
Berghof Foundation for Peace Support

Workshop Report

“Exploring the Potential of Systemic Conflict Transformation”

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Sonja Neuweiler & Daniela Körppen

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1. Main Objectives of the Workshop

This international expert workshop was organised by the Berghof Foundation for Peace Support to develop further the conceptual framework of a systemic approach to conflict transformation. The main purpose was to share and compare existing systemic approaches to conflict transformation and to explore the added value of systemic thinking for conflict transformation strategies.

We invited scholars and practitioners who are working with systemic approaches in disciplines such as peacebuilding and organisational development. Some of the guiding questions for the discussions were:

- How far do systemic approaches to conflict transformation provide a creative potential for bridging the gaps in existing peacebuilding strategies?
- What are the challenges to implementing this methodology in theory and practice?
- To what extent are the different systemic approaches compatible?
- What are the critical issues of systemic approaches to conflict transformation and do we need to complement or combine various systemic methodologies?
- What are potential contributions from other approaches?
- What role does systemic thinking play for peace and conflict studies' theory building?

2. The Expectations

Expectations as the following were expressed in an introductory round:

- “I wish to learn about different ideas of bringing systems theory and peace and conflict studies together.” (Thorsten Bonacker)
- “Systemic thinking is cutting edge thinking! I am expecting some good collaborations with other organisations and colleagues.” (Danny Burns)
- “My expectation is to learn and to connect: To get feedback on application and theory and to develop a more nuanced sense of system’s applications.” (Peter Coleman)
- “I would like to explore the possibilities of connecting systemic and non-systemic approaches. “ (Wilfried Graf)
- “My interest in this workshop is to find out about the scope, the possibilities and the limits of the systemic approaches; as well as on their applicability to conflict analysis, resolution and transformation.” (Elke Grawert)
- “My expectation is to relate my practical experiences more to theory and to learn from it. “ (Usche Merk)
- “I wish to explore a promising and diverse ‘new’ frontier in conflict transformation.” (Oliver Ramsbotham)
- “My expectation is to explore new directions of conflict transformation and to learn from my colleagues.” (Robert Ricigliano)
- “At this workshop I would like to build up links between the academia and the practical field of systemic conflict transformation.” (Peter Woodrow)

3. The Presentations and the Subsequent Group Discussions

It is the purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the workshop presentations and discussions. The summarised content has been selected by the authors of this report among various aspects of a broad and inspiring discussion on the potential of systemic approaches to conflict transformation during the workshop.¹ Therefore it is neither exhaustive nor chronological with regards to the chosen issues.

Concerning the structure of this report, each section begins with a summary of the presentation. Subsequent to the abstracts, the main points of the corresponding discussions will be summarised. As there occurred many references and links to previous discussions and papers, these connections are indicated whenever possible. If it seemed necessary for a comprehensive summary of the discussion, explanations that were given by the speakers during the presentation have been included in the discussion part. Each discussion section ends with the open questions.

The inputs of Danny Burns, Peter Coleman, David Stroh, Robert Ricigliano, Peter Woodrow and Usche Merk will be presented according to the chronological order of the agenda of the workshop, since the discussions often drew on previous commentaries and presentations. Some of the most important points of these discussions have been taken up again in the final open group discussion and will therefore be mentioned once more later in this report (see 4).

¹ We would also like to thank our colleagues Stefan Maschinski and Peer Bruch for their editorial support.

Danny Burns

Systemic Action Research: Creating Constructive Paths through Power and Conflict

In this session Danny Burns introduced his approach to Systemic Action Research. He showed how multi-stranded action research processes can amongst other things: alert us to the unintended consequences of intervention; enable paths to be fashioned through competing narratives and interests; and generate systemic solutions to deeply entrenched issues.

Danny Burns pointed out that action research typically focuses on small groups to explore issues of mutual interest. Systemic action research scales up action research processes so that they can engage effectively with large systems. It is an approach to leadership and change which has considerable potential in conflict transformation work.

The methods he presented were initially developed in UK settings, but more recently Danny Burns has been working with SNV Kenya and Southern Sudan on embedding systemic action research into international development work. He has been working on issues ranging from female genital mutilation to education, pastoralism and water resource management.

Discussion:

Relation of conflict analysis and strategy development

- One of the central questions raised after Danny Burns presentation referred to the relation between analysis and strategy in systemic action research: Is it learning from action or analysing action?
- Danny Burns pointed out that one of the crucial assumptions of a systemic analysis is to admit that analysis and action need to be considered as two interacting components. According to him, systemic conflict transformation strategies do not necessarily need to be based on a preceding analysis. He expressed the concern, that conflict analysis is often linked to the aim of 'controlling the situation'.

Systemic understanding versus systemic process design

- Danny Burns emphasised that it is the systemic process design that matters; a systemic understanding goes hand in hand with it. With regards to a systemic understanding, Danny Burns clarified that the identification of systemic

patterns helps to support change of behavioural patterns. It is crucial to the systemic approach to tease out the underpinning assumptions and social norms that are directing action.

- Danny Burns' understanding of a systemic process design is to work with multiple inquiry strands at multiple levels. Systemic Action Research (SAR) works simultaneously at various starting points trying to find out about the key issues of conflict through inquiry and conversation instead of analysing beforehand whom to talk to and whom to work with. Understanding the systemic dynamics of which people are part is possible in the action research process through letting them tell stories about the underlying issues. This listening process is thought to 'unlock resonance' which allows for adapting action and strategies. Other ways of unlocking resonance in the process of action- resonance- reflection- action are visual methods for instance.
- SAR tries to initiate interaction processes, that connect these multiple action sites and enable processes of relation building. The idea of resonance replaces representativity, SAR is using a 'cascading model of sense-making' (not a consultative one) where action is adapted to resonance. Listening to the stories of the people allows to find out about the underlying issues of conflict. SAR then means to listen to people to understand what they consider to be relevant and to adapt the design of intervention accordingly.
- As a consequence of the systemic process design, one is working in a permanent state of uncertainty while trying to find out about the unattended consequences of action in the SAR process.

A non-modelling model

- Danny Burns pointed out that models should not be deterministic in the sense that they are used to design a predefined process that one 'works through'. In his critique of formal modelling he argued that systematic modelling does not render justice to the complexity of social reality because modelling often implies a predefined often one-sided method.
- For Danny Burns, it can be constructive to use formal modelling as one among other methodologies. It is interesting to compare the output of different approaches to the same issue. Each represents only patterns or lenses through which one can make sense (different senses) of something.
- As a concluding remark, SAR is considered to be a 'non-modelling model' because pictures, metaphors and other visual methods are used in order to surface the underlying assumptions which might be a form of modelling.
- David Stroh added that the SAR tools are particularly 'good models' because they provide a sense of ownership to the participants.

