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CONFLICT MITIGATION IN RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Jan Øberg

Introduction

Worldwide maldevelopment persists. New patterns of conflict emerge. System overload is no longer an exception; it's the rule. The complexity of human society and the production of information grows almost exponentially; the human capacity to steer, not to speak of wisdom, lags behind. As human beings we spend at least 80% of our time in conflict behavior -- with ourselves, with Nature, with other cultures. Examples include Somalia and ex-Yugoslavia. Resource conflicts, racism, weapons trade, poverty, interventionism, nationalism, environmental degradation, and alienation still exist. In spite of an ever more system-integrated world, we live separate lives. And thus the tendency toward system breakdown that characterizes the end of the 20th century -- so aptly termed the "age of extremes" by Eric Hobsbawn (1994). It has been the most directly and structurally violent period in humankind's evolution. There are, as yet, no signs of fundamental change as we enter the 21st century.

In short, the overarching catchwords of our time, of human existence, are conflicts and violence. But conflicts and violence are often confused. What must be prevented, or at least reduced, is violence--not conflicts. Many conflicts are positive and some are indeed necessary. Without conflicts there would be no struggle for freedom, no democracy, no human maturity, and no diversity. We clash because of our differences. Without differences everything would be standardized and similar. We don't want an Orwellian world. We must learn to clash as civilized creatures, not as conflict illiterates. It is debatable whether violence can be completely eliminated in human relations and most of us are likely to contemplate violence when face-to-face with a pathological mass-murderer. What can not be disputed is that more violence should never be applied than is strictly necessary to achieve a certain result.

The hopes and struggle for a more humane, sustainable, just and democratic future for all will be thwarted unless we:

- a) acknowledge the centrality of conflicts in human and social life and in overall development;
- b) understand better why human beings create and deal with conflicts, often counterproductively;
- c) perceive the handling of our conflicts as a science and an art that can be learned;
- d) realize that with more human beings trained in handling conflict (i.e. with less conflict illiteracy worldwide) we can reduce violence and provide new opportunities for non-violent human goals and means to be fulfilled. This article discusses post-conflict reconstruction and development in the context of training and education after examining conditions for conflict resolution in the post-Cold War period.

New and Old Conflict Formations

Relatively new after the so-called end of the Cold War, but not in history, is that conflicts focus on civil society as well as on individual and collective identity rather than on more abstract principles such as "the revolution," or a particular principle or ideology. What is often at stake, as the actors see it, is no less than their existence. Benjamin Barber stimulatingly calls it "Jihad versus McWorld." Jihad are small slow or "backward" groups (e.g., fundamentalist, parochial, and nationalist) with their own norms and agendas. McWorld signifies the modern, computer-integrated, Western-universalizing fast world based on multi-party systems, markets, materialism and human rights.

It looks, to put it crudely, as if violence abounds both because of the integration into supermodern, supernational integration and because of the disintegration of traditional units (such as federations) and values. Some actors want to be part of McWorld, but they do not know how and McWorld doesn't know it either. Other actors fight for their right not to be integrated into McWorld which they perceive as culturally arrogant, exploitative, and fundamentalist. In all these cases conflicts abound. New conflicts today mix with old ones. It should not be ignored that nuclear weapons are still among us, last considered usable in the Iraqi conflict, and so are deterrence, military balance, offensive weaponry and interventionist policies. Cold War security institutions such as NATO and European Union still exist with the only exception being the Warsaw Pact. And although most conflicts today are intra-national, they are all displaying international conflict potentials.

The global system is heading for a more conflictual, unpredictable and chaotic era compared with the order of the Cold War. In earlier epochs there were periods of transition alternating with some stability. The contemporary world seems to be in constant transition, and it is difficult anywhere to see the goal achievement that defines stability. The potential for a broad variety of violence -- against other human beings, other cultures and against Nature -- is increasing.

Conflicts: Violence or Development?

