

# Connecting the Dots: Evaluating Whether and How Programmes Address Conflict Systems

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## Introduction

Since 1999, the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP)<sup>1</sup> has been dedicated to improving the effectiveness of peace practice. We have been exploring not just whether a project, programme or initiative has achieved its stated goals, but whether those achievements have made a meaningful contribution to the transformation of the broader conflict, or ‘peace writ large’.

RPP’s engagement with systems thinking approaches is prompted by the very question it set out to answer: how do programmes fit into the larger picture, and how can we use our limited resources (human, financial, etc.) to generate the biggest possible impacts on conflicts? In this context, RPP has been experimenting with the application of systems thinking to peacebuilding practice, developing practical tools for practitioners working in conflict zones that enable them to exploit the insights of systems thinking, while avoiding the more arcane and complex elaborations of the field. One of our main efforts with regard to systems thinking has focused on developing relatively simple, practitioner-friendly ways to develop systems ‘maps’ of conflicts and then to use those maps as the basis for the development of intervention strategies (Woodrow 2006). We have also observed that other RPP tools and concepts initially presented in the 2003 findings of RPP, published in *Confronting War* (Anderson/Olson 2003), and further elaborated in the course of utilization of the RPP findings with agencies in the field, support implementation of a systems perspective on programme planning and review (ibid.).

These systems approaches to conflict analysis have also shaped RPP’s approach to the evaluation of peacebuilding impacts<sup>2</sup> – the effects on ‘peace writ large’ – at both the programme and strategic levels. Practitioners, researchers and policy makers have increasingly recognized the difficulty of evaluating the impacts of peacebuilding programmes within the traditional cause-effect paradigm. Impacts are often visible only long after a programme is completed and are difficult to attribute to a particular programme because they occur far along the ‘results chain’, and thus are difficult to separate from other influences. Linear causal chains from a community programme to im-

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1 The Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP) is part of CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. CDA is a non-profit organization, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts (USA).

2 CDA defines impacts as “the results or effects of any peacebuilding intervention that lie beyond its immediate programme activities or sphere and constitute broader changes in the conflict” (Anderson et al. 2007, 23).

pact at the societal level – ‘peace writ large’ – are also difficult, if not impossible, to trace. Some, consequently, have advocated stopping at evaluation of outcomes that can at least be logically linked to the programme, even if a full causal relationship cannot be established (Smith 2004).<sup>3</sup> Systems thinking concepts, methods and tools provide a useful alternative to abandonment of the idea of evaluating impacts. They can be useful in assessing impacts, despite the absence of direct causal relationships to (and direct attribution of) impacts, and despite the difficulty in isolating the effects of programmes from the various actors with which they interact or from the other factors which influence the transformation of a conflict. This chapter will explore how this systems perspective regarding conflicts has been applied specifically to the evaluation of peacebuilding work, which has been a key area of RPP inquiry since 2003.

In the following sections, we explore three tools and concepts that RPP has used to integrate systems thinking into programme design and evaluation: a systems-based approach to conflict analysis, the elaboration and testing of theories of change, and the application of the RPP matrix (essentially a tool for exploring programme strategies).

## 1. Why Systems Thinking?

RPP did not set out to apply or test systems thinking. Rather, the findings from RPP’s first phase (1999-2003), summarized in *Confronting War*, drove us to look to systems thinking for ways to deal with the challenges the findings posed for effective peace practice. First, as noted in *Confronting War*, “All of the good peace work being done should be adding up to more than it is. The potential of these multiple efforts is not fully realized” (Anderson/Olson 2003, 10). In other words, individual programs – and even all the efforts put together – are not adding up to peace. Second, RPP found that peacebuilding programmes often ‘miss the mark’. That is, they do not address things that really make a difference in the conflict. This stems largely from gaps and shortcomings in the way practitioners and policy makers conduct conflict analyses and in whether and how they integrate their analyses into programme planning (Woodrow 2006). Third, despite the fundamental and widely accepted finding of the Do No Harm Project (a predecessor project to RPP) that all forms of assistance and those who provide it are part of the conflict context and system, programmes continue to be conducted as if they are somehow ‘outside’ of the system they engage. Planning and analysis processes fail to incorporate the intervention itself as part of the system. These early findings of the Do No Harm and Reflecting on Peace Practice projects were not systemic in themselves; however, they did suggest that existing tools and frameworks – including the results-based frameworks used or required by most donors – did not help agencies plan and monitor programmes with systemic effects.

At the same time, RPP found consistent resistance to the notion of accountability for impacts on ‘peace writ large’, for a number of reasons: practitioners often feel that evaluating impact demands too much from projects in expecting effects beyond the immediate target population, as they often operate in small communities or with lim-

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3 See also Earl et al. 2001 (advocating evaluation of outcomes rather than impact).

ited constituencies. Accountability for ‘peace writ little’ – for effects in the community or with beneficiaries of the project – would be more reasonable, it is argued. Practitioners further note the real challenges of evaluating impacts of their programmes on ‘peace writ large’, particularly in relation to attribution and timing of impacts. Attribution of impacts is difficult, people feel, because ‘peace writ large’ is far from the immediate programme sphere and subject to numerous influences apart from the specific programme being evaluated. Evaluations can be misleading as well, finding no impact when in fact impacts often occur long after a programme ends and evaluations have been conducted (or, conversely, finding impacts that subsequently are not sustained or are reversed).

Part of the problem is that most of the widely used frameworks and tools for programme planning, management and evaluation are not appropriate for complex change processes such as peacebuilding – including the frameworks used or required by most donors. The Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) interviewed a number of practitioners and evaluators in developing an approach to OECD DAC guidance for evaluating peacebuilding and conflict prevention (see below). Many of them emphasized the disconnect between the real dynamics of peace programming and the widely used logic-based frameworks and tools for planning and evaluation – such as the ‘logical framework’ or ‘results chain’. Sarah Earl and her co-developers at the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Outcome Mapping capture the critiques of these planning and evaluation frameworks well:

“Linear, ‘cause and effect’ thinking contradicts the understanding of development as a complex process that occurs in open systems. Pressure to demonstrate, measure, and be accountable for impact has led donors to conceptualize, implement and evaluate programs using tools and methods which seek a linear cause and effect relationship between a problem and the identified ‘solution’ to that problem. However, experience tells us that development is a complex process that takes place in circumstances where a program cannot be isolated from the various actors with which it will interact (for example, other donors, partner organizations, government departments, communities, organizations, and groups within the community). Nor can it be insulated from the factors by which it will be influenced (these include social, political, cultural, economic, historical, and environmental factors). While it is necessary to simplify to some extent in order to plan and implement programs, methodologically one needs to acknowledge the contextual reality of which programs are a part” (Earl et al. 2001, 7).

The difficulties in identifying and attributing macro-impact have led IDRC and other practitioners and researchers to conclude that evaluations should recognize that “impact assessment at the project level is not proving to be viable and [...] shift it to the strategic level” (Smith 2004, 14).<sup>4</sup> In other words, they feel that project evaluations should be limited to immediate outcomes (Spurk 2008). We do not agree that this means that peacebuilding cannot be evaluated or that the impacts of peacebuilding cannot be known for many years.

We have found that systems thinking can be used to integrate an understanding of complex change into a number of critical areas of evaluation of peacebuilding impacts of programmes.

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4 See also Earl et al. (2001, 6) noting that “[t]racing the connections is at best unreliable and at worst impossible.”

## 2. What Does Systems Thinking Add to the Evaluation Process?

For RPP, systems thinking provides language and tools for expressing what many practitioners already know: that the ‘parts’ of the conflict system – including issues, actors, attitudes, behaviours, institutions etc. – interact with each other to form a complex dynamic that is not linear or at least not as linear as suggested by the predominant frameworks and tools for programme management, such as the ‘logframe’. Cause and effect are not unidirectional, but rather characterized by reinforcing and balancing feedback loops and time delays, and no system part can be fully understood divorced from its interaction with other parts of the system. Glenda Eoyang, a human systems dynamics practitioner, summarizes the implications of these realities for evaluators:

“These temporal and dynamical characteristics challenge many of the assumptions of the traditional evaluator. [...] An evaluator may be able to assign an arbitrary beginning and end date of an intervention, but the system itself recognizes no such boundaries in time. For this reason, the whole concept of projected and predictable outcomes is an artificial construct when evaluating performance in a CAS [complex adaptive system]” (Eoyang & Berkas 1999, 316).