- According to Danny Burns, SAR is an organic and participatory approach; it is the messiness which renders SAR legitimate.

Individual patterns and social norms

- During the discussion the question was raised how to identify the systemic patterns which link individual situations to the social norms.
- Danny Burns pointed out that in conflicts, there can be a tense relationship between individual patterns in a local situation and the social norms or the greater regional context. Therefore, finding out about the underlying assumptions of behaviour is important in order to relate the interventions to the existing social norms.

Role of emotions

- Concerning the role of emotions, Cordula Reimann raised the question of how to integrate the emotions (as non negotiable needs) of the conflict groups into systemic thinking analytically and practically.
- Danny Burns explained that SAR is about building up social relations on the basis of emotional connections, instead of focusing on intellectual conceptualisation: Doing together allows for the establishment of emotional connections. As 'doing together' helps to build personal relationships it has more potential for change than processes of 'talking together'. According to Danny Burns, the integration of emotions can make processes more sustainable.

Sustainability

- Elke Grawert pointed to the problem of sustainability, when she asked: How to ensure that the processes of interaction and learning are moving on, once they have been initiated? A critical remark was that external interveners most of the time have only a limited time frame of intervention.
- Danny Burns suggested that working with learning processes might allow for sustainability: Acting on multiple strands enables convergence and interconnection which can result in a constant dynamic process. Working with non result-oriented learning processes, might enable the development of sustainable learning processes and the change of leadership cultures.

How to construct systemic change in a participatory manner?

- Danny Burns pointed out that in order to make systemic change possible, the people engaged in change must be part of the analysis, of the construction of solutions and of the experimental approaches in SAR. The orientation on

participative action of the approach enables collective sense-making and the establishment of 'real' relationships.

Learning processes and micro-macro linkage

- Another question that was raised in the discussion referred to the level of applicability of SAR: how to use the learning experiences of working with small groups for the larger context? How to develop and apply techniques based on these ideas for the field of conflict transformation?
- Danny Burns regarded this to be a crucial point of further development of SAR. According to him, learning processes can drive systemic change, as learning means to 'change the lens' and the people's attitudes towards the conflict issues.

On the various roles of different forms of knowledge

- Norbert Ropers raised the question of how to deal with the potential tensions between several forms of knowledge.
- Danny Burns explained his idea of valuing the different types of knowledge: there is expert knowledge and there are forms of local knowledge. In contrast to 'expert knowledge', local knowledge is based on judgement, not primarily on studying and reading. According to his point of view, the knowledge of the people must be the starting point for looking for solutions, because solutions must be adapted to their way of making sense of the conflict issues. Expert knowledge can only help in the process of sense-making through inquiry, but the sense-making itself must be located within the system.

Importance of catalysing moments

- Danny Burns clarified that it is important to create contexts that allow for catalysing moments to emerge as it is impossible to influence the conflict system directly. These catalysing moments might turn out to be helpful in order to get to the relevant issues of conflict, if it is too difficult to address the conflict issues straightforwardly.

Role of language

- In the discussion there was broad agreement that language plays a crucial role in systemic approaches.

Open questions:

Some points of the discussion turned out to be open questions. Others would need further clarification to be summarised in a comprehensive manner.

Some examples are:

- To what extent is it possible to find out about the relevant issues of conflict in the action process and to base strategy development on action research only?
- Where does the mandate for SAR come from? Where to derive the legitimacy for action as an external within a conflict system?
- How much external knowledge is needed for SAR? How to deal with the expert mode?

Peter T. Coleman

Navigating the Landscape of Conflict: Applications of Dynamical Systems Theory to Addressing Protracted Conflict

Peter Coleman started his presentation with giving an overview on the “dynamical systems theory” he developed with his team. He emphasised that protracted social conflicts undermine the security and well being of societies worldwide. Decades of research have worked on the understanding of the many factors that can contribute to their persistence, but scholars have yet to articulate a coherent and testable theoretical model that links these component parts to the basic underlying structures and dynamics that account for intractability.

He argued that the dynamical systems theory is ideally suited to capture the complexity and intrinsic dynamics associated with a wide spectrum of interpersonal, group, and societal processes. Besides this he gave a brief summary on the empirical research which was conducted in Mozambique, amongst others.

Discussion:

Due to the enormous complexity of the presentation, it turned out afterwards that there was a certain need for clarification. The following discussion concentrated on the importance of attractors in the dynamical systems model and related aspects of Peter Coleman’s theoretical equipment.

Analysis of patterns instead of cause and effect

- Peter Coleman explained that he considers chaos theory and its related concepts such as the idea of attractors to be very helpful for conflict transformation. According to him, systemic thinking implies to focus on dynamical patterns not on outcomes. Dynamical patterns are patterns of thought, feeling, or action on the individual, group or social level developing through the interactions of various variables. In this approach, analysis is important for the identification of patterns: by observing the elements evolving and interacting over time, it is possible to track the trends and interaction patterns within a system. This allows for a differentiation of the types of interaction, like the identification of positive and negative feedback loops.
- Responding to Cordula Reimann who wanted to know what this practically means on a social level, Peter Coleman added that some tools facilitate the identification of patterns on the social level, such as: interviews on the perceptions of the system dynamics, mapping the evolution of social networks over time and trying to find out about the critical ruptures and discontinuities within systems.

What brings about change?

- Peter Coleman stated that one cannot make change happen; it is only possible to increase the probabilities for change in a system.
- He clarified that change of system states (escalation/ de-escalation) and of attractors happens at different time scales. System states can change very quickly like sudden escalations within systems or processes of unforeseen de-escalation show. Attractors in contrast evolve over time and tend to develop very slowly. This means that attractors can also persist if the system state has changed: the de-escalation of a conflict can be a short term effect while the underlying destructive system attractors continue to exist.

On positive and negative patterns

- In reaction to a little confusion on terminology, Peter Coleman clarified that positivity and negativity are very different dimensions containing different elements. They are not in an opposite relationship to each other (thinking in opposites might be part of the problems related to linear thinking). The introduction of positivity into a system might create the potential for constructive dynamics to evolve.
- According to Peter Coleman, it is not sufficient to create a positive potential for change because negative attractors need to be attended to specifically. Re-engineering negative 'autistic' attractors can be based on strategies

introducing negative feedback loops that interrupt the strong destructive tendencies within a system. Examples of these strategies are the implementation of early warning systems, the establishment of cross-cutting structures (different groups doing things together), the institutionalisation of alternative (and more nuanced) narratives, but also international monitoring or attempts to reframe issues of conflict on lower levels and to separate the people from the issues.