Conflicts in and of themselves are neither good nor bad. It is the way we deal with them and the means we choose when trying to solve them that make some of them turn very nasty. It is quite likely that it was good for Yugoslavia to dissolve and for peoples to live in new units -- like it is natural that spouses sometimes grow apart. The way this conflict was dealt with by the Yugoslavs themselves and by the internal actors made it so destructive and painful. If the individual did not go through conflicts s/he would never mature. By reflection between what we want to do and what we know we should not do (or don't want to do, but know well we ought to do) we become moral actors. This is also the case, in principle, with human communities, societies and countries. To have had a resolved conflict with someone results in the parties

becoming friends with deep mutual respect for each other. It teaches us something about ourselves, about the other, and about human community.

Constructive conflict processes, that are diagnosed and treated well, lead to development. The other side of the coin is that destructive conflict processes, those diagnosed falsely and treated counterproductively, lead to violence. Development can be defined as the ever maturing physical and mental-moral ability to stand on one's own feet while simultaneously participating in an equal-based give-and-take with the world. It aims at satisfying individual and collective material and non-material needs. This applies in principle to both individuals and societies. Sustainable development is fundamentally based on nonviolent principles that permit an optimum realisation of human, societal and ecological potentials.

Violence, to use a phrase by Eric Fromm, is the life not lived. Wars and other types of violence may break out because of human evil; the cruel dictator comes to power. Contrary to common belief, however, this theory explains only a fraction of the world's conflicts. Closer to the truth is that fear caused by the threat of war and violence releases potentials for aggressive behaviour. Be this as it may, the circumstances that catapults pathologically cruel individuals to power are most important as an "early warning" sign. Genuine human evil, in contrast, is probably a rather constant factor.

Locking or Solving Conflicts

The more complicated fact is violence is a consequence of problems and conflicts that are suppressed, ignored, or cannot be articulated. It also emerges in response to deficient "diagnosis" and counterproductive intervention/ mediation by "third parties." Violence produces violence -- an eye for an eye. Rather than of human evil, violence is a product of fear and frustration. It is the lack of creative thought as to what to do instead. The most commonly heard "underdog" explanation is that "we did all we could to avoid this war, we didn't want it, but finally there was nothing else left to do". The most frequently used "topdog" or interventionist argument is this: "we've tried to talk you to your senses, but if you don't want to listen, we have no choice but to bomb you to stop this."

Such statements may be subjectively true when uttered, but from a professional conflict-management viewpoint they are wrong in most cases. Conflicts should be perceived as problems to be solved and potentials for development, rather than as opportunities to apportion guilt and blame. Solving conflicts implies a creative search for alternatives and a potential future for the conflicting parties. Locking a conflict implies the systematic reduction of potential alternatives. The somewhat simplifying hypothesis that most violence stems from human evil, tends to equate conflict-resolution with punishment of individuals. This is a typical view among politicians and human rights advocates. However, this seldom leads to anything but a transformation of the violence into hate and traumas, a perception of humiliation and "the-winner-takes-it-all" sentiment.

More sophisticated explanations of violence tend to equate conflict resolution with problem solving and exploration of mutual development opportunities. The earlier the underlying conflict is diagnosed and treated, the easier it is to use it constructively; the later, the more likely it will slide into warfare. What does conflict resolution mean? It means to voluntarily enter into an arrangement that identifies and treats the root causes of a dispute and distributes the disputed values or interests in such a manner that the conflict will not re-appear, not even in disguise.

What can "Third Parties" -- mediators, mitigators, and officiators do? Third Party is an unfortunate term because almost all conflicts have more than two actors and the Third Party can do nothing if he or she is a party to the conflict. Third Parties are wise to be aware that they can not solve anybody's conflict. They can only help those who are in, or have, a conflict to settle it. In a deep sense of the word, nobody can solve somebody else's conflict. A mitigator can attempt to persuade, make proposals, cajole, place negotiation facilities at the parties' disposal, carry messages, appeal, serve as an intellectual catalyst, argue that the parties act against their own best interests, promise aid, and seek to change attitudes or perceptions. This is similar to a policeman who can arrest a criminal but not solve the problem that made him or her a criminal in the first place.

Third Parties can not function as mediators in cases where they have any interests in a particular outcome which is not compatible with the interests and goals of the parties in conflict. Neither can they mediate if, in any way, they have participated in developing the conflict or the war in the first place. For instance, if the mediator is selling weapons to one party or has made strong statements as to who is the culprit. Neither can any mediator function well without having access to independent analyses of the conflict, the parties and the area as well as culture.