RPP has found that systems thinking can help address these temporal and dynamic challenges in planning for and evaluating the impacts of programmes on ‘peace writ large’:

*Identifying the strategic question.* Systems thinking prompts us to ask a different strategic question about achievement of impact. Rather than asking whether a different ‘end state’ at the macro-level has been created (and can be attributed to our programme), it asks whether and how change (facilitated by our programme) in one part of the system or interaction influences (or fails to influence) other parts of the system (Foster-Fishman et al. 2007). This focuses the question of accountability for impact not on the achievement of a planned end state – which in a complex system is difficult, if not impossible, to predict or control – but rather on whether and how programmes have leveraged change in the system, and therefore are likely to affect how the system behaves – hopefully in positive ways.

*Analysing the conflict and focusing programming.* Conflict analysis using systems approaches and tools helps identify key driving factors of conflict and assess whether programmes are addressing things that will make a difference to the conflict. RPP has found that most conflict analysis methods and tools help identify the multitude of factors that cause and influence conflict, but not the *driving forces* of the conflict and peace system or the *dynamics among factors*. As a consequence, many programmes are not relevant to the conflict dynamics. Systems thinking forces one to identify the driving forces – the most important (underlying) factors driving the evolution of the system – and to analyse the various causal connections and interactions amongst them. Where most analyses stop at identifying ‘detail complexity’, systems thinking goes further to identify ‘dynamic complexity’, the non-linear feedbacks between cause and effect and the sometimes unknown and unpredictable effects of interventions (Senge 1990). Traditional approaches to analysis consider fairly linear cause-effect relationships, whereas a systems model identifies interactions in multiple directions, and looks for causal loops in which all factors are associated. This kind of analysis permits a wider understanding of multiple causes, rather than a single ‘root’ cause, as well as more complex chains of attribution that can take account of multiple

factors and programmes affecting the evolution of a conflict. One example of a systemic conflict mapping is presented in the appendix of this chapter.

*Understanding interconnections and interactions among factors and actors.* While most conflict analyses identify both factors or causes of conflict as well as peace actors, they rarely link them. Structural causes and the behaviour of actors are analysed separately; attitudes, behaviours and structures are analysed as conflict factors, but the dynamic nature of their interaction is not (Galtung 1989). Systems thinking recognizes that problems that show up at the system level often are solved at the level of the behaviour of key actors. In linking the factors of conflict with the key actors in peace and conflict, systems thinking helps understand how the two interact.

*Understanding the consequences of our own actions – intended or unintended – on the broader conflict dynamic at many levels.* With its attention to feedback dynamics, time delays and the interaction between behavioural, attitudinal and structural elements of conflict, systems thinking provides useful frameworks and tools for tracing the consequences of our own actions on conflict. RPP has found that an evaluator can test the theories of change, the programme's assumptions and logic about how it will contribute to the larger peace. In fact, in the OECD/DAC process, RPP recommended an examination of theories of change as an important element of evaluation of peacebuilding and conflict prevention.<sup>5</sup> We also recommended that evaluations identify and explain *unintended* positive and negative impacts on conflict – and have found that a systems mapping of a conflict enables such an exploration of potential or actual unintended consequences from different programming options. In a context in which, as RPP found already by 2003, “[a]ll of the good peace work being done should be adding up to more than it is” (Anderson/Olson 2003, 10), systems thinking helps us understand why it is sometimes difficult to induce positive change and why efforts do not always create the effects they intend.

### 3. RPP Experience: Applying Systems Thinking to Evaluation of Peacebuilding Programmes

For several years, RPP has been integrating systemic thinking into its programme design and has worked with local and international peace practitioners in Rwanda, Eastern DRC, Kenya, Liberia, Senegal (Casamance), Kosovo, the Middle East and Sri Lanka to develop systems maps and to use them in discussions of strategies for change.

Meanwhile, as already mentioned, in 2006 CDA worked with the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to develop an approach to DAC Guidance on evaluating peacebuilding and conflict prevention. While CDA's work with the DAC and the DAC's interim Guidance did not reference systems thinking directly, systems thinking is particularly relevant for its implementation. The DAC Guidance calls for

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5 In the spring of 2006, OECD/DAC commissioned RPP to research and write an ‘approach paper’ on how to evaluate peacebuilding and conflict prevention programming – as a joint initiative of the DAC's Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation Network and the Evaluation Network. For the full approach paper see OECD/DAC (2007). The approach proposed by CDA in this paper has been incorporated, in large measure but with some variance, into the official DAC Guidance.

performing a conflict analysis in the context of evaluating field programmes, as the basis for assessing the relevance and appropriateness of an initiative (OECD/DAC 2007, 20). It also recommends identifying and assessing the theory of change of the intervention and its linkages to other societal factors and interventions to determine whether there are effects on ‘peace writ large’ that may not be immediately visible or attributable (OECD/DAC 2007, 35). RPP itself has used systems thinking frameworks as it has tested the DAC Guidance in conducting evaluations of programmes in Liberia, Sri Lanka and Guinea-Bissau and in a more general study of peacebuilding programming in Kosovo, which had many of the characteristics of a multi-donor evaluation.

#### 4. A Systems Approach to Conflict Analysis

As already noted, one of our main recommendations to the OECD DAC was that evaluators must either perform their own analysis of the conflict context or obtain a reliable analysis done by the programme team itself or others in the field (Anderson et al. 2007, 25). We considered such a conflict analysis to be a crucial prerequisite for addressing the DAC evaluation criteria of Relevance (addressing the key drivers of conflict), Effectiveness (progress against goals) and Impact (results with respect to the larger conflict). A conflict analysis is also helpful – though not as central – for assessing Sustainability and Efficiency, the other two major DAC criteria.<sup>6</sup> In our view, it would be difficult to discuss Relevance without understanding the conflict dynamics; otherwise one would be left asking “relevant to what?”

Similarly, if we are concerned with whether and how a programme has had an Impact on ‘peace writ large’, it is necessary to know what the conflict is about. While it is possible to examine a programme against its stated goals to explore Effectiveness, a conflict analysis is important for determining whether the goals themselves are the most appropriate in the situation. We call this the ‘so what?’ question: even if a programme achieves its goals brilliantly, will the programme contribute to ‘peace writ large’? What is the impact on peace?

##### 4.1 Determining Relevance: Did Peace Programmes Make a Difference in Kosovo?

In 2006, for example, CDA was asked to assess whether a range of peace programmes had contributed to the absence of violence in some communities during the riots that had engulfed Kosovo during March 2004 (Chigas et al 2007). The team analysed the patterns of violence and absence of violence, as well as the reasons for the absence of violence over the three years leading up to March 2004, both Kosovo-wide and more deeply in seven communities that were the focus of case studies. To do this, the research team used international agency and police data on violence, focus groups with

6 In addition to these five criteria, the interim Guidance has identified Linkages, Coherence, Coverage and Consistency with Peacebuilding Values as additional criteria to be tested during the current “application period” (Anderson et al. 2007, 39-45).

practitioners and interviews in the communities themselves. The analysis identified several *key driving factors of violence*: a) uncertainty and ongoing positioning regarding the status of Kosovo (whether it would become independent or remain part of Serbia), b) resentment about allocations of resources and aid, c) feelings of injustice related to past and present relations (such as missing persons, war crimes, lack of prosecution of perpetrators of violence, among others) and d) youth desperation.<sup>7</sup>

The study then examined the peacebuilding programming. It became apparent that the programmes had focused greatly on returns of refugees and internally displaced people (initially Kosovo Albanians who had been forced out before the NATO bombing and later Kosovo Serbs who were forced out during the violence after 1999), on democracy-building in Kosovo and on bridging relations between ethnicities in multi-ethnic areas. These efforts had not addressed the key dynamics and drivers of conflict and violence. Returnees were not central actors with respect to violence, although they were important victims of the conflict. Democratization efforts avoided one of the central questions of the conflict – the status of Kosovo. Kosovo Serbs (as well as the Serbian government) perceived these programmes as a back door strategy towards independence and reacted negatively by refusing to participate in the reformed structures.