- Peter Coleman explained that what is needed for change to happen is some kind of doubt (in a meaning system), of possibility, of imagination: any form of introducing a negative feedback loop that starts to rupture the coherence within the system.

Latent attractors

- Concerning the role of latent attractors, Cordula Reimann asked for the implications of the distinction between explicit and latent attractors.
- Peter Coleman clarified that latent attractors create the potential for constructive dynamics in the long term. They consist of implicit attitudes and underpinned assumptions which are not visible in the short term. Psychological studies on the individual level have shown that implicit and explicit attitudes are not necessarily congruent. While the explicit attitudes of people might be positive, the implicit (hidden) attitudes can be negative. Implicit attitudes on the individual level can be identified by psychological methods, but it is very difficult to measure that on the social level. Peter Coleman stated that finding out about the implicit attitudes would considerably enhance the possibilities of impact assessment.

Other Points of Discussion:

Position of observer

- Taking an academic, meta-theoretical perspective Peter Coleman proposed to find out about the dynamical patterns and interactions within a system through analysis and mapping from the position of an observer outside the system.
- With reference to the question of entry points, Peter Coleman underlined the importance of the initial conditions of a system: The influence one has on the system depends on the choices one makes. Interventions depend on decisions like who to talk to, who to do an interview with, who to contact, etc. Choosing the conditions of the system one is working on, also means to co-construct the

system to a certain degree. Interventions have unattended consequences and potentially cause rejection or meet with refusal.

Time factor

- Peter Coleman pointed out that different change initiatives have different temporal patterns, the design of actions therefore depends on the given time frame. Intervention strategies can be differentiated according to their time scales, whether they are inducing short term effects or aiming at the development of constructive change in the long term.

Systemic approach as an integrative platform

- Peter Coleman stated that systemic approaches are heuristically integrative. They do not only build on the state of the art of conflict transformation integrating different approaches, systemic thinking is also complementary to preceding approaches.

Open questions:

As the discussion was primarily focussed on the clarification of the theoretical concepts, the open questions mostly referred to the practical implications of the approach, such as:

- How to identify the critical ruptures or tipping points in a system?
- Are there any parameters to identify the entry points?
- What is meant exactly by the initial conditions of a system?
- To what extent is it possible to influence change processes externally?

Robert Ricigliano

“Ya Can’t Get There from Here:”

Exploring the Gulf between Conflict-Sensitive versus Systemic Approaches

Robert Ricigliano explored in his presentation the conceptual and practical implications of a systemic approach to conflict transformation or peacebuilding by contrasting that perspective with the more pervasive concept of conflict sensitivity. He argued that that systemic approaches represent a very different way of thinking and acting and that it is not just a “next step” in the line of thinking that produced conflict sensitivity.

Another purpose of the presentation was to identify the extent of the change that many practitioners, policy makers and donors face in trying to integrate systems thinking into peacebuilding practices. The presentation gave concrete examples of how a peacebuilding practitioner (in this case a development organisation working in Afghanistan) would have to think and act differently and more systemically for increasing the potential impact of their programmes on the systemic – or Peace Writ Large – level.

Discussion:

The subsequent discussion to the presentation of Robert Ricigliano focused mainly on the potential and the critique of mapping as a tool of systemic conflict work. The summary of the discussion therefore concentrates on the usefulness of mappings and related issues.

The advantages of maps as an analytical tool were seen in the potential of maps to demonstrate the various perspectives of the actors involved. Other participants were critical of mapping and pointed out that mapping methodologies do not have the potential to capture the interdependence and the dynamics of systems. The discussion also included the question of the differences between action analysis and intellectual analysis.

Peace Writ Large (PWL)

- Robert Ricigliano pointed out that systems maps can be helpful for showing the links from micro level programmes to the regional level of peacebuilding activities and to the broader level of conflict transformation. According to him, mapping helps to identify the potential links of programmes to PWL; SAT (structural-attitudinal-transactional level), pathway, holistic and interdependence analysis are useful tools for strengthening the programmes' impact on PWL.
- Robert Ricigliano argued that a theory of change needs to be defined in order to bridge the micro-macro gap. The SAT model (change is to take place on three different but interrelated levels: the structural, the attitudinal and the transactionable level) helps to identify where to look at and where to start working without being deterministic, as change on one level affects the others.
- He further pointed out that a holistic analysis is crucial to prevent the impact of disciplinary blinders as holistic approaches help to stop 'thinking in boxes'.

Mapping reinforces problem-oriented research

- Some participants argued that mapping reinforces problem-oriented ways of research. As maps are static, they are incapable to capture the interactive quality of the system's components (See Danny Burns). They did not consider analytical approaches to be sufficient and it was argued that there is at least a need for experiments in between analysis and strategy planning.
- With reference to the presentation by Danny Burns, some participants pointed to the importance of relating action and intellectual analysis. Others argued that comparing multiple maps from multiple perspectives is helpful to outline different intervention possibilities.

Linear and non-linear methods

- Peter Coleman argued that even though models –including those informed by systemic thinking– are quite linear as an analytical tool, they can help to communicate the complexity and the need for holistic approaches to other people. Furthermore, he pointed to the somewhat complementary relation of linear and non-linear methods: within maps the key factors are causally related which might not be entirely systemic for some, but maps were regarded as helpful to situate the key factors in the broader context of conflict.
- It was seen as a constraint of the modelling tools that the participants in collective modelling processes are tied to the system. The idea was raised that maybe one would need a frame-breaking outsider to surpass the limits of belief systems and to identify creative potential for change.

Mapping problems or mapping solutions?

- According to Robert Ricigliano, maps are a necessary tool to find out about the parts of a system that one could nurture in order to support change. In response to this, it was proposed to focus on the outlining of the solutions which already exists within the system.

Role of local actors in the process of mapping

- Some participants were of the opinion that modelling the different perspectives of groups in a conflict and the opportunities they see for change allows for sense-making through comparison.
- Robert Ricigliano pointed out that the more diversity (actors, expertise, perspectives) in the room, the better the map. According to him, maps are not more than the sum of the views that are influencing it. Therefore, it is important to keep constantly enriching the analysis by working with various actors.