In other words, the social figure most similar to the conflict-mediator or mitigator is the doctor, the "disease" being the propensity to use violence as a means to solve problems. Solving conflicts efficiently opens the road to development. Locking them is a recipe for violence. Conflict doctors can play an important role at any stage -- early warning, prevention of violence, stopping of violence and in the reconstruction-development of post-conflict societies.

Conflicts: Human Identity and Existence

We talk about ethnic conflicts, resource conflicts, political and cultural conflicts, but seem implicitly to forget that all conflicts are acted out by human beings. Most of today's conflicts have a nucleus of (immaterial) identity and (material) existence. People fight for identity -- their right to be someone now -- and for their existence -- to have something now, whereas, earlier, conflicts were predominantly about more abstract and more distant issues such as ideology, class and independence. In conflict situations, decisions are taken in small groups. Usually, neither war nor negotiation processes are participative or otherwise democratic. The higher the tension, the larger the stakes, the fewer that make the decisions. Power of the future of millions can be concentrated in a handful of warring individuals -- and mediators. It is individuals who shoot, kill, rape and torture. It is other individuals who allow them or persuade them to commit these acts. It's presidents, party leaders, paramilitaries and editors who instigate and (try to) control it.

Everything else being equal, negotiated peace is a deal between individuals. This also applies to local society which is where some of the worst cruelties have taken place and people are supposed to live together afterwards. Societies, nations or other collectivities cannot make peace if their representatives are filled with traumas, hate or deep distrust of each other. So, the human dimension at the negotiation table as well as with local residents/citizens in conflict areas must be given high priority.

It must be an overarching goal of anyone working for a more humane community to first try to understand what makes people take to violence. To just condemn and punish those who do it is a quite human reaction, but unless we also understand the mechanisms that make the ordinary citizen a mass killer and war criminal, there is little chance that we shall learn to prevent future violence in time.

The Human Dimensions of Conflict

Military expertise is employed to do peacekeeping and provide security. Human rights and constitutional expertise are used to shape the conditions of lawful society. Diplomats are called upon to deal with decision-makers. Economists are brought in to estimate the costs of reconstruction. Professional media people provide the propaganda of war. No one is called to deal with the human dimensions that pervade it all. In fact, here is a conspicuous need for three types of human-oriented knowledge, namely:

- a) psychology, psychiatry, anthropology, sociology and development, which must be linked to:
- b) knowledge about the people, the culture and history of the specific conflict area, which again should be linked to,
- c) competence in conflict analyses, mediation and negotiation skills.

Of course, the experienced officer, lawyer or diplomat may embody these qualities or at least have a feel for them. But these dimensions cannot be left as a residual category which may or may not be found by coincidence. A career diplomat from a far-away ministry sent on a mediation mission for three months in a complex conflict in a country he has no prior experience with, is as likely to succeed with his mission as the present author would be if to operate on a cancer patient. Textbooks in political science or law are necessary but certainly not sufficient. To understand these new politico-existential conflicts, we need insights into psychology, drama and poetry to decipher what is happening.

The virtual neglect of the human dimensions is the more baffling since we are faced with a persistent media-based political simplification of complex conflicts. One is personification. The Iraqi conflict is reduced to Saddam Hussein's person, Somalia to Mohamed Farah Aideed, Yugoslavia to Slobodan Milosevic, Cuba to Castro, etc. The other is reductionism of causal explanations to make political decision-making easier; thus the reduction of explanatory factors down to one (the bad side's strategy or evilness), of number of actors down to two (the famous A

and B), of their attitudes (into either "white" or "black"), and the reduction of "the others" as human beings down to primitive animals (demonization and dehumanisation). In summary, two things should be abundantly clear: the existential and civilizational dimensions of conflict are coming to the fore and we are at a loss--as individuals, as institutions and as thinkers--to handle this fact.

Reconstruction and Peacebuilding

To rebuild post-war society is no simple project. Words and concepts are deceptive. "Re-build," to take one example, suggests that something destroyed can be re-created. This may apply to buildings or some other physical structures, but not so easily to social, psychological and mental structures. Memories of what the war brought cannot be eradicated; and the prewar social situation cannot be re-established when people have died, populations moved, and families split.