The programmes implemented were good programmes, in that they helped improve the lives of the beneficiaries and promoted better governance in Kosovo, but they missed the mark in terms of their relevance to the factors and actors that mattered most to the conflict. Indeed, the channelling of aid to returnees and communities with Serb returns, it turned out, prompted further resentment, as did Serb resistance to participation in Kosovo institutions – thus increasing inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic divisions rather than improving relations between groups.

#### 4.2 Understanding the Nature and Depth of Impacts in Guinea-Bissau: Getting at Deeper Causes of Conflict

By mapping the dynamics among different conflict factors and by integrating the intervention or intervening organization into the analysis itself, systems analysis has also helped to identify more precisely the nature and level of impacts on ‘peace writ large’, both positive and negative, intended and unintended. In Guinea-Bissau, for example, RPP was asked to evaluate an experimental conflict prevention programme, the International Peace and Prosperity Project (Woodrow/Murphy 2008)<sup>8</sup>, which is attempting to avert the outbreak of another round of violence in that country similar to the destructive civil war of 1998-99. The project started in 2004, during a period when it appeared that the situation could deteriorate rapidly. The overall strategy of the programme was to identify individuals and groups in Guinea-Bissau who could, with

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7 The factors also emerged from community interviews during the study and from consultations involving local and international NGOs, donors and the UN Mission in Kosovo. The factors identified in these interviews paralleled a systems-based analysis conducted (and regularly updated) by a group of international and local NGOs, OSCE and UNHCR staff in a reflective process about peacebuilding strategies in Kosovo facilitated by RPP over several years beginning in 2004.

8 The Guinea-Bissau effort is operated by the BEFORE Project, a joint programme from swisspeace and the Alliance for Peacebuilding.

small amounts of technical and financial support, undertake actions to reduce the likelihood of violence and build the basis for sustainable peace.

The evaluation was performed in the spring of 2008 – that is, before the renewed round of political violence and assassinations in early 2009. As a first step in assessing programme relevance, the team began by analysing the conflict. The team asked each interviewee about their view of the causes of conflict in the country. From the information gathered in this way, the team pieced together a systems view of the conflict dynamics. Before leaving Guinea-Bissau, they were able to test the analysis with several local people to make sure that their understanding was valid. The resulting conflict ‘map’ is presented in the appendix.

Drawing on this analysis, the evaluation determined that, in general, the project initiatives were quite relevant to the conflict, particularly the short-term needs for de-escalation of tensions in relation to a series of near-crisis situations. However, the systems analysis of the conflict also revealed that, while the interventions were effective in addressing the short-term symptoms of the problem, the project’s longer-term strategy for addressing some of the deeper structural issues in the situation was less clear.

One element of the systems analysis of conflict in Guinea-Bissau centred on a critical political dynamic illustrated by Figure 1. This is a common pattern in post-colonial Africa: a patron-client system that grows out of the necessity for survival and mutual assistance in rural areas.

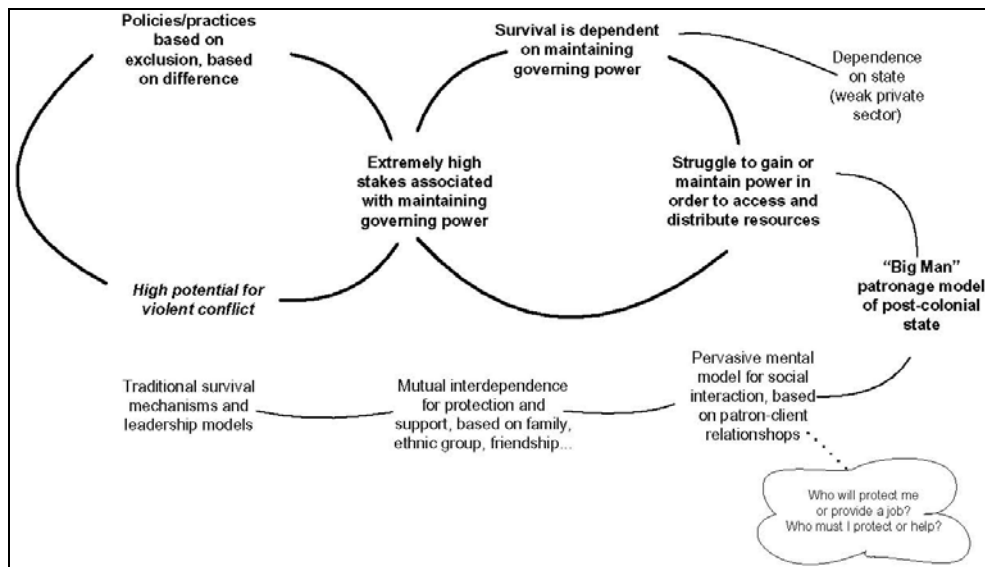


Figure 1: Big Man Patronage System & the Struggle for Power

The problem emerges when this traditional system of social interaction is carried into modern political life, resulting in forms of what the West considers corruption and dangerous struggles for control of political power and patronage. The systems analysis made clear that this core dynamic lies at the heart of the political struggle in Guinea-Bissau, and that until this syndrome is changed, there will likely be a series of dangerous struggles for

power among the elite political class – spilling over into overt violence on occasion (as it subsequently did in 2009 with two high-profile assassinations). In this situation, IPPP was doing a good job assisting local political leaders to forestall a range of potentially dangerous circumstances. For instance, the IPPP provided crucial support to a group promoting violence-free elections, initiated discussions of security sector reform, supported a series of dialogue processes with key stakeholders groups and promoted a national reconciliation process. However, no one in the situation was addressing the central ‘big man’ dynamic described above – which would, admittedly, be a difficult and long-term task.

#### 4.3 Analysing Frustrated Efforts in Sri Lanka: Addressing Linkages between Causes

CDA was asked to participate in an evaluation of the Berghof Foundation’s work in Sri Lanka. There, a systems analysis of the conflict provided critical insights into why Berghof’s peace efforts (and those of many others) were not having the desired effects. The problem lay in a key dynamic among the major Sinhalese parties that have alternated in holding power in the South of the country. In the post-colonial period, the Sinhala majority pursued efforts to reassert their identity and dominance on the island – to the exclusion of minority groups, such as the Tamils. This also has produced a continuous struggle for power and access to resources and patronage systems amongst the two main rival Sinhalese political parties, as shown in Figure 2 (Woodrow et al. 2008).