- Usche Merk questioned the focus on analysis in the approach of Robert Ricigliano. She considered it to be a dilemma to think that analysis leads to a 'better' understanding about the 'real' factors. According to her, it represents a linear mode of thinking to consider analysis and understanding as being the prerequisite for defining 'better' interventions. Usche Merk claimed that it is important what local actors perceive as options of change. In relation to that she also stated that the more sophisticated a tool, the easier it gets to fall into the paradigm of 'controlling the process' (see Danny Burns).

Mapping as an instrument for coordination

- With regards to the question of how to link programmes to other initiatives, Robert Ricigliano stated that mapping can be a helpful instrument of coordination. He argued that joint analyses with other agencies and working with other local programmes helps to maximize the impact on PWL. In order to increase these effects, the various dimensions of impact would have to be considered and multiple stakeholders included, the donors comprised.

How much complexity do we need?

- A main point of several discussions during the workshop concerned the degree of complexity that is to be included in the analysis (See Peter Woodrow, David Stroh). Peter Woodrow argued that over complex modelling constrains political action. He explained the idea of dynamic complexity, that allows for the identification of keyfactors. Subsystems and by-factors can then be analysed which makes the models more actionable. According to this perspective, there is no need to provide detailed complexity. Reducing the factors instead allows to keep the potential for political action.

Open questions:

- What is more systemic, working with maps or with narrative tools/ language?
- Who is to decide on the factors within the map and how to deal with the problem that the choice of factors is always informed by underlying assumptions of a person?
- How to consider power relations adequately in mapping methodologies?

David Peter Stroh

The System Dynamics of Identity-Based Conflict

The purpose of this presentation was to describe the potential of systems thinking to help third parties and adversaries in identity-based conflicts to transform their story into one that leads to respectful co-existence.

David Stroh pointed out that systems thinking can enable third parties to establish a more objective view of the whole conflict, while encouraging combatants to take responsibility for how they unintentionally contribute to their own insecurity. Besides this, systems thinking can be helpful to meet the challenges in the areas of conflict analysis, strategy development and evaluation.

David Stroh introduced a dynamic systems model of identity-based conflicts and showed how it has been applied within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the area of strategy development, he suggested five areas of leverage for conflict transformation. Finally, he summarised four ways that systems thinking can assist in the evaluation process.

Discussion:

Neutrality/ objectivity

- The following discussion focussed on a critical reflection of the concepts of neutrality and objectivity. Several participants remarked that neutrality and objectivity are impossible. Arguing that there is always subjectivity in analysis and intervention, it was suggested that multi-partiality might be a more adequate concept than neutrality.
- Norbert Ropers pointed out that 'neutrality' does not depend from a person's own attitude, but that it is identified by those one is working with. It is not the attempt to be impartial but the perception of others which decides.
- David Stroh considered it to be primarily important, that the people he is working with accept the maps which are used in this approach as a reflection of their reality. He considers these maps to be multi-partial because the multiple viewpoints are integrated in order to help people to understand their situations and their actions as well as the actions and perspectives of others.

Role of questions

- There was broad agreement in the discussion that a systemic approach implies to pose different questions.

- David Stroh pointed out that working with different (systemic) questions might be a strategy to make actors or groups reassess their goals and beliefs. For this purpose, David Stroh uses questions such as ‘why have people not achieved their goals despite their best efforts’, ‘if the answers are so obvious why do they not work’, and ‘what can people do differently’. David Stroh further explained that the use of focused questions is crucial in this approach, as it is impossible to map the whole system with all its interconnections and interdependences. According to him, models become meaningless if they are too complex. Therefore the adaptation of the focussed question to the situation of the respective groups is the major challenge.
- Though, it was less consensual in the discussion, what is understood as being a systemic question. Daniela Körppen remarked critically that it might not be possible to combine causal questions with systemic thinking. According to her, some of the questions David Stroh uses in his approach are causal questions. She considered causal questions to be typical of problem-oriented methodologies and not of approaches that are focussing on solutions.
- David Stroh disagreed with this remark and explained that he considered helping people to recognise how they are contributing to the dynamics of the system to be a solution- not a problem-oriented approach.

Engagement of the unlike-minded

- One of the main points of discussion was the issue of dealing with the ‘unlike-minded’. Questions were raised such as how to bring those in the process who are holding extremist views, how to engage those who are spoiling change processes, and how to address the extremists in the communities?
- It turned out in the discussion that the approach did not provide tools for addressing hardliners and for bringing them back in the process.
- Some participants suggested that one should try to make use of the heterogeneity within groups, because there are different levels of extremism. If direct engagement is not possible, there might be a way of ‘making others engage others’. Oliver Ramsbotham proposed that it might be a strategy to reduce the constituencies and to detach the means from the ends.
- With reference to the discussion on different forms of knowledge following the presentation of Danny Burns, Norbert Ropers remarked critically that one might need to integrate some creative discursive elements to work with the different ‘shades of knowledge’ (e.g. there are parties against peaceful coexistence, and their might also be parties that are sceptic but still open towards peaceful coexistence).

Mapping as a multi-stakeholder approach?

- For David Stroh, the advantage of the multi-stakeholder analysis in his approach is to show that the different perspectives together create a clearer picture for everybody. Integrating the partial stories of different groups in the maps helps to construct a more comprehensive and more complex picture of the situation. This point relates to previous discussions on the potential of maps as pointed out by Robert Ricigliano and on maps as visualisation tools (See Danny Burns).
- According to David Stroh, the maps in his approach aim at shifting people's stance in the world, from being victims to being creators of their own reality. He argued that goals are critical in changing systems: maps help to work out the disparity of the expressed goals (long term- prosperity, peace) and the goals that are pursued in practice (short term- revenge). Showing the unattended consequences of actions (e.g. by making the costs of short term goals explicit) enables people to take responsibility, to reconsider obvious solutions and to experiment with new actions.
- David Stroh considers systems consist of different stakeholders holding different views. Therefore, showing these multiple realities that are building up a system might be a strong intervention because of the crucial role of beliefs in systems.
- As a concluding remark, David Stroh pointed out that maps should be used as conversation starters, not as answers.

Make use of system archetypes

- David Stroh explained the potential of using systems archetypes to demonstrate the unattended negative consequences of a group's actions. According to him, systems archetypes provide a basis for a more complex analysis.
- With reference to the previous discussion on the importance of the time factor (See Peter Coleman), David Stroh pointed out that the time delays of strategies and their impact on changing perceptions, support the tendency to favour 'quick fixes' to long term solutions: in the short term, a strategy might seem effective, but in the long term it increases the group's distance to the realisation of the overarching goal.

