ESSAY

De-escalating conflict and creating safe spaces for dialogue

Des-escalar el conflicto y crear espacios seguros para el dialogo

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Abstract
This article delves into the complexities and methodologies of de-escalating conflict and creating safe spaces for dialogue. It emphasizes the significance of context and conflict analysis, alongside relevant frameworks, in understanding peacebuilding processes. The discussion includes critical reflections on peacebuilding praxis, distinguishing between adversarial conflict processes and more cooperative, depoliticized problem-solving approaches. Central to the article is the concept of 'action research as a safe space for dialogue,' which is presented as an effective tool for de-escalation and sustaining dialogue. The article illustrates this concept through a brief case study of action research in Georgia, employing the human needs theory framework. The conclusion suggests that the application of action research as a safe space for dialogue could be particularly valuable in addressing conflict and violence in Latin America, contributing to conflict transformation and peacebuilding efforts in the region. Through these insights, the article offers a practical approach to managing and resolving conflicts constructively.

Keywords:
Safe space for dialogue; action research; human needs theory, peacebuilding praxis

Resumen
En este artículo se abordan los retos y los procesos para desescalar los conflictos y proporcionar espacios seguros para el diálogo. Se presenta la importancia del análisis tanto del contexto como del conflicto, así como los marcos pertinentes. Se discuten varios supuestos de la praxis de construcción de la paz, destacando principalmente la distinción entre los procesos de conflicto adversariales y la resolución de problemas cooperativa, colaborativa y despolitizada. A continuación, el artículo ilustra el concepto de «investigación-acción como espacio seguro para el diálogo», como opción para desescalar el conflicto al tiempo que se convocan y sostienen actividades de diálogo. El artículo presenta un breve estudio de caso sobre un diálogo de investigación-acción llevado a cabo en Georgia, utilizando el marco de la teoría de las necesidades humanas. El artículo concluye sugiriendo que la idea de la investigación-acción como espacio seguro para el diálogo debería ser pertinente para abordar el conflicto y la violencia en América Latina con fines de transformación de conflictos y construcción de la paz.

Palabras clave:
Espacio seguro para el diálogo; investigación-acción; teoría de las necesidades humanas, praxis de construcción de la paz.

Introduction

Modern peace and conflict studies start from the premise that social and political conflict is entirely human and perfectly normal. A well-regarded textbook on conflict resolution simply states in the introduction: 'Conflict is a universal feature of human society'.[3] The challenge is to avoid or prevent conflicts from becoming violent and destructive. Instead, we may strive to transform conflict into opportunities for positive social change and restoring valued relationships within communities and societies. Conflicts are complex, and they play out in many different social and political contexts. Many factors are at play and conflict dynamics are chaotic. This article looks at two things that are often required in the short- to medium-term to promote positive conflict transformation – elements of de-escalating conflict, and elements of sustaining safe spaces for dialogue, where dialogue itself is a de-escalation strategy.

The perspectives shared here are based on practitioner experiences of the author in post-Soviet Georgia, South Africa, and elsewhere. Those experiences have included working as local staff in community-based organizations, for example in South Africa during the years preceding the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994. Those were the years of the South African Peace Accord where so-called black-on-black politicized ethnic conflict was addressed mainly at the level of black townships, such that it was characterized as 'community conflict'. In Georgia, presented below as a case study, the author worked for an international peacebuilding NGO, partnering with a Georgian development NGO. Tensions between minority regions and the Georgian central government included conflicts involving identity, security, and political legitimacy. Our intervention was originally framed as a conflict prevention project, in the sense of preventing political and social problems from escalating into violence. In West Africa, the author has worked extensively with resource conflicts and extractive industries – conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone, and environmental integrity in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The strategies and considerations described here should be entirely relevant in the context of ongoing socio-political conflicts in Latin America. This would include ethnic or identity conflicts between groups, or between indigenous groups and governments; it would include environmental conflicts between community-based groups and economic

3 In Ramsbotham, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution, Fourth Edition*, 9. Further, Charles Webel, a 'Fulbright Senior Specialist in Peace and Conflict Resolution', writes: "Conflicts appear historically inevitable and may be socially desirable if they result in perso nal and/or political progress. Conflicts may, perhaps paradoxically, promote and increase peace and diminish violence if the conflicting parties negotiate in good faith to reach solutions to problems that are achievable and tolerable, if not ideal." Webel, *Handbook of Peace and Conflict Studies*', Webel, C, Galtung, J., editors, 2007.