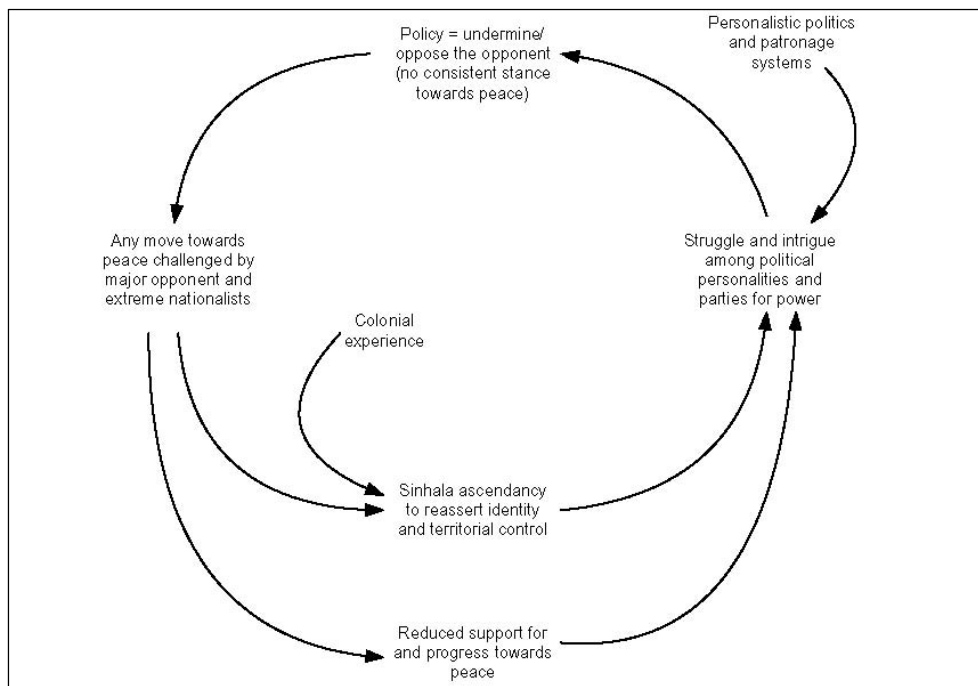
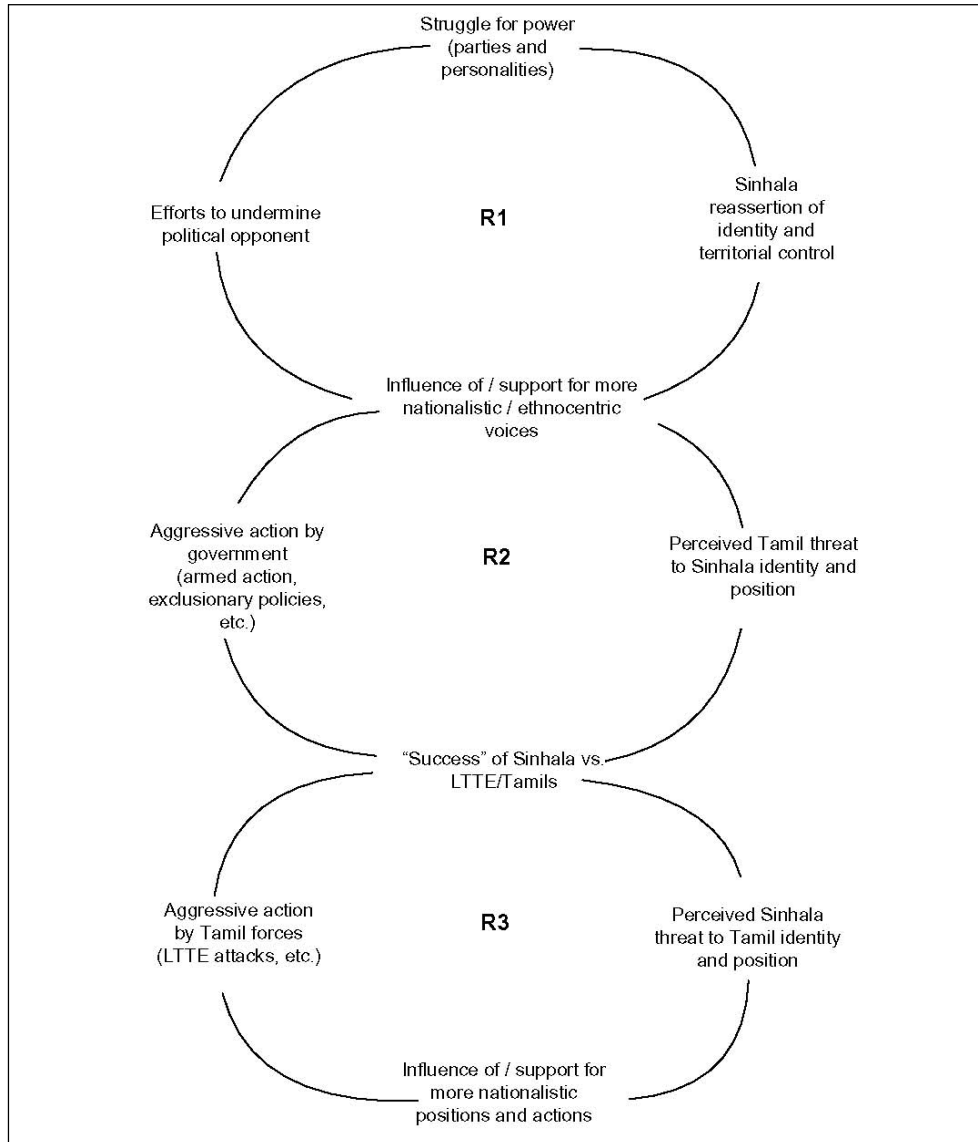


Figure 2: The Southern Political Dynamic in Sri Lanka



*Figure 3: Escalation and Intractability Due to Ethnic Outbidding*

The primary objective of both major parties has been to undermine the other, and any move towards peaceful settlement with the Tamil minority has consistently been attacked by the party in opposition – regardless of which party that is. The effect of this intra-ethnic power struggle on the conflict dynamic is illustrated in Figure 3.<sup>9</sup> One aspect of the conflict dynamic that contributed to its intractability was the tendency of each party's strategy to strengthen the most nationalist voices on the other side (rein-

<sup>9</sup> The systemic analysis presented here draws on insights about ethnic outbidding in Sri Lanka in Ropers (2008).

forcing cycles R2 and R3 in the diagram). This created a self-perpetuating escalatory dynamic as each party sought to gain or maintain success (in terms of its identity or territory) vis-à-vis the other. The success of the ‘other’ was seen on each side as a threat to its own identity and success, reducing support for the peace process and strengthening voices for more confrontational or aggressive action.

Most peacebuilding programmes, including Berghof’s, focused on encouraging bilateral talks between the Sinhala party in power and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This strategy, however, was not sufficient to address the core political dynamic within the Sinhala polity. Peacebuilding efforts have assumed that the two sides are prepared to talk, but even if the Sinhalese party in power is willing, peace efforts will face severe challenges until this core dynamic is addressed. In Sri Lanka, nationalistic voices were strengthened by internal political struggles (R1 in Figure 3 and also described in Figure 2), making it difficult for initiatives to succeed in breaking the escalation dynamic between the Sinhalese and Tamil parties (through bilateral dialogue, exploration of non-zero-sum options, confidence-building, etc.).

## 5. Systems Thinking as an Approach to Testing a Theory of Change

A second recommendation CDA made to the OECD DAC, again adopted in large measure in the interim Guidance, was to identify and assess the theory of change of an intervention (Anderson et al. 2007, 54; OECD/DAC 2007, 35). A theory of change describes a programme’s assumptions about how the initiative will contribute to the larger peace. While not necessarily systemic, theories of change are also closely associated with a systems perspective because the theories can be seen as essentially about how to induce change in a system. Effective peacebuilding to change conflict systems requires an understanding about how the conflict system works (through systemic conflict analysis) as well as a grasp of how to promote and track the systemic effects of programme interventions. These are considered theories because they contain unproven assumptions and must be tested in practice. The systems approach provides tools both for projecting possible effects of programmes based on certain assumptions and for tracking whether theories of change are proving true or false.

We find two types of theories of change. The first type concerns whether and how the various programme activities add up to achievement of a programme’s stated goals. Some call this a “programme theory” or “implementation theory” (OECD/DAC 2007, 35). Essentially, this is an exploration of the programme logic and includes examination of the assumptions about how change will happen at each programme step – the connection between programme inputs, outputs and outcomes or goals.

The second type of theory addresses whether and how achievement of the goal itself will contribute to the broader peace or the assumed causal relationship between the programme’s goals and its impacts on the broader peace. As the OECD Guidance notes, “[w]ell-founded theories of change are at the heart of effective work in all fields” (OECD/DAC 2007, 35). Assessing the appropriateness and robustness of the theory of change of a programme helps to test the assumptions about how a programme

strategy will affect ‘peace writ large’ – a crucial element of evaluation. Systems thinking permits a rigorous analysis of theories of change and can provide valuable insights into whether programmes are effective.