Open questions

As in the preceding discussions, some questions remained open for further reflection or clarification, such as:

- What could be systemic questions for the hardliners?

- Can we to develop creative instruments which help to operate in a solution-oriented manner?
- Translation problem: how to make these learning processes sustainable as participants return to the 'old' environment.
- What role does the 'expert' play in this process? Who is the 'moderator' in the process to be perceived as legitimate?

Peter Woodrow

Systemic Conflict Analysis:

Balancing Sufficient Complexity with Ease-of-Use in the Field

Peter Woodrow presented a systemic methodology of analysing conflicts. One of the main questions he addressed was: What is an effective and practical way to do analysis and how to connect it to programme strategies?

His presentation was based on the following structure:

1. Brief summary of Reflecting on Peace Practice Project (RPP) involvement with systems thinking
2. Findings from the RPP of the First Phase (1999-2003)
3. Development of a systems approach to conflict analysis
4. Successes and challenges: what has worked, what has been difficult
5. Emerging "archetypes" or common patterns in social/political systems
6. Using a systemic analysis: in programme design, reflection, evaluation

He concluded his presentation with giving an overview on his current work. He emphasised the need of developing better systems-based tools for thinking about change strategies, besides this he stressed the importance of using "archetypes" for conflict analysis.

Discussion:

Analysis and strategy development

- Similarly to the discussion of Danny Burns' presentation, one of the main points was the question of how to connect analysis with strategy. In contrast to the view that Danny Burns expressed before, Peter Woodrow considered analysis to be a necessary instrument at the beginning of every peacebuilding

process. In accordance with the views of some participants in previous discussions (see Robert Ricigliano), he also argued that a comprehensive analysis and a better understanding of the conflict situation does not lead to a better strategy automatically.

- According to Peter Woodrow's research, programmes doing few or no conflict analysis sometimes turn out to be effective as well, which might result of cumulative effects with other programs in the area. He argues that this is why an analysis of how programmes can connect to others and what peacebuilding efforts are taking place in the area, is essential and obligatory for peacebuilding work and strategy planning.
- Peter Coleman suggested that it might be helpful to shift the strong orientation on analysis to the identification of networks of effective action on the ground as a basis for strategy development (See later in this section).

Identification of the conflict's key factors

- Concerning the previous discussion on how much complexity is needed (see Robert Ricigliano), Peter Woodrow considered a comprehensive analysis of the key driving factors as necessary for designing action. As an overall analysis of conflict situations is too complex and overwhelming, a strategic analysis is helpful for identifying priorities among the factors.
- According to Peter Woodrow, an analysis in 'detailed complexity' (enormous amount of factors, but simple level of analysis as everything is connected to everything else) leads to the detachment of analysis and strategy. Strategising is impossible on the basis of detailed complexity maps.
- In contrast, 'dynamic complexity' outlines the interaction processes and the causal effects of relationships, the dynamic associations among factors as well as actors and their association with issues. It helps to bridge the analysis to the programme strategy by focussing on the actors and their impact and it helps to find out about potential leverage points (See Robert Ricigliano).
- For Peter Woodrow, the identification of the key driving factors allows to keep the potential for action. Moreover, identifying the factors that are contributing to the key factors makes it strategically possible to work on these 'subfactors' in order to influence the key driving factors.

Discussions on PWL

- Peter Woodrow stated that the lack of attempts to link programme strategies to the key driving factors of conflict is a major reason for the failing impact on PWL.
- Referring to the discussion on the initiation of interaction processes in Danny Burns' SAR approach, Peter Woodrow argued that one might start processes

with indirect action, but that ultimately there is a need to address the key driving factors of conflict.

- Similarly to Robert Ricigliano's position in the preceding discussion, Peter Woodrow considered it a problem that many programmes have not thought through how their efforts (whether it is dialogue, negotiation, social organisation, constitution rewriting) connect to PWL. Some participants agreed that the question of potential impacts of programmes on PWL further supports the claim for strategy development on the basis of analysing tools.

Peacebuilding as an addictive system

- Peter Woodrow outlined the idea in his presentation that peacebuilding itself is an addictive system. Several issues were raised in the discussion that related to this idea. For Peter Woodrow, the addictive tendency of the peacebuilding community makes it very difficult to develop new creative tools and to distance from what one has learned. According to him, the system of international peacebuilding and conflict transformation in itself represents a constraint on the effectiveness of action and intervention. Peter Woodrow argued that this applies to all levels, how aid is delivered by governments, donors and all the people involved in the field due to e.g. the determination of priorities and criteria, the time pressures, the interveners leaving in accordance with the mandates, the external definition of programmes ignoring what local people have to say, etc., instead of effective locally owned system change).
- Danny Burns pointed out that the 'addictive tendency of systems' implies that the awareness of one's own contribution to conflict situations does not automatically lead to changes in behaviour. He argued that insights in conflict dynamics are necessary but not sufficient because knowing that one's behaviour is not functional does not lead directly to effective action (e.g. smoking). Considering that systems are addictive and that people are very rooted in society makes it a great challenge to help people to alter their behaviour.

Relation between external and internal analysis

- One of the assumptions of this addictive (peacebuilding) system is that 'better' analysis of problems of system leads to 'better' solutions. Therefore it was proposed to shift the analysis of problems to an analysis of effective action of networks that exist on the ground. By emphasising solutions, one might come to a fundamentally different sense of what is possible in a situation. The central question would then be, why do relationships work in some communities and not in others?

- Additionally, it was considered important to identify the positive forces that are existing within the system (See Peter Coleman). How can they be used as leverage for interrupting the negative cycles?
- With regards to these suggestions on solution- oriented approaches in the field, Peter Woodrow concluded with the idea to stop all problem-solving dialogue activities for the next ten years. 😊

Motivation for change in behaviour

- As a general assumption it was considered important that the awareness that some actions (of conflict parties, of third parties, etc.) are not functional does not need to cause changes in behaviour because the motivations for action are related to identity, life experience, emotions, expectations and values.
- Danny Burns argued therefore that informing people on the potentially destructive consequences of their actions is not sufficient to support change in behavioural patterns. According to him, it is necessary to engage with emotions, assumptions and expectations of what our life might be. As a concluding remark, Danny Burns criticised that maps cannot capture this emotional and expectation level, this goes beyond mapping because maps are contextual.

Open questions:

Some of the questions raised in the discussion remained open at the end:

- How to achieve the desired results (also on the PWL level)?
- Why are programmes not having the impact on PWL they are thought to have?