actors who develop or exploit natural resources; it would include interest-based conflicts around competition for scarce resources or the distribution of economic benefits; it would include conflict over land use, ownership, and human rights. All these conflicts could be described as rooted in social contexts where various stakeholder groups are struggling to have fundamental human needs satisfied – needs such as identity, security, participation, understanding and freedom.[4]

The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, I present some framework elements relevant for thinking about de-escalating conflict. Before any strategy or policy for de-escalating a specific conflict can be designed or attempted, there needs to be careful consideration of the broad sociopolitical context within which the conflict persists; there needs to be a preliminary look at conflict analysis; there needs to be consideration of conflict dynamics and the timing of any intervention; and 'safe spaces for dialogue' need to be envisioned. Secondly, the chapter presents a case study describing our conflict prevention project in Georgia, where directly involving stakeholders in joint problem-solving workshops was framed as 'action research as a safe space for dialogue'. There are many possible options for creating and sustaining safe spaces, but the approach described here is not widely known and has evolved from many peacebuilding projects and partnerships of the author.

Before proceeding, it will help to make clear a short set of assumptions that relate to peacebuilding praxis – the application of conflict resolution 'theory' to peacebuilding practice in the real world. Firstly, conflict transformation requires, or at least assumes, that stakeholders or conflicted parties *want* to find a way to engage in collaborative methods of conflict handling and want to avoid violence or adversarial win-lose processes if possible. It can seem as though this is almost never the case because we live in a world dominated by a power politics, or realpolitik paradigm. Secondly, peacebuilders assume that if stakeholders or conflicted parties are committed to adversarial, win-lose strategies and tactics it will be difficult to implement peacebuilding approaches. An early and significant challenge is to change stakeholder attitudes and perceptions about the costs and benefits of cooperative versus adversarial strategies and engagement. It is very common that parties who believe they are locked in adversarial, win-lose conflicts do not initially see the possibilities of moving to non-adversarial, cooperative problem-solving processes. But if we are to take up the difficult

4 This mention of human needs is related to the Human Scale Development framework of Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef and colleagues. Deep-rooted social conflict can be defined as the situation where social structures and institutions are dysfunctional for the satisfaction of a set of universal human needs: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, creation, identity, freedom.

challenge of changing hearts and minds, then de-escalating conflicts by creating sustainable safe spaces for dialogue is essential.

The final assumption, which is based in the author's own work with local community-based structures and organizations, is that peacebuilding strategies can be relevant and successful at local levels, even if larger society-wide, regional or international conflicts remain intractable or unapproachable. One way to understand this is that most peacebuilding organizations are committed to building peace 'from the bottom, up' – and often have access to civil society only at local, community levels where their efforts can be concrete, sustained, and locally mandated.

A few considerations for de-escalating conflict

From the perspective of a potential third-party intervention into a conflict, there are some essential elements to take into consideration if de-escalation is judged to be possible or urgent. The outline below is simplified by assuming there are two main protagonists who are well distinguished, and approachable. The reality will probably be more complex.

Context analysis: Any and every engagement or intervention starts with conflict *and* context analysis.[5] Third party intervenors often do this from a perspective that is external to the conflict. The following questions provide a higher level of context analysis. The answers to these questions then point to various possible frameworks for conflict analysis, of which there are many, and ultimately to designing intervention strategies:

a) Are conflict drivers embedded in social structures and institutions, e.g. laws, economic factors, cultural practices, political policies, historical narratives? A structural conflict can be defined as institutionalized denial of the satisfaction of some of the basic human needs mentioned above. For example, the social structures and institutions of apartheid South Africa intentionally denied the satisfaction of identity, security, participation and other human needs of non-white South Africans during the decades of white minority rule. When

5 The distinction between context and conflict analysis here is a little bit subtle, and sometimes there will be overlap. The distinction that is meant here is that each instance of conflict is specific, with definable scope, stakeholders, and issues, whereas the social context is broader. The social context could be described or analyzed whether there was a specific conflict embedded within it. For example, within the broad context of the social system of apartheid in South Africa, there were many, many specific, concrete conflicts that could be addressed at the level of parties, communities, industries, organizations, and stakeholders.

the context analysis indicates structural conflict, the conflict transformation process will probably, eventually, require fundamental structural social change.

b) What type of conflict is it, and at what social level does it play out? Is the conflict international; intra-state; community or communal; ethnic; is it about environmental issues or natural resource and extractive industries activities; is the conflict violent? How do the parties and other stakeholders understand the conflict from their own perspectives? Different conflict types suggest different frameworks for conflict analysis.

c) What is the history of the conflict, within its broader social context?

d) How do stakeholders define 'the problem to solve'? For example – if we take the phrase, 'no peace without development, no development without peace' – what comes first? Does a conflicted community have a starting point, either 'without peace first, we will never have a possibility for investment and sustainable development' – or 'without development, we will never realize positive peace'? Conflict analysis and intervention design begin with the starting point of the key stakeholders.

e) What does the societal map of key stakeholders, other interested parties, and potential third parties look like? Are there any acknowledged governmental authorities, or other power brokers, who could or should be involved in an intervention or de-escalation strategy? Are there any ongoing interventions?