For example, CDA evaluated a programme that established Community Peace Councils (CPCs), a local-level mechanism for resolving disputes, in about seventy-five towns in Lofa County, Liberia. Through interviews with staff we identified several Theories of Change about how the CPCs would contribute to peace in that country. One of the more important theories was:

A community-based mechanism will resolve incidents that have a potential for escalating into serious violence. The project asserted that the overall level of violence in the country (and by extension the threat of a return to the violence of the civil war) would be reduced if disputes were settled peacefully at the community level. The evaluation team assessed whether this theory of change was valid in the context, beginning first by performing a conflict analysis. To do this, the team conducted a one-day workshop among people from five rural towns that had been participating in the CPC programme, asking them to identify the main drivers of conflict in the area. Throughout the evaluation process, the team also asked each individual interviewee about the nature of conflict in Lofa County in order to ensure that the analysis reflected the perspectives of all the different groups in the area.

The team then identified what kinds of conflicts the CPCs were handling to determine whether they were having the effects envisioned in the theory of change. If the conflicts handled by the CPCs had the potential for escalating into widespread violence, the CPCs would be stopping a key driving factor of the conflict – even if at the community level. Although the CPCs were successfully resolving a number of disputes, the evaluation found that they were not dealing with the most serious disputes, which concerned land. Therefore, they were having little effect on community security. Early in the programme process, some CPCs had addressed land issues in some communities before town chiefs and other elders had returned from IDP or refugee camps. However, as the leaders returned, they reasserted authority for land disputes and relegated the CPCs to domestic and interpersonal issues. As in the Guinea-Bissau evaluation, systems analysis allowed the team to identify with much greater precision and nuance what impacts the programme had on the key dynamics of the conflict, and, more importantly perhaps, why it may or may not have achieved its intended results.

## 5.1 Accounting for the Forces for Resistance to Change

An important aspect of assessing the theory of change is examining whether a programme has taken account of the forces in the system that may work against the change it is trying to promote. Often, these forces are placed in the ‘assumptions’ or ‘risks’ section of a ‘logframe’ as factors that can impede the achievement of the programme goals and are beyond the control of the programme. A systemic approach to evaluation accepts that these factors that resist change are not controllable – at least not directly. But it views them as part of the dynamic of the system that could prevent positive initiatives from taking effect. That is, they act as forces, much like a thermostat, that return the conflict state to its ongoing state of tension.

By applying systems thinking, evaluations can examine whether a programme is successful at interrupting or neutralizing these destructive dynamics. Thus, the Kosovo study described above found that participatory decision making and promotion of inter-ethnic cooperation on practical issues of common concern (e.g. business development, HIV/AIDS, women's rights, infrastructure and livelihoods) did not lead to significantly greater interaction or improvement of trust. The dynamic is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

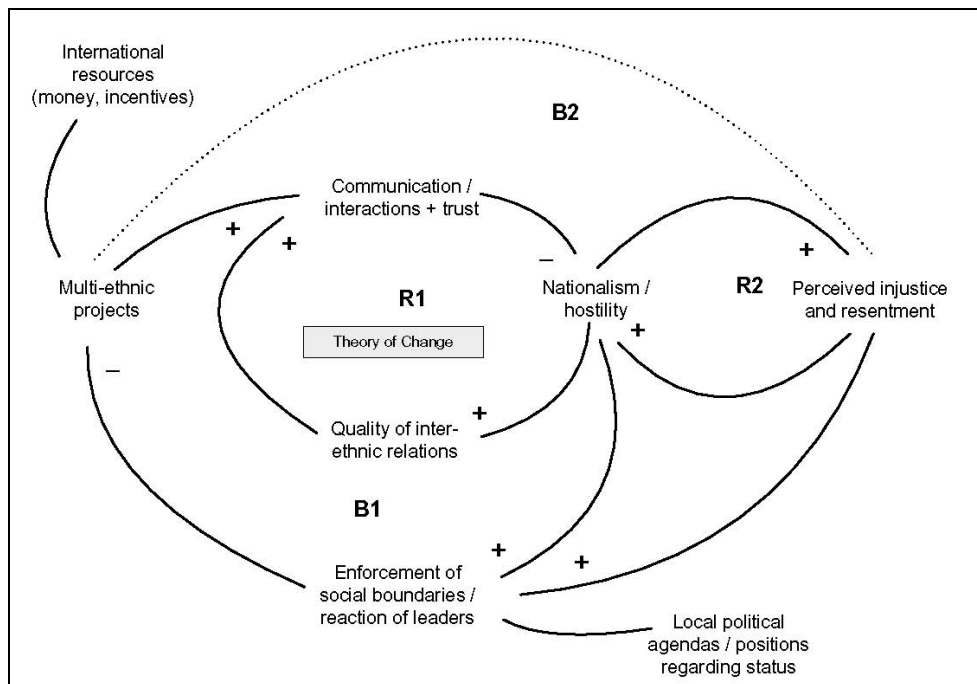


Figure 4: Limits to Effectiveness of Multi-ethnic Programming in Kosovo

Having identified lack of communication and the isolation of Kosovo Serbs and Albanians as significant factors contributing to nationalism on both sides and ongoing inter-ethnic hostility, donors and practitioners promoted multi-ethnic projects and participatory decision making as a means to address this conflict cause. The hope (theory of change, depicted by the reinforcing loop R1 in Figure 4) was that the opportunity to communicate and work together across conflict lines would decrease isolation, leading to a decrease in stereotypes and fears, resulting in increased trust. The increased trust would erode the influence of nationalistic ideas and increase willingness to live together. In theory, the attractiveness of nationalism would further be reduced by the material benefits (money, infrastructure, etc.) these multi-ethnic projects would provide.

The policy and the resulting programmes, however, failed to recognize and address elements of the system that were critical to the maintenance of nationalism and hostility. First, in both Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb communities, intra-community pressure or 'rules of the game' restricted the boundaries of permissible interaction to generally non-visible business interactions. The greater the volume of multi-ethnic projects and in-

teractions, the greater the enforcement of these boundaries. This operated as a balancing loop (B1 in Figure 4) in the system, which ultimately limited the number and scope of multi-ethnic contacts that were possible and, consequently, undermined the potential of this policy to decrease isolation and increase communication and trust significantly.

Second, the policy and programmes failed to take into account another significant factor that affected the level of nationalism and hostility in both communities: the perceived sense of injustice and resentment about the past and present. Even when inter-ethnic dialogue and communication did occur in these multi-ethnic projects, it did not address core issues related to these perceived injustices. Thus the projects were not able to reduce the influence of perceived injustice. (This dynamic is shown as reinforcing loop R2 in Figure 4.) Third, by focusing on multi-ethnic projects and multi-ethnic communities, the programmes ignored a key constituency – the more ‘hard line’ populations that lived largely in mono-ethnic areas, but who were leaders in resisting multi-ethnic projects and in enforcing the ‘rules of the game’ in line with local political agendas and broader positions regarding the ultimate status of Kosovo.

Finally, the multi-ethnic projects became a ‘fix that failed’. While the projects were intended as incentives for cooperation, they were perceived as ‘conditionalities’ in both communities and widely resented. Communities developed ways to circumvent the spirit of multi-ethnicity either by only going through the motions of multi-ethnicity in projects or by imposing conditions for agreeing to multi-ethnic cooperation. Peacebuilding programming exacerbated these unintended consequences by rewarding the form of project design and not following up on or monitoring substance (that is, determining whether the projects were having the intended effects or not). This created a great degree of cynicism about multi-ethnicity and opportunism rather than increased trust, interdependence and information sharing. This unintended negative balancing loop that further undermined programme effectiveness is shown as B2 in Figure 4.

## 6. The RPP Matrix as a Systems Tool

The RPP Matrix, although not originally conceived as a systems tool, has proven to be a useful framework for systemic analysis of strategies for change. A key insight of systems thinking is that changes in policies, regulations, information flows or dynamics (or any other part of the system) transform the status quo only if they leverage changes in other parts of the system. The RPP Matrix provides a tool for exploring the interactions and dynamics among different actual or potential programme elements. It helps identify linkages and interconnections across key system elements; thereby facilitating assessment of the likelihood of a programme’s contributing to systemic-level change.