Usche Merk

Restoring Dignity and Peace in Communities Affected by Conflict – Systemic Approaches in an African Context. The Concept of *Sinani* – KwaZulu-Natal Programme for Survivors of Violence, South Africa

Usche Merk presented the concept of Sinani, a South African NGO which has been working with more than 20 communities involved in political violence in KwaZulu-Natal since 1995. Sinani's approach draws on systemic thinking, participatory community development and African meaning and communication systems. Sinani has observed a strong connection between cycles of violence, poverty and the rise of HIV and AIDS in those communities which have a tendency to become repetitive problem systems.

Usche Merk stressed that in order to help communities to break these destructive cycles, Sinani is trying to strengthen resources, problem solving capacities and the social fabric of communities as a whole by integrating peace building, psychosocial support and community development. She outlined the major conceptual ideas and approaches using practical examples and stories of change processes and concluded by debating the relevance for systemic conflict transformation in other contexts.

Discussion:

Linkage between grass root work and the macro level

- One of the major points in the discussion was the strategic question of how to link grass roots work to the macro-political level. Usche Merk explained that it belonged to the lessons learned in her project that linking the local to the national can have an impact and enable change processes. Working with systemic tools like circular questions, visualisation and constellation work creates a space where people then might start to develop alternative options.
- It was discussed if the integration of local leaders or traditional authorities potentially links the micro and the macro level. As in Usche Merk's example, these leaders could serve as a bridge from local initiatives to the political structures on the macro level.
- Concerning the role of leaders, Danny Burns raised the question how the leaders could be engaged in learning and dialogue processes and if the integration of local leaders allows for a longer term engagement which assures a certain degree of sustainability.

'Learning by doing'

- Robert Ricigliano stated that Usche Merk's example of Sinani very well illustrates the importance of being open to learning processes instead of hoping for an immediate impact of actions. He argued for a focus on constant learning not on outcome.
- In response to this, Usche Merk explained her idea of 'learning by doing'. According to her, it is important to find out if actions and strategies are helpful or not, instead of judging what is 'right' or 'wrong': If it turns out that things do not work, one must stop doing more of the same!
- Concerning her understanding of a solution-focussed approach, Usche Merk described the strategy of 'seeing the problem as the best possible solution under certain circumstances'.

Preconditions for a systemic approach

- With reference to examples from Sri Lanka and South Africa, the question was raised of how much stability is needed as a precondition for a systemic approach.
- Ulrike Hopp pointed out that, even though working situations are often deeply fragmented, interveners are often trying to reach a certain outcome immediately. She suggested that it might be necessary to create a certain 'wholeness' before systemically designed actions can have the desired impact.
- It was discussed that very often there seems to be a tendency in strategy planning to underestimate the importance of a certain level of confidence and trust by the communities as a precondition for moving on. Usche Merk agreed and gave examples of her practical work of how fear and insecurity hinder systemic tools and often make workshops or other activities impossible.

Relevance of the context and importance of culture

- Usche Merk argued that interventions need to be adjusted to the local context. As each community is different, it is a long process to adapt the intervention 'mix' to the community dynamics. One has to find out about the relevant issues and the leverage points within specific communities, which depends on a participatory approach. According to Usche Merk, the starting point for action is a community "diagnosis" based on the integration of the people: what is the situation of the particular community, what is there in e.g. resources, structures, skills, etc. Trying to identify the community structures goes hand in hand with finding out about the space for alternatives. This process starts with a request, asking people for their ideas and preferences helps to establish a process that is based on the integration of emotions.

- Usche Merk further argued that systemic thinking needs to be culturally embedded as only the local actors know how to change the system.
- She explained that Sinani's approach provides a good example for the integration of the local meaning system into systemic thinking: Sinani makes reference to the underlying philosophical ideas and relates the programme activities and tools to concepts of the local meaning system. Usche Merk described that this integration worked particularly well as in the local African meaning system social processes are seen as circular and ideas of social change suit well to systemic thinking. Moreover, ideas on social practice are largely based on dialogue and ownership. Usche Merk considers the integration of the local meaning systems as a source of inspiration and sustainability for systemic approaches.
- For Sinani's work on gendered violence for example, it turned out that it is particularly important to link the strategies to the historical context and to the culture of young men, to their ethics and to their identity. For working on upcoming questions such as 'how to behave differently and still be a man?' constellation work is very useful. Working with the youth on the personal level first allows for opening it up later to broader social issues.
- Asked for the role of the external party, Usche Merk referred to the importance of context dependence. She argued that for effective action it is necessary to know the environment as well as the people one is working with.
- But she also expressed the concern, that in long term processes there is a certain danger of losing the perspective by becoming part of the system.

Dealing with uncertainty

- Referring to the problem that it is impossible to know what consequences grass roots interventions do unfold on the wider level of the society, the general question of the risks related to the uncertainty of intervention was raised. Oliver Ramsbotham outlined the ethical problem of who is to bear the risk of unforeseeable action and intervention.
- Usche Merk responded that working with community involvement and on the foundation of trust allows for 'taking risks without being naïve'.

Systemic approaches and donor requirements

- With reference to the preceding discussion on uncertainty, Ljubjana Wüsthube pointed out that uncertainty as an element of systemic thinking poses problems in dealing with the donors: how is it possible to work with donors in a way that they accept that the outcomes of systemic processes are not always predictable?

- Robert Ricigliano responded that one ought to have the discussion about focussing on constant learning and not on outcome also with the donors. Usche Merk agreed generally, but she also suggested that there is room for courage, awareness and ideas in proposal writing.

Linking various levels

- Usche Merk's presentation also related to the idea of multi-level approaches in previous discussions (see Danny Burns). She pointed out that linking the various levels is a necessary strategy. According to Usche Merk, the different levels of violence are interconnected through negative repetitive cycles. Therefore, the various levels within a society have to be linked in systemic action and interventions need to occur on several levels in order to have an impact (See Peter Coleman).
- She clarified her idea of linking the various levels with reference to Sinani, who work with leadership, with service providers, with community youth, etc. The key strategies are empowerment, linking, reconnecting, interrupting problem cycles and unfolding change in the social fabric. The key objective is building peace through strengthening community structures, interventions include working on the personal level, CBO development, networking, joining, linking, capacity-building, unlocking resources and specific interventions regarding peace, health and poverty.