Conflict Analysis: With the broad outlines of the socio-political context always in mind, a shorter and more focused set of basic conflict analysis questions will include at least these:

a) Who are the key parties of stakeholders central to the conflict? Are there factions within some or all these parties? Are there likely 'spoilers' – interest groups who will be motivated to sustain the conflict and resist de-escalation or transformation?

b) What are the essential, specific issues or problems central to the ongoing conflict? What is the problem to solve? What are the root causes of the conflict?

c) What are the conflict behaviors? What strategies, actions, options are parties using to respond to the conflict? Are parties locked into adversarial assumptions and processes, and how?

d) With respect to conflict dynamics, what are the short-term conflict or violence triggers?

e) Who represents the conflicted parties, and do they have legitimacy and mandate from the constituencies they speak or claim to speak for?

Context and conflict analysis are not one-off or one time check-list tasks that are ever finished. To de-escalate a conflict, analysis is an ongoing process that is always necessary, never completed, and essential for any trust building, paradigm shifting, or attitude changing if adversarial processes are to be transformed into opportunities for cooperation and collaborative problem solving.

Timing: Much has been written about ripeness theory. Ripeness theory holds that there is a 'ripe moment' to intervene into or resolve a conflict. Usually this assumes that both parties have concluded that winning is not possible, but continuing with violence or adversarial strategies is too costly or too painful. This ripe moment is sometimes described as a 'mutually hurting stalemate' and may signal that at least some people are ready to consider changing strategies, exploring compromises, or attempting negotiation or mediation. One problem with ripeness theory is that those who adhere to a power politics or political realism perspective sometimes imagine or propose strategically increasing the costs and pain involved in ongoing conflict and violence to provoke the ripe moment, for example through economic or other sanctions. Whether or not such strategies provoke conflict ripeness, doing so through adversarial strategies will usually make the challenges of transforming conflict more difficult.

Peacebuilders are usually disinclined to use ripeness theory as a rationalization for escalating a conflict to de-escalate or transform it. That should mean that there is no wrong time to discuss with conflicting parties their options or motivations for moving from adversarial strategies to collaborative/cooperative conflict resolution. It is sometimes possible to help parties reframe their understanding of the conflict, their perceptions of the other side, or to develop new options long before the point of stalemate or defeat. The challenge for interveners is to create opportunities for reflection, engagement, dialogue or trust building that lead to de-escalation, and further to problem solving and conflict transformation.

It is worth noting that a frequent challenge for bringing together conflicted parties in asymmetrical conflicts - for example conflicts between private sector actors in extractive indus-

tries in conflict with indigenous or local peoples impacted by such economic activities – is that they usually operate on very different time frames. The time required for engaging communities and civil society structures is usually much longer than most decision or change making processes that happen within a company, or an industry, or even within most governmental institutions. Resolving or transforming a conflict that is framed as 'community conflict', or when conflict parties include large groups of people who require organized representation and consultation will typically require months or years because of the complexities of working with and within communities.

The final thing to say about timing and timeframes is that as a principle, 'good process takes time'. Most conflicts that can be easily resolved have been resolved. Deep-rooted intractable conflicts will always require significant investment of time and effort, and therefore often require extensive human and financial resources dedicated to patient, holistic and creative problem solving. Negotiation and mediation can take years, and social change processes are never as short as political cycles, NGO project cycles, or donor cycles.

The elements discussed thus far - context and conflict analysis, and the design and timing considerations of any intervention - lead towards the possibility of de-escalating conflict through some type of dialogue. It is worth mentioning that various kinds of traditional diplomacy, various flavors of 'multi-track diplomacy', confidence or trust building measures, even training parties in conflict resolution or negotiation are also possible strategies that could lead to conflict de-escalating dialogue.

Safe spaces for dialogue and De-escalation

If conflicted parties are committed to adversarial, win-lose strategies dialogue will be extremely difficult, probably disingenuous and possibly dangerous. A genuine willingness to consider dialogue or participate in an intervention does then represent a de-escalation of the conflict. Parties will need to believe that there is a "safe space" where dialogue can be attempted or tested. A safe space is sometimes a physical place, usually one that is regarded as "neutral territory" by all stakeholders. However, there are other types of safe spaces, as the safe space is also a metaphor for many other elements of a conflict transformation process. Some of the essential elements of a safe space for dialogue include conveners with moral authority; impartial facilitation; agreed ground rules or guidelines to support constructive communications; confidentiality; and trust building opportunities.