The RPP Matrix emerged during the first phase of the RPP project (1999-2003) from an examination of a series of case studies of peacebuilding projects. It has been further refined during the current phase through gathering of evidence from practitioners around the world. The Matrix illuminates specific dimensions of change and characteristics of peace strategies that support impacts on ‘peace writ large’. Specifically, RPP found that programmes that promote only Individual/Personal level change are insufficient. In other words, programmes that achieve changes in participants’ attitudes,

beliefs, perceptions and individual relationships do not have an impact on the broader conflict, unless they link or extend into changes at the Socio-Political level, such as social mobilization, shifts in social norms or public opinion, institutional reforms, new laws or policies or improved group-level relationships.

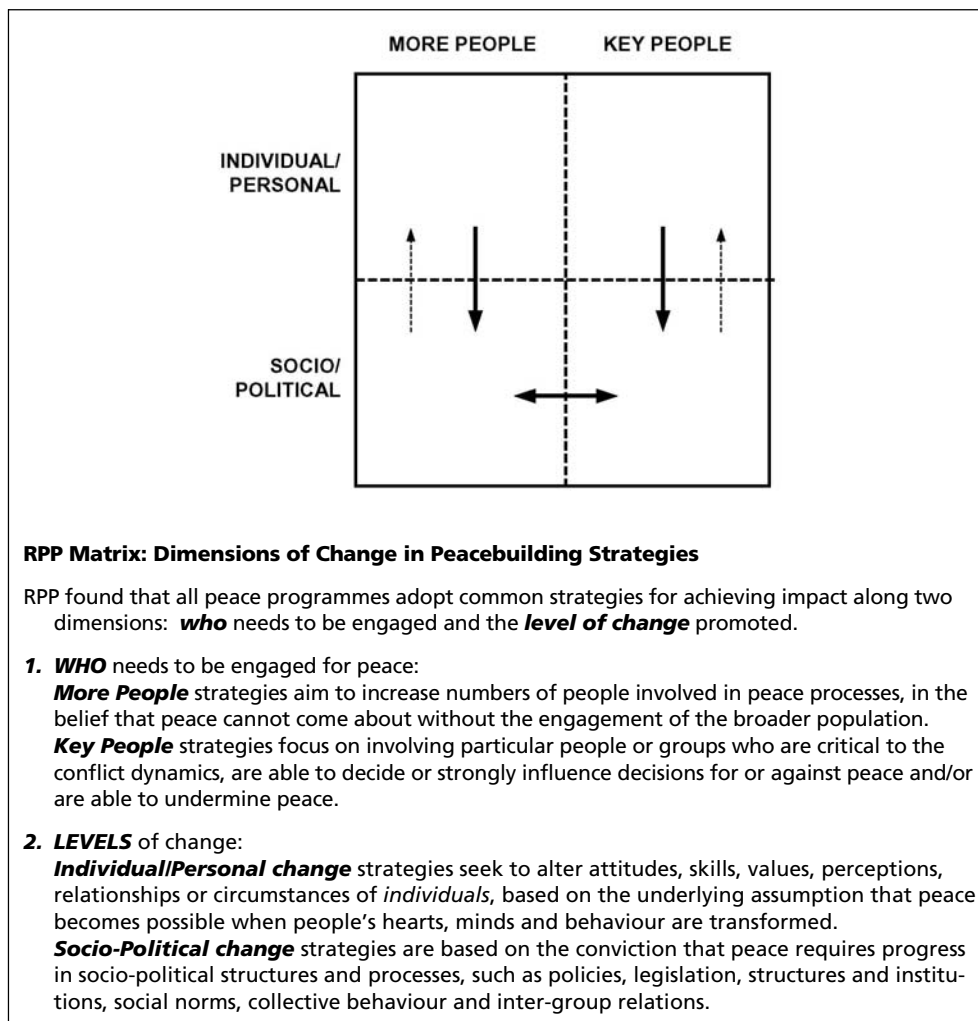


Figure 5: RPP Matrix

Similarly, programmes that focus on engaging More People in the peace process do not add up to effective peace work unless they link strategically to or influence Key People – people or groups who have the power to decide, influence or spoil progress towards peace. The reverse is also true: Key People approaches must link to More People. These findings are illustrated in Figure 5, in which the arrows indicate the needed linkages from the Individual/Personal Level to the Socio-Political Level and from More People to Key People and vice versa.

While primarily a tool for examining programme strategy, the RPP Matrix also enables an evaluation team to explore the cross-level and cross-constituency influences and linkages that the programme promotes – which then permits an examination of systems effects, at least for the dimensions included in the Matrix. For example, an evaluator could ask about the systemic effects of a programme that concentrates on political dialogue among key leaders (a Key People strategy, usually promoting changes at the Individual/Personal Level). Is the programme having desired impacts at the Socio-political Level? Are there other intended or unintended effects of the dialogues – such as community-level discussions or problem-solving processes inspired by talks among leaders? If the programme is blocked from its intended results, is there a systems explanation that might also map onto the Matrix? In this context, we have used the Matrix to discover insights about whether a programme is likely to have impact on ‘peace writ large’ and/or why it is blocked from those effects. The examples presented below illustrate this point.

## 6.1 Exploring Programme Strategy in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the evaluation team looking at the Berghof Foundation’s work (noted above) analysed the programme’s strategy for achieving impact and its theory of change. The analysis was based mainly on the RPP Matrix and drew on a systems understanding of how influence works in Sri Lankan society – particularly in relation to government decision makers. Berghof’s programme, like many peacebuilding programmes around the world, preceded on the assumption (theory of change) that working with influentials or “middle-range leaders” (Lederach 1997, 39), such as academics, think-tanks, professionals and leaders from the corporate/business, religious and civil society worlds, would provide a channel to decision makers and to grassroots support for peace initiatives.

In fact, such groups did exercise influence under some past governments in Sri Lanka, but by 2006 a new government was impervious to pressures or authoritative analyses from these quarters. The assumption that influentials would provide a link between More People and Key People and would help engage key government officials in the peace process turned out to be flawed in the Sri Lankan context of 2006 and after, as suggested in Figure 6.

The ‘BF’ in Figure 6 refers to the Berghof Foundation, which was trying to work through influentials, a typical peacebuilding strategy. In an earlier phase, while official negotiations were underway, Berghof had had direct access to decision makers and also found government leaders open to influence from intellectuals. However, given the ethnic outbidding dynamic in the Sri Lankan conflict system, described earlier, Berghof’s work on federal options with influentials close to the sitting government had incited opposition not only from nationalists but from the opposition political party. When the President, who rejected the parameters of the former peace process, came to power in 2005, Berghof’s access and influence had changed, and they came under increased attacks from ultra-nationalist elements. A strategy that had engaged with (or considered how to affect the influence of) a broader array of Key People – including nationalists and the opposition party – and how to shift the internal Sinhalese political

dynamic, might have had greater success.<sup>10</sup> A combination of the systems understanding of ethnic outbidding dynamics and the RPP Matrix provided important insights regarding the Berghof Foundation programme.