Energy within systems

- Similarly to Danny Burns who pointed to the importance of emotions and energy within systems, Usche Merk suggested an approach that is trying to track the 'change flows' within the system instead of pulling things in from outside. According to her, there are different levels of change, looking for the energy within the system rather than importing it then means to find out where change flows come from and how they develop.

Open questions:

Some questions were left open at the end of the discussion, mostly focussing on the practical implications and the potential outreach of the approach, such as:

- How to track the energy within systems?
- How to deal with the underlying assumptions that are influencing perception and action?
- To what extent could this approach contribute to a change in power relations?
- How much stability is needed as a precondition for this approach?

Oliver Ramsbotham

Wrap Up

- In his wrap up of the discussions Oliver Ramsbotham pointed out that the term “systemic conflict transformation” was used as a concept that includes conflict analysis and conflict transformation. This means to him that the term implies an analytic as well as a normative component. With regards to the normative content, Oliver Ramsbotham argued that it has to be made transparent what this normative component includes. According to him, it could be seen as a kind of a contradiction to combine the terms “systemic” and “transformation”, since “systemic” is neutral and “transformation” includes a normative component.
- Moreover, Oliver Ramsbotham raised the question of the particularity of systemic approaches of conflict transformation. In what way does systemic conflict transformation differ from complex, critical or constructivist conflict transformation? Additionally, these approaches offer a different perspective that might enrich systemic approaches. The crucial question of systemic approaches is therefore not about the delineation or the integration of other approaches, it is more important to deal with the tensions between these different approaches and to take the critique of different approaches seriously.
- He critically reflected on the potential of (systemic) mappings of conflict situations. He emphasised that it must be considered as a shortcoming of these maps that they don’t integrate the third parties perspective.
- Oliver Ramsbotham also pointed to the multi-disciplinary character of the workshop. According to him, it is very helpful to draw on inspiration from other disciplines. It was obvious during the workshop, that the different disciplines each do work with their own terminology. Even though he acknowledged that it is inspiring to learn about the terms and concepts that other disciplines are using in this field, such as attractors or archetypes for example, Oliver Ramsbotham also pointed to the walls between different disciplines and the barriers that are put up between them. The critical question for him is, if it is synthesis that systemic conflict transformation is trying to achieve?

Basic Principles of Systemic Thinking

(Norbert Ropers, Daniela Körppen)

Thinking in network structures

- Mapping patterns of feedback loops: e.g., the solution to a problem for one party (arming itself in an environment perceived as insecure) is the problem for the other one (perceived security threat) which leads to reinforcing the first problem (= the famous “security dilemma”). (Ossimitz / Ropers)

Thinking in dynamic frames and thinking in terms of relationships

- Feedback mechanisms are circular and self-referential by nature; in the closed circuitry of a feedback loop “cause” and “effect” cannot be categorically isolated: they modify each other in a continuous process where input and output, perceptions and performance interact. (Bateson)
- Integrating time delays (e.g. counter-armament happens only later) and understanding that causes and effects in social systems can be separated substantially by distance and time. This draws attention to the fact that human beings can be driven by grievances and traumas caused a long time ago and that small catalytic events can cause large changes in systems. (Ossimitz)

Turning a blind eye to the problems

- Not focusing only on identifying the problems but concentrating more on the solutions which already exist within the (conflict) system; a systemic analysis takes away the focus from the question “why” a conflict is escalated to “how” people in the region try to cope with the situation. (Watzlawick / Bateson)

Accepting ambivalence and contingency and acknowledging perspective-dependency

- Accepting that all analytical models are a reduction of the complex reality (and are necessarily perspective-dependent) and therefore always only a tool and not “the reality” as such. (Ossimitz)
- Reality is constructed through communication.
- Considering the relationship between the observer and the observed as reciprocal. (Luhmann)

Concentrating on human beings and their learning processes

- Respecting the human beings within the system as the core reference point. Focusing on individual and collective learning processes and problem-solving skills to understand and influence the system dynamics. (Ossimitz / Ropers)

4. Open Group Discussion

The conceptual input by Norbert Ropers and Daniela Körppen suggested basic characteristics of systemic thinking (see box, p. 8), which had been developed for the terms of reference for the edited volume. This input inspired a vivid open group discussion at the end of the workshop. Conceptual issues and questions of practical implementation of systemic conflict transformation were synthesized from previous discussions or brought up as a basis for further research and discussion. These insights will be summarised in this section.

Main aspects and central questions of this discussion included:

1. With regards to the practical implementation of systemic methodologies in the field of conflict transformation:

Analysis of conflicts

- Even though systemic approaches do not assume that social change unfolds in a linear manner, they include to a certain degree also mono- causal result chains. For this reason, even systemic methodologies for analysing conflicts are based on linear assumptions to some extent.
- Addressing conflicts with solution oriented approaches allows for more openness than problem-oriented perspectives do. In addition, the orientation on solutions facilitates the broad inclusion of local actors (Usche Merk).
- Analytical tools such as modelling, mapping, etc. were critically discussed and classified as being rather static and problem-oriented than being apt to capturing dynamics and focussing on solutions.
- Systemic thinking offers a great potential for developing creative tools (e.g. Tetralema or constellation work) for the field of conflict transformation. Since these tools are not necessarily focussing only on the analysis of problems, they are useful for revealing solutions existing already within the system.
- A system is a set of interconnected elements that change and evolve over time (Peter Coleman). These dynamics need to be analytically captured. However, this assumption bears the risk to “over-complexify” conflicts and to assume that every single element within a system is connected to all the other elements.
- **In order to keep the potential for political action, how much complexity can we stand?**

- Interaction within systems implies creative energy to evolve. These energy flows offer a creative potential for change within the system. Emotions play a crucial role within this setting.
- **How is it possible to capture these energy flows analytically?**

Relation of conflict analysis and strategy development

- Systemic conflict transformation strategies do not necessarily need to be based on a preceding analysis. A conflict analysis is often linked to the aim of controlling the situation. One of the crucial assumptions of a systemic analysis is to admit that analysis and action need to be considered as two interacting components (Danny Burns).
- A Deeper understanding of a situation does not necessarily lead to a better development of a conflict transformation strategy. However, an analysis as the starting point of strategy planning is absolutely necessary (Peter Woodrow).
- **Within systemic analysis should we then analyse action or learn from action?**

2. With regards to the development of a systemic framework for analysing ethnopolitical conflict:

- Systemic approaches to conflict transformation can be considered as an integrative platform containing all existing approaches (Peter Coleman).
- Can systemic thinking actually serve as a theoretical lens for analysing social processes (Oliver Ramsbotham) or, is it rather an attitude and a suspension of the academic distance between the observer and the observed (Danny Burns)?
- **Is systemic thinking an analytical method or an attitude?**
- **How much modelling (theoretical construction of models) is compatible with systemic thinking?**
- Exclusively, systemic concepts do not suffice for the transformation of political conflicts. They need to be complemented by methods of other fields such as psychology and cultural theory (Graf).
- Importance of psycho-analytical approaches and cultural studies.