Convening: Inviting conflicted parties to dialogue in safe spaces often involves employing a credible convener. A convener may or may not have other facilitative roles. Credibility can come through:

a) Moral authority – religious persons or institutions are sometimes useful and effective. Sometimes another type of eminent person with moral authority can be involved, someone that the conflicting parties are willing to listen to and trust.

b) Recognized impartiality – Some NGOs, other civil society actors, or community leaders such as elders (who also often carry moral authority) can sometimes play a convening role. For example, a UN agency such as UNEP[6] might act as an impartial convener in a conflict involving the environment or extractive industries.

c) Relevant political power – further below there will be discussion of 'de-politicizing' the conflict and attempting to diminish the negative influence of power politics, but there are sometimes political actors or institutions that bring institutional capacity, recognized governmental and legal authority, financial resources, and/or acknowledged ability to employ both 'carrots and sticks' to the challenge of implementing a dialogue process.

Facilitation: De-escalation often involves facilitative activities by various types of third parties. When disputes are addressed as community conflict, they often benefit from relationship-based facilitation, meaning that the facilitators have an ongoing valued relationship and role within the conflicted community, are therefore trusted and available for a long-term engagement. This style of facilitation is usually process-oriented, rather than outcome-oriented. The principle assumed here is that good process will usually render good outcomes, whatever they are, whereas poor process will seldom achieve sustainable and positive outcomes, whatever shape those outcomes take. Some of the activities that relationship-based facilitation will involve include:

a) Trust building between parties – there are many formal and informal techniques for carefully supporting parties through opportunities for trust building. There is a wide range of practical and ethical issues to be considered when designing and implementing trust building activities.

6 United Nations Environment Programme

b) Facilitated relationship analysis – Conflicted parties need to reflect on the fundamental nature of their relationships and build capacities for empathy. Facilitators often help parties 'stand in the shoes' of the other side, or reverse roles to create insight and motivate cooperation.

c) Conflict analysis – Perhaps the most essential dialogue activity that can be facilitated in an appropriate safe space is joint conflict analysis. Negotiation, mediation and problem solving are all processes for the parties to shape a shared or common analysis and agree on the scope and nature of the shared problem that needs to be solved.

d) Strategy costing – Facilitators can help conflicted parties evaluate the costs versus benefits of various strategies or approaches to either continuing the conflict through adversarial processes or attempting resolution. For example, a conflict analysis exercise using elements of 'Getting to Yes' or principled negotiation[7] could involve these questions:

• what are 'your' key interests in the conflict; what does the other side think are their key interests?

• what are your best alternatives to a negotiated agreement – what are you going to do if negotiation fails; what is the other side likely to do in response, if negotiation fails?

• what options for resolution can you imagine that would satisfy both your interests, and their interests?

The ideal outcome from such an exercise is that parties on both sides of the conflict have an 'ah-ha' moment wherein they jointly realize that they have a) shared or common interests; b) poor alternatives to a negotiated agreement; and c) they can see possible resolution options that could satisfy the interests and needs of both sides. This does happen in real life.

e) Quiet diplomacy and providing good offices – Sometimes de-escalation can only begin through confidential or secret communications. The 'quiet' in quiet diplomacy is this element of confidentiality, which may allow risk-taking on the part of representatives of the

7 Mention of principled negotiation here refers specifically to the widely known and well-regarded framework of 'Getting to Yes', by Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton. They eventually developed a detailed version of the principles of principled negotiation, identifying 'seven elements of principled negotiation: relationship; interests; options; alternatives; communication; legitimacy; commitments'.

parties to explore even the possibility of negotiations, mediation, ceasefires, or other types of dialogue. What's 'good' about good offices is that they are, at least metaphorically, safe spaces.

f) Empowering 'weaker' parties – When conflicts are asymmetrical, the party assumed to be weaker may require expert advice, training, information or other resources, simply to be able to participate in a dialogue or transformation process. There will be some types of third parties who can support these empowerment strategies working with only one side, and then not in an impartial, facilitating or mediation role. There will be other types of facilitators who can both work to level the playing field and be trusted by all sides of the conflict to support processes that are impartial from the perspective of conflict transformation.

Resources: Would-be conveners or facilitators must consider whether they have the human, financial, and time resources to make a long-term commitment to any conflict intervention that involves communities. There are often administrative, logistical, technology, and communication costs that inflate any intervention budget. Relationship-based work, especially as noted above with respect to community conflict, will always consume time, funding, and human resources (patience, creativity, empathy, sound ethical judgement) beyond whatever is originally budgeted.