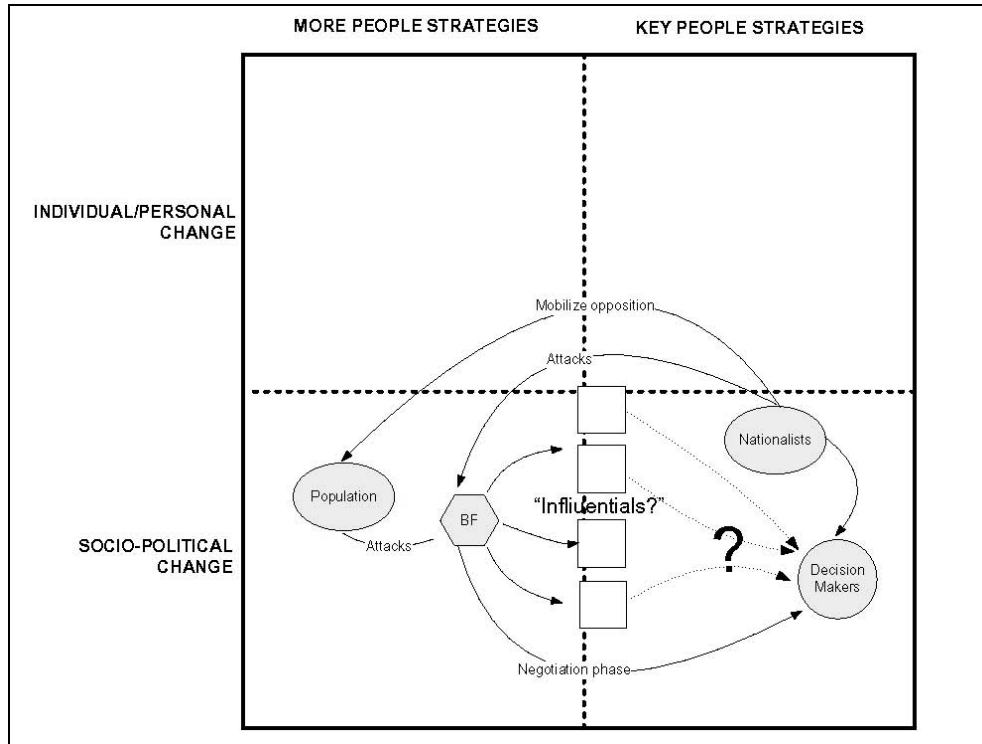


Figure 6: Berghof Strategy with 'Influentials' in Sri Lanka

## 6.2 Examination of Short-term Impacts in Liberia

CDA provided support and technical assistance in Liberia for the evaluation of an urgent six-month programme to promote reconciliation in Nimba County, where post-war tensions have been particularly high. An examination of the programme strategy from a systemic perspective yielded valuable insights regarding the current and potential future impacts of the programme, and the kind of support that would be needed to achieve those impacts. The programme convened dialogue sessions amongst actors representing every sector of society and across conflicting groups. The dialogue groups analysed the conflict and developed policy recommendations to deal with the causes.

10 RPP has found that many programmes fail to identify and engage with or address 'key people' sufficiently. In particular, RPP found that there is a tendency to engage with the 'easy to reach' and to avoid the 'hard to reach', who are important to work with in order to achieve peace (Anderson/Olson 2003, 50).

The evaluation identified a number of positive effects of the programme on direct participants in the programme, including reduced negative attitudes towards people in the competing groups, improved communication, cooperation and social contact between individuals and enhanced individual relationships. These were primarily results amongst More People and some Key People at the Individual/Personal level.

The programme also envisioned several ways in which these initial successes could be translated into changes at the Socio-Political level that would have greater significance for 'peace writ large' in Nimba County. These included a) the adoption and implementation of policy recommendations by the government; b) the transformation of attitudes and development of trust at the group level (beyond immediate participants and involving significant numbers of the two main contending groups); and c) initiatives taken by communities to develop and use formal and informal mechanisms for conflict resolution to deal with significant conflicts that could escalate into violence. The basic program strategy is illustrated in Figure 7.

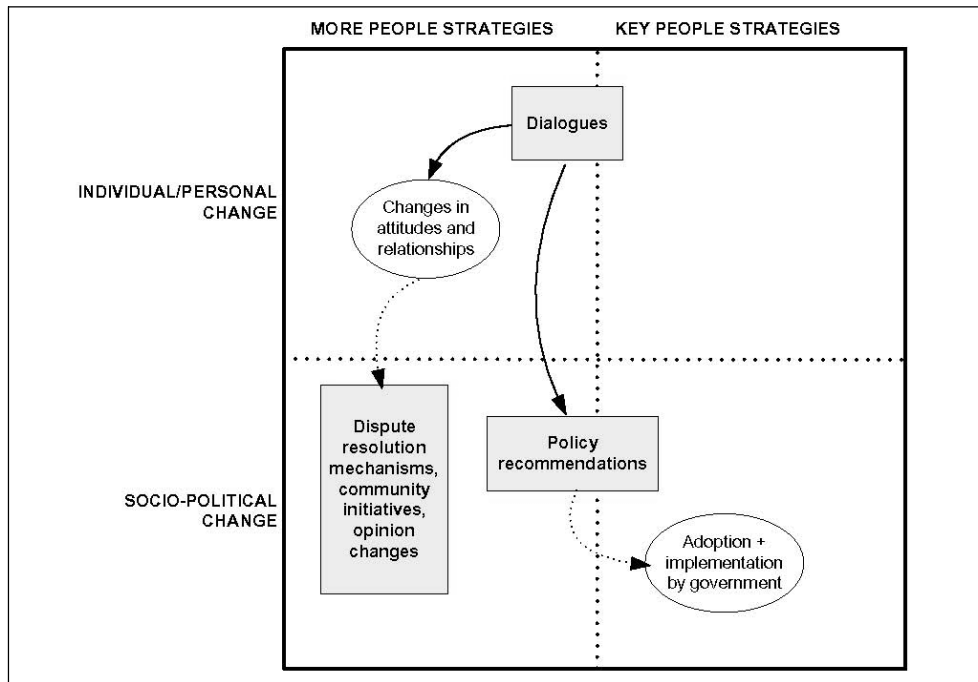


Figure 7: Effects of a Dialogue Strategy

As the Matrix suggests, the dialogues did produce a series of policy recommendations for government consideration, but it was too early to tell whether these activities would produce impacts at the Socio-Political level as the government had not yet acted on them. The other anticipated impact of the dialogues at the Socio-Political level remained a hope (shown as a dotted line on the Matrix moving from the More People – Individual/Personal realm to the More People/Socio-Political). It was not clear whether and to what extent the changed attitudes and relationships achieved in the dialogues

had extended beyond the direct participants to the community at large and the community-owned dispute resolution mechanisms. In addition, new initiatives by the community on peace and conflict resolution anticipated by the programme had not yet materialized. The evaluation (conducted at the end of the six-month pilot phase) concluded that the dialogues had had important effects on the participants' attitudes and relationships but not yet on 'peace writ large'. It also concluded that the programme was on track. The fact that these changes had not yet extended into the Socio-Political realm within the six-month time frame should not be viewed as failure, and there were promising signs that the programme could achieve these impacts with time.

## 7. Potential of a Systems Approach to Evaluation

In our experience, systems thinking can fill gaps in analysis and strategy development that are critical to effectiveness and impact. Systems thinking concepts and tools have also proven invaluable in evaluation processes, to understand the complex nature of the conflicts in which programmes are intervening, as well as the ways in which they affect 'peace writ large'. Classic evaluation methods look at a programme's original stated goals and objectives and examine the extent to which the programme has achieved them. An adaptive management approach to peacebuilding understands conflict as complex and non-linear and assumes that results will often be unpredictable due to emergent and surprising factors.

This approach to peacebuilding requires a different approach to monitoring and evaluation. Systems thinking shows great promise in providing the basis for evaluating programmes that operate in a flexible and adaptive mode under uncertainty as, we believe, most peacebuilding efforts should. More importantly, systems thinking can provide a sophisticated understanding of why programmes may or may not be having their desired or planned effects and generate suggestions regarding what can be done to improve impacts. This is crucial for evaluations focused on helping programme teams and donors learn and improve their practice.

Figure 8 provides a summary picture of how a systems approach to monitoring and evaluation (elements on the outer circle) might change the normal programme cycle (shown with the central thick arrows). First, the nature of preparatory conflict analysis would shift from the current dominant modes that tend to result in long lists of conflict factors, without any prioritization or identification of dynamic links among factors in the system. Second, the goal-setting process would change. As a preliminary step, programme designers would identify and map out intended changes in the conflict system and, significantly, pathways to change. They would then identify points of leverage or intervention that could facilitate those changes and consider potential secondary consequences and unintended effects. Prior to implementation, they would identify ways to collect ongoing data regarding how the system responds to programme activities. While this could be considered similar to the current fashion for identifying indicators, the focus would be on evidence of changes/responses of the system, rather than direct programme participants or proximate programme outcomes.