- Postmodern approaches (e.g. Foucault) can offer an important contribution for revealing the underlying power relations, discursive structures and implicit value systems in a conflict situation.

5. Conclusions and Further Activities

Due to the constructive discussions and the creative atmosphere the workshop was considered as inspiring and thought provoking by the participants. Professor Peter T. Coleman (Columbia University/New York) suggested to organise a follow-up conference in New York City as a cooperation project between Berghof and Columbia University on the topic “Taking Peace Seriously: A Practice-to-Theory Dialogue on Effective Systemic Peace Initiatives”.

The main idea of this meeting is to bring together a small group of practitioners working with systemic approaches and a group of theoreticians from the field of systemically oriented conflict studies. The practical experiences should be analysed together and aim towards identifying basic parameters for the development of a theoretical framework grounded on systemic thinking for examining political conflicts.

In addition the workshop was helpful in concretising the concept of the edited volume on systemic thinking and conflict transformation edited by Norbert Ropers and Daniela Körppen.

6. Agenda of the Workshop

Exploring the Potential of Systemic Conflict Transformation

26th - 28th September 2008

Evangelische Bildungsstätte Schwanenwerder, Berlin

Friday, 26 September 2008

13:00	Lunch
15:00 – 16:00	Welcome & Introduction of the Participants Norbert Ropers, Daniela Körppen
16:00 – 16:15	Coffee Break
16:15 – 17:45	Systemic Action Research: Creating Constructive Paths through Power and Conflict Danny Burns, University of the West of England and Director of SOLAR <i>Moderation: Daniela Körppen, BFPS</i>
17:45 – 18:00	Break
18:00 – 19:30	Navigating the Landscape of Conflict: Applications of Dynamical Systems Theory to Addressing Protracted Conflict Peter Coleman, Teachers College New York <i>Moderation: Elke Grawert, Universität Bremen</i>
20:00	Dinner

Saturday, 27 September 2008

9:00 – 10:30	“Ya Can’t Get There from Here:” Exploring the Gulf between Conflict-Sensitive versus Systemic Approaches Robert Ricigliano, Director, Institute of World Affairs <i>Moderation: Peter Coleman, Teachers College NY</i>
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10:30 – 11:00	Coffee Break
11:00 – 12:30	The System Dynamics of Identity-Based Conflict David Stroh, Bridgeway Partners <i>Moderation: Norbert Ropers, BFPS</i>
12:30 – 13:30	Lunch
13:30 – 15:00	Systemic Conflict Analysis: Balancing Sufficient Complexity with Ease-of-Use in the Field Peter Woodrow, Collaborative for Development Action <i>Moderation: Cordula Reimann, Koff/Swisspeace</i>
15:00 – 15:30	Coffee Break
15:30 – 17:00	Wrap Up & Discussion Oliver Ramsbotham, University of Bradford <i>Moderation: Norbert Ropers</i>
17:30 – 20:00	Sight Seeing
20:00	Dinner: Refugium, Gendarmenmarkt 5, 10117 Berlin

Sunday, 28 September 2008

9:00 – 10:30	Restoring Dignity and Peace in Communities Affected by Conflict – Systemic Approaches in an African Context. The Concept of Sinani – KwaZulu-Natal Programme for Survivors of Violence, South Africa” Usche Merk, Medico International, Weltfriedensdienst <i>Moderation: Peter Woodrow, CDA</i>
10:30 – 11:00	Coffee Break
11:00 – 12:30	Gaps of Systemic and Non-Systemic Approaches to Conflict Transformation Open Group Discussion
12:30 – 13:00	Sharing of Future Plans for the Development of Systemic Ideas to Conflict Transformation Final Discussion
13:00	Lunch

7. List of Participants

Thorsten Bonacker	University of Marburg, Germany.	thorsten.bonacker@staff.uni-marburg.de
Danny Burns	Social and Organisational Learning as Action Research (SOLAR), University of the West of England, Bristol, UK.	danny.burns@uwe.ac.uk
Peter Coleman	International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR), Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, USA.	pc84@columbia.edu
Veronique Dudouet	Berghof Research Center (BRC), Berlin, Germany.	veronique.dudouet@berghof-center.org
Wilfried Graf	Institute for Integrative Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding (ICCP); Vienna, Austria.	graf@iicp.at
Elke Grawert	University of Bremen, Germany.	grawert@uni-bremen.de
Ulrike Hopp	Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (BFPS), Sri Lanka Project/ Berlin, Germany.	ulrikeathome@gmail.com
Daniela Körppen	BFPS, Berlin, Germany.	daniela.koerppen@berghof-peacesupport.org
Gudrun Kramer	ICCP, Vienna, Austria.	kramer@iicp.at
Kate McGuinness	Berghof Foundation, Berlin, Germany.	kate.mcguinness@berghof-foundation.de
Usche Merk	Medico International/ Weltfriedensdienst, Frankfurt, Germany.	u.merk@gmx.net

Sonja Neuweiler	BFPS, Berlin, Germany	sonja.neuweiler@berghof-peacesupport.org
O. Ramsbotham	University of Bradford, UK.	o.p.ramsbotham@bradford.ac.uk
Cordula Reimann	KOFF/ swisspeace, Bern, Switzerland.	cordula.reimann.@swisspeace.ch
Robert Ricigliano	Institute of World Affairs/ University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, USA.	robr@uwm.edu
Norbert Ropers	BFPS, Berlin, Germany	norbert.ropers@berghof-peacesupport.org
Dirk Splinter	Inmedio, Berlin, Germany.	berlin@institut-inmedio.de
David Stroh	Principal Bridgeway Partners, Lexington, Massachusetts, USA.	dstroh@bridgewaypartners.com
Barbara Unger	BFPS, Berlin, Germany.	barbara.unger@berghof-peacesupport.org
Oliver Wils	BFPS, Berlin, Germany	oliver.wils@berghof-peacesupport.org
Peter Woodrow	Collaborative for Development Action (CDA), Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.	pwoodrow@cdainc.com
Ljubjana Wüsthube	Inmedio, Berlin, Germany.	berlin@institut-inmedio.de