Reconstructing war-torn societies means reconstructing 1) human beings, soul and bodies, 2) social structure, 3) culture, 4) environment, and 5) a peace culture of reconciliation, repentance, forgiveness, respect, healing of collectively and individually acting out the sorrow, learning to live with it and simultaneously moving toward a vision of peaceful existence, either together or as good neighbours.

The present ad-hocness, the mechanical-materialist approach and attitude to what it means to reconstruct, to implement or build peace is problematic, to say the least. The same applies to the conspicuous lack of efficient permanent institutions and skills for such complex and urgent projects. There is, it seems, a need for discussion of aims, expectations and strategies. Also, certain conditions must be fulfilled before it is realistic to expect any success in post-war reconstruction. One of the most important is that the settlement, often termed peace plan, agreed upon must contain some basic principles and satisfy minimum quality criteria. And so, naturally, must the actors, the former conflicting parties. In sum, little more can be stated here than this: It is imperative that a reconstruction/peacebuilding strategy be discussed that defines what is to be done, by whom, for whom, when, where, by what means, on whose cost, and with what new risks involved.

The Dayton agreement for Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, epitomizes the theoretical, conceptual, structural and practical problems touched upon here. It does not solve any underlying conflicts but does stop, at least for a period ahead, military activity. It is mediated and signed by actors who are responsible for prolonged destructive policies and war. It violates vital principles which it is supposed to honour, permits re-militarization of the region, and is likely to aggravate tension and conflict at a later stage. And its civilian component is treated disgracefully in the document and in today's implementation by the international community. In short, while the international community is prepared to fight wars within hours, it seems virtually unprepared to fight for peace.

Some Short-Term Peaceful Measures

It will take decades, in the best of cases, to introduce and integrate the human dimensions of conflicts and their settlement into the international community. Long-term reforms of the United Nations and other inter-governmental organizations will be required as will a whole new attitude and conceptualization of security, defence, and development. However, it must be remembered that the ideas and the concepts which are considered totally unrealistic at the time of their conception have often turned out, years later, to be acceptable to decision-makers. Thus, it is some fifteen to thirty years since peace researchers developed theories of human security and defensive defence and argued that structural and direct violence were fundamentally related.

Likewise, sustainable development is age-old, common sense among indigenous peoples. It was only re-invented and adapted by the Brundtland Report. And not so long ago, it was considered "leftist" or "flower power" to protest nuclear weapons. In the late 1990s it has become Realpolitik. So will, we believe, the idea of conflict-resolution with a human face, of abolishing conflict illiteracy in human interaction and thereby reducing violence in the human community. Sooner or later, competence in foreseeing violence risks, helping others prevent violence and transform violent behaviour patterns into constructive problem-solving will be as esteemed as are today is competence in medicine or law. To be a conflict doctor will become as socially prestigious as it is to be a medical doctor.

We may even at some point look back upon processes such as that of bringing peace to former Yugoslavia and ask ourselves how we could foolishly believe that a few diplomats, however excellent and hardworking, could be expected to succeed in solving such immense problems. Until then, we have to act and take small steps. To follow are some modest, down-to-earth proposals.

General Education, Training and Institutional Learning

The conflict training and education programs can be included in courses, seminars, and workshops at international agencies and CSOs (Civil Society Organisations, usually negatively termed NGOs). They may take place in the headquarters (theoretical and general) or in the fields of violence and development alike (practical, project-related). Imagine a process like this:

1. Acquainting Yourself with Conflicts

(1) Introducing the course, the subject and planning practical matters. The first lecture(s) on the existence, essence and enigma of conflicts.

(2) Analysing and understanding conflicts - basic concepts and theories:

Conflict types and dimensions: conflicts and disputes, incompatibilities, scarce and plenty resources, cycles, structures, actors, approaches, environment and social and communicative structure.

Conflict levels: inner human conflicts, inter-human conflicts, intra-national, inter-national, regional and global conflicts, conflicts between humankind and Nature, and images of God.

Conflict dynamics: the management, evolution and transformation of conflicts.

Conflict analysis: how do we understand our own conflicts and how do we analyse those of others in order to help them? What are the basic preconditions for not only judging but also truly understanding a conflict, be it manifest or latent?

