family therapy. In the last ten years, systemic thinking has started to shape peace and conflict research as well.

Various strands of schools have since developed. The more traditional, ontology-based, goal-seeking conflict management school first came to be increasingly chal-

lenged by the conflict resolution school, which in comparison pays more attention to the role of stakeholders in conflict, their interests and relations. But both lack the epistemology-based approach which has been inspiring emerging conflict transformation discourse since the early 1990s. The various conflict management and conflict resolution approaches usually start from the underlying assumption that sound and rational proposals can be made in order to mitigate tensions between conflict stakeholders in order to 'resolve' their conflicts. Conflict transformation, against the background of conflict asymmetries, addresses the structural dimension of – and aims at changing the *character* of – the relations between the actors in conflict, by encouraging them to deal with each other constructively.

Conflict transformation understands social conflict as a natural form of human existence, i.e. not as a something negative *per se* but as a potential catalyst of change of systems, and thus something that is indispensable for any civilized development. In fact, conflicts as such do not alienate human beings from each other. On the contrary, it is human beings – with all their knowledge, experience, wisdom, aspirations and emotions – who are responsible for choosing the manner of coping with competitive interests in their mutual relations. Social conflicts may not necessarily escalate into violence, but neither can they always be 'resolved'. That is why they should not be simplistically looked upon as linear phenomena. They definitely should be comprehended in their interdependent dimensions and dynamic nature.

The inter-linkages of causes, intervening variables and consequences of conflict dynamics are still widely under-researched. In complex conflict scenarios it can be hard to distinguish between causes and consequences, and the borders between both become fuzzy, if not blurred. Goal-seeking, linear approaches will most likely fail in such scenarios, since they tend to aim more at stabilising particular segments where a crumbling mosaic is actually what is at stake. For example, seeking to crush the Taliban militarily, as was done in Afghanistan after 9/11, can be considered a perfect example of how non-systemic thinking has brought about a short-sighted military victory and a political defeat at the same time. Assessed systemically, the intervention intended to create stability has installed a new government but has simultaneously contributed to destabilising the country and even the whole region. As this example makes clear: complex and interdependent settings of conflict are where systemic thinking must inevitably come into play.

The actual matter of transforming (violent) conflict into constructive interaction is about people internalising the chances for socialising alternative non-violent patterns of beliefs, behaviour and relations. It goes without saying that the more actors are actively involved in, or are affected by, a conflict, the more complex and diverse their interests and potential interventions will be. The risk of hyper-complexity is obvious and cannot be ignored. But reduction of complexity is not always the best solution. If there is anything to be learnt from the over-simplistic use of force in the form of military interventions seen in the recent past, it is that simplicity is often a 'red herring'. This said, it is also clear that systemic approaches will only be accepted if the process of gradual transformation is able to attract all of the actors involved or affected.

Active participation means paying respect to the diversity of actors' stakes. 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 methodo-

logy, the agenda of research is being influenced and shaped increasingly by those who are immediately affected by its results. The growing interest in action research and in reflection on peace practices, to mention just two positive trends, have already 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 and practitioners to create reflective feedback loops.

The Berghof Foundation is deeply committed to the idea of collective learning about the systemic ‘ingredients’ of conflict transformation. Quite literally, founded as a cross-disciplinary institution, the foundation itself is systemically positioned. It has not only spent the last four decades building bridges between social and natural sciences, but has also fostered collaboration between researchers from different disciplines, practitioners and education communities. This is also what its two sister organisations, Berghof Conflict Research (BCR) and Berghof Peace Support (BPS) stand for. The book you are holding is a strong reflection of this tradition. Being a collaborative endeavour of BPS and BCR this book marks both a milestone and a kick-off for further efforts.

My BPS-colleagues Daniela Körppen and Norbert Ropers deserve the credit for having invited distinguished authors from different strands of research and practice and for patiently managing the project in spite of various counteracting feedback loops that arose during its course. The printed result of this work reflects the difference in perspectives but also the remarkable progress achieved during the last decade. Taking stock of the different current strands of discourse, this book should spark intellectual spirit and invite further debate.

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