Action Research as a Safe Space for Dialogue

Action research is a participatory activity that directly involves stakeholders not as the subjects of study, but in the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of a research process. They become the primary 'owners' of the information, benefits and knowledge that is produced. Action research is different from other kinds of research because of its 'action' component. The goal is *not* to gather and document independent data or information, but rather to create new *knowledge that is actionable* by stakeholders working together to resolve complex problems and address difficult conflicts and their root causes.

Would-be mediators often find that one of the difficulties of 'getting to yes' is firstly, 'getting to the table'. This can be because parties fear that negotiation or mediation will somehow force them to make compromises they are unwilling to make, or expose information they hope to conceal, or involve political actors and forces that they will not be able to control.

Trust is low, fear of unknown consequences is high, adversarial power politics may be intense, and direct communication between parties is challenging.

In such a situation, an appropriate facilitator can propose bringing parties together for joint conflict analysis in an action research setting, were, 'it's not mediation, it's not negotiation… it's just research'. Often, such an activity aims not at final solutions, but at joint, facilitated dialogue between parties that can result in reframing the conflict and creating new information specific to solving shared problems. In the process, stakeholders build trust, establish more open communications, share and shape narratives and perspectives, and can invest time and resources in 'cooperative, creative and collaborative problem solving'.

Narratives: When representatives of conflicted parties participate in such an action research dialogue, 'storytelling' or narrative building is usually an early, crucial and intensive phase of the project. Its is worth noting that this is also the essential early phase of a mediation, when the mediator asks parties to tell 'their side of the story'. The action research setting where all parties are in the role of researchers can become the safe space where participants are encouraged to fully share their own stories, perceptions, perspectives, versions of the 'truth', and listen carefully to the same type of 'data' as it comes from the other side.

Separate people from problem: The classical view of an intense conflict has the two parties sitting across the table from each other, locked in acrimonious discussion or debate, each blaming the other side - convinced that the problem is the people on the other side. By turning the 'problem to solve' into the object of research, the action research process puts the problem on one side of the table, with the protagonists sitting (metaphorically) side-by-side and facing together the problem they share. They can then cooperate in the challenge of defeating their shared problem to the ultimate benefit of each other and their constituencies. At least three benefits can be realized if this reframing is achieved: 1) as the view of the conflict shifts, and as parties engage in dialogue, de-escalation is happening; 2) dialogue and de-escalation contribute to trust building, perhaps even 'humanizing' the other side to some degree; 3) as the conflict is viewed through progressively less adversarial lenses, it can slowly become depoliticized. The point of depoliticizing a conflict is to reduce the negative influence of power politics.

Legitimacy and integrity: When conflicted parties are embroiled in adversarial politics and strategies, it is common for differences of perspective and opinion to be expressed as the other side lacking legitimacy or integrity. However, in the framework of an action research

project, differences of perspective and opinion are understood as natural and healthy. Facilitators often establish guidelines to support the safe space and promote useful dialogue and reflection. The guideline here would be 'differences of perspective and opinion are natural and healthy, and in order to not treat them as lack of legitimacy and integrity, we will work respectfully, openly, and constructively'.

Theoretical frameworks: In a typical negotiation or mediation, there is seldom space or scope for introducing theoretical frameworks to the process. All too often theory is dismissed or denigrated as 'academic' in the negative sense – in the sense that it is somehow detached from immediate events and processes in the real world, and therefore irrelevant. However, in an action research dialogue, facilitators can introduce helpful theoretical frameworks as tools for usefully organizing information and reframing issues.

Depending on the context and conflict analysis, there are many theory frameworks or conceptual frameworks that can be introduced to support the analytical work of a problem-solving dialogue. Identity conflicts can involve human needs theory. Development conflicts can involve human scale development theory.[8] Environmental conflicts can involve frameworks such as 'The Equator Principles', or the 'Millennium Ecosystem Assessment'. Every root cause for serious socio-political conflict has relevant and useful theoretical frameworks that can be used as tools for an efficient action research dialogue intervention.

Case Study

In the late 1990s the country of Georgia had separated from the former Soviet Union but was suffering from a multitude of identity conflicts and political crises. The regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had attempted secession, the conflicts were unresolved, not amenable to political mediation or the best efforts of various intervenors, and in fact remain 'frozen' until today.

Three other Georgian regions were deemed 'fragile', and there was an internal analysis at International Alert[9] that suggested that Georgia could 'break up' in the way that Yugoslavia