(3) Conflict roots: conflict in various spheres of human existence -- historical, psychological, economic, cultural, social, religious, and ethnic.

(4) Conflict resolution: the multitude of approaches, definitions and methods; Shallow versus deep resolution; The human dimensions; Diagnosis and prognosis, the use of theories and intuition in early warning, management, solution and post-conflict.

(5) War prevention, peacekeeping, peacemaking and peacebuilding. Actors for conflict resolution from you and me to the United Nations, OSCE and others, and multi-track diplomacy.

(6) Peace with nonviolent means or developing a peace culture, the myth of the victor, war and violence as conflict-resolution failure--toward a culture of peace. What should a peace plan look like?

(7) The roles and capacities of state and citizen diplomacy and how they can work in synergy and when?

(8) Conflicts and democracy: is democracy an effective conflict-resolution method? Social institutions (such as the market, the state, and economic growth) and modernisation as conflict resolution methods? The centrality of civic society: How to encourage and broaden human participation in conflict-resolution? The role of the media, schools and community-building.

(9) The role of violence in conflict management, from the individual to the global level; Ethical dimensions and arguments pro et contra; When can the argument be made that violence is necessary?

(10) Concrete cases of conflict-resolution with a minimum of or no violence -- from the individual to Ôland, Trento/Alte Adige.

2. Dealing with your own conflicts

(11) Learning to see the conflict region and your local conflicts in the light of what you have learnt now.

(12) How do you see the others and what would you like to suggest to them now?

(13) If we should make a peace plan for this area, what would its most important elements be?

(14) Major advantages and benefits and major obstacles: how do we develop a strategy for overcoming resistance to peacebuilding and reconciliation?

(15) Personal empowerment, personal risks vis-a-vis hardliners -- how do we deal with fear? How do we cope with stress, frustration and the many obstacles during war?

(16) What should be the first step we take here tomorrow?

(17) Can we form peacebuilding teams or mobile groups of "conflict doctors"? Can those who now know something teach other groups so the message gets spread?

(18) How do we solidify our knowledge and keep inspiration? Networking locally, regionally, internationally and with the teaching agency in the time to come.

Naturally, all these themes cannot be dealt with in any depth during a few days. Each educative effort should be tailor-made to the needs and circumstances -- time and financial resources -- of the participants. Also, when the participants are prospective mediators or conflict doctors, the role of Third Parties -- what they can and cannot do -- should be emphasized.

This teaching can be offered in basically three settings:

- * at the headquarters of the interested organizations where participants would work with illustrative cases from real life;

- * as part of field mission--for instance, as a couple of weeks' evening courses or through weekends; personnel stationed "in the bush" are often anyhow pretty bored or restricted in their movements for safety reasons;

- * to local parties in conflicts or development change processes; in such cases the teaching should be related directly to ongoing projects of development or reconstruction so the competence is of immediate use for the participants and instructors can assist in the implementation of skills on the spot.

3. Peace Education Teams

Peace educators can build multi-competent education teams. These may encompass not only "theoreticians" but also former military, police and civil affairs peacekeepers of the UN, pensioned generals, diplomats and, not the least, staff of various humanitarian agencies who have accumulated knowledge and experience about the conflict region.

4. Mobile Conflict Mitigation Teams in the Field

Individuals who have gone through a basic program may form groups of 3-5 who monitor conflict risks and intervene in local communities should situations develop that threaten to end in violence. Preferably they consist of members from two or more conflicting parties and serve as good examples and bridge-builders.

5. Conflict and Violence Assessment.

Like it is commonplace to do environment or technology assessment when undertaking development projects, it should become as commonplace to conduct studies of how externally induced changes might affect various groups and suggest measures to deal with short and long-term conflicts so that violence is prevented.

6. Reconciliatory Assessment.

This means building the "human conflict dimensions" into reconstruction of war-torn society. This is international aid given to jump start devastated societies. Of course, those most in need must be assisted first, but then there will have to be a strategy and a policy of peacebuilding. If not, the process itself is likely to (re)generate into serious conflicts. To build in a philosophy of reconciliation into the re-construction process is imperative for healing the scars, the traumas and the hate. Nothing is probably more important than to offer people practical opportunities to build confidence, work together and see that they can gain more from not fighting each other. Peace is seldom a matter of idealism. It comes when conflicting actors calculate that there is more to gain from that than from war or fighting. Thus, all aid agencies should use their creative capacities to not only build bridges but also provide bridge-building skills.