A systems approach would require more attention to ongoing shifts in conflict dynamics and constant adaptation of programme activities, while holding firm on overall goals. While classic monitoring is intended to provide ongoing feedback to programme implementers as a management tool, in practice monitoring is performed to meet donor requirements, and few programmes adapt their strategies or tactics based on monitoring information. A systems approach would not wait for mid-term or formative evaluations to undertake important programme changes. (Note: This may well require changes in donor management practices, as this approach does not fit the ‘results chain’ or ‘log-frame’ models.)

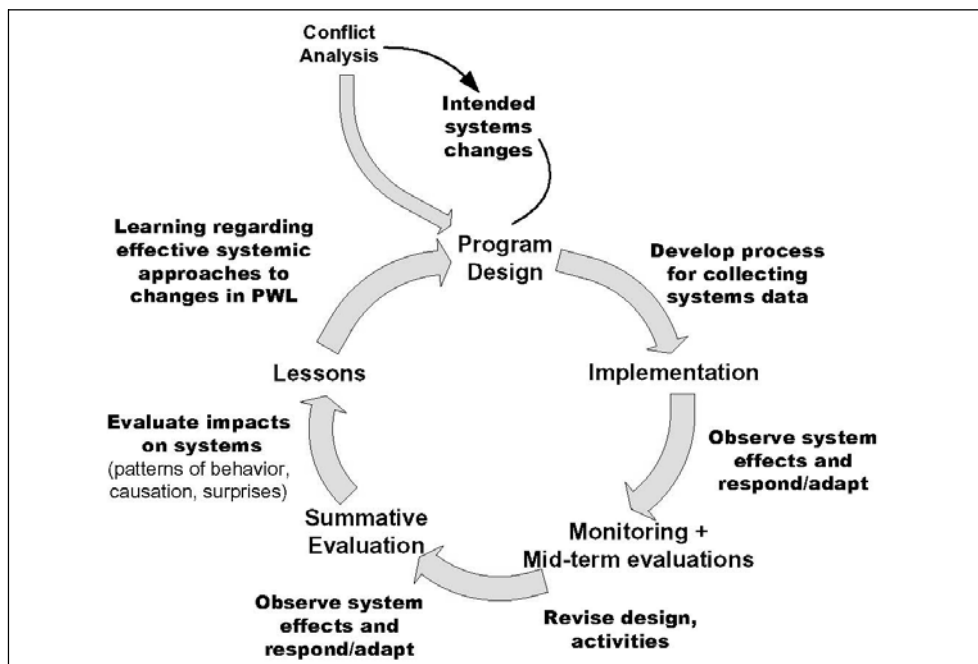


Figure 8: Programme Cycle with Added Systems Elements

From a systems perspective, then, evaluations would look for changes in patterns of individual and group behaviour, shifts in causation (X no longer leads clearly to Y), weakening or strengthening of key conflict factors – and the reverberations through the system of any such changes, including surprises, intended and unintended consequences. Systems-based evaluations would no longer focus on causal attribution and credit-taking for individual programmes, but would give way to assessing how programmes contribute to positive changes in ‘peace writ large’, examining how changes are leveraged in the system, and testing theories of change from a systemic perspective.

## 8. Tentative Lessons and Challenges

RPP has been working with systems approaches for a short four years, and we are still learning. The early results have been positive, but we need to work with systems methods more and encourage other people to try a range of systems-based tools and concepts. Nevertheless, we do have a number of insights and have identified several ongoing challenges:

*User-friendliness.* Not everyone responds immediately to systems mapping – especially when the process uses mainly visual mapping tools. The essential principles of systems thinking, if presented well, are not difficult to understand. However, conflict mapping can easily overwhelm people if it is too complex. Since our objective is to improve the effectiveness of peace practitioners, we must ensure that introductions to systems thinking and the conflict analysis processes themselves result in a deeper understanding of conflicts and inspire creative approaches to change.

*People who are more verbally or kinaesthetically oriented<sup>11</sup> need other methods for understanding systems insights.* For instance, any visual map needs to be accompanied by explanatory text, and many people are helped by ‘telling the story’ of the conflict, using the map as a reference point. Participants, especially those immersed in the conflict context, are also often tempted to add more and more factors to the systems analysis, until the resulting map is a dizzying and complex array – and there is no evidence that the additional factors actually improve the analysis. Quite the contrary, discussions and evaluations of strategy are more effective using relatively simple representations of the core dynamics of conflict. The appendix provides a visual map of a conflict analysis developed in the context of an evaluation – the Guinea-Bissau example cited earlier in this chapter.

*Identification of systems ‘archetypes’.* In the organizational development field, ‘archetypes’ describing common patterns of behaviour in organizations have been developed (Senge et al. 1994). The identification of similar archetypes or patterns of behaviour for conflicts and peace processes would be useful. Norbert Ropers, in his systemic analysis of the Sri Lanka process, has started to do so (Ropers 2008), and RPP has also begun to see emerging common patterns that may evolve into archetypes over time. The ‘Big Man Patronage Model’ shown in Figure 1 and in the appendix is an example of a common pattern that has emerged from RPP’s work in multiple locations. Archetypes are not sufficient models in and of themselves; each conflict system always has specific variables and dynamics that are unique to it. However, archetypes can be useful – and user-friendly – for gaining insight into the conflict and for providing a foundation on which a conflict analysis can be built as a key tool for programme evaluation from a systems perspective.

*Making the connection to strategy and impact.* A systems-based conflict analysis is useful but does not lead automatically to sophisticated programme strategies! In our

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11 Psychologists have determined that each of us has a dominant mode of learning and processing information. The main modes are visual, verbal and kinaesthetic. While the visual and verbal modes are fairly self-evident, the kinaesthetic mode involves taking in information at a gut level and even working with it in some physical way or through metaphors (Dunn, Dunn & Price, 1984).

experience, people tend to gravitate towards the interventions with which they feel most comfortable, based on their past experience, skills and favourite methodologies. We continue to draw on insights about how to induce change in systems<sup>12</sup> and to work on tools and exercises that maximize the use of conflict maps to identify points of leverage and develop strategies. The RPP Matrix has been a useful and simple tool for identification and planning of linkages across significant system dimensions. However, it does not track feedback loops, time delays or unintentional consequences of interventions and, as such, is incomplete. Although progress has been made in identifying archetypes of conflict dynamics, analysis of existing theories of change and development of systemic theories of change and mechanisms for testing them are areas that merit further attention.

*Enhancing monitoring.* The notion of feedback is a fundamental concept within systems thinking. In the conflict transformation field, our analyses are, at best, rough approximations of reality – and we will never be able to predict with certainty the outcomes or impacts of our peace interventions. As noted above, we can, however, increase our ability to obtain constant feedback through more effective monitoring processes, both of the context and of our initiatives, and engage in adaptive management that enables changes in programme directions in response to feedback about the programme and about the political environment.

This suggests that, in a systems approach to programming, the ‘M’ of ‘M&E’ might be more important than the ‘E’. Much monitoring currently focuses on whether programmes are achieving what they set out to do – mainly in terms of activities. While many practitioners do monitor context and progress towards the changes they aim to achieve, many do not, and when it is done, it often is not systematic or systemic. CDA’s Do No Harm project has found that few agencies monitor for unintended negative or positive impacts on conflict. Many agencies do perform a Do No Harm analysis as they design their programmes and address potential negative conflict impacts of their design but then rarely subsequently monitor actual effects or actual trends in inter-group dividers and connectors. In other words, robust monitoring systems that permit adaptive management in response to emergent and surprising factors may be more pertinent than formal evaluation processes. It would still be important to engage in periodic evaluation, if for no other reason than to look at the process over time and to capture deeper lessons. However, integration of systems thinking into monitoring mechanisms and processes might prove to be more valuable than systems-based evaluations.

Finally, evaluation itself should be seen as part of the overall programming system – in other words, it should not be isolated from programme design, implementation and monitoring. M&E processes must provide ongoing feedback that will enable adaptive management of peacebuilding programmes within dynamic social, economic and political systems.

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12 For instance, we have adapted points from an essay regarding ways to change a system. See Meadows (1999).

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*Appendix: Systems Map of Conflict in Guinea-Bissau*