7. Post-Conflict Community Development

International peace plans are usually perceived from the top-down. This is only half of the process. Peace must also be built from the ground-up. Proposals for building a community in Western Slavonia in Croatia have been made: multi-ethnic school programs; youth-to-youth exchange programs over cease fire lines; village visitation programs; joint police training; joint workshops for professionals and journalists, teachers, nurses, lawyers, CSOs, farmers, and sports teams. These are designed to deal with common problems, identify and carry out reconstruction projects, and help formerly warring factions collaborate. Perhaps even make it a minimum condition for receiving the money and the materials to do the project. What people need in war-torn society is good experiences and seeing hopes fulfilled. It is to see that peace pays, that life and normality can return and that "the others" are humans too (re-humanisation).

8. Learning Democracy and Governance

Introducing multi-party procedures where the political culture underpinning it is simply non-existent only helps nationalists, authoritarian demagogues and the like. The experience of some

Eastern European countries speaks for itself. In former Yugoslavia, there are virtually only nationalist parties. In addition, the formation of political parties has become the main vehicle for the private appropriation of public property and goods. Consequently, we find less democracy than under the Communist yoke they wanted to throw off. Democracy itself is a conflict resolution method. Thus, without a general foundation of democratic culture and values, democratization will remain a varnish on authoritarian structures. Learning the human dimensions of conflicts can serve as one among many other instruments to further a genuine democratization in civil society and rebuilding governmental institutions.

9. Peace and Humanitarian Brigades

CSOs have long worked with more or less informal mitigation and mediation (e.g., the Quakers, various religious groups, Gandhians, scholarly-based organizations, and women's initiatives). Empowerment of local civil society groups is an important aim. The concept of peace brigades is inspired by Gandhi's "Shanti Sena" by which he meant that each village ought to have groups of people trained in nonviolence who could help citizens deal smoothly with their conflicts. Today, there is ample scope for similar, professionally trained "conflict doctors" to be sent to trouble spots. Social movements could even move in larger numbers and be present among, or between, conflicting parties as "human shields" with the single purpose of helping victims, be "eyes and ears on the ground" and facilitate contact between the parties. While not recommendable in the midst of war or genocide, such activity could make a difference in many other cases.

10. Stand-by UN and Other Volunteers Corpses

It would be useful if the UN (or one or more of the UN agencies) established a "UN-Volunteer Peace Corps" composed of a sufficiently large number of experienced UN and CSO experts and newly trained volunteers for UN-peace activities. Not only would government and CSO expertise complement each other, they would also bridge differences of "culture" and mutual skepticism between the two. Both are functionally needed for conflict-resolution and in peacekeeping operations. Allocation of UN funds and/or funds from the national and inter-governmental development aid budgets should be set off both for their operation and their manpower training purposes. The present disgraceful treatment of the civilian aspects of the Bosnian peace implementation plan illustrates how such a corps could probably do what no one is today tasked to do.

11. Conflict Consortiums

Particularly at the national and the regional level, there is a need for new cooperative efforts between: a) inter-governmental organizations working in human rights, humanitarian aid, development assistance, the environment and peace; b) CSOs in these and other fields; c) area expertise and d) conflict-resolution expertise.

If these were better coordinated, for instance through a joint national conflict-resolution secretariats, they could efficiently assist government as well as increase their own efficiency. They would be consortiums financed either by themselves and/or by their governments and aimed at fact-finding, early warning, monitoring, violence-prevention and analysis and, in addition:

- * do analysis for early warning and disseminate reports to all relevant bodies, nationally and internationally;

- * train humanitarian and development staff workers in understanding conflicts and their dynamics, including conflict-resolution;

- * participate in field missions by the UN, OSCE, and others to gather experience;

- * teach journalists conflict journalism rather than war-reporting;

- * promote a sentiment of non-violence, and help Third Parties as well as conflicting parties to develop a peace culture (cf. UNESCO);

- * and they would work as consultants to governments and other bodies interested in increasing its competence in managing conflict.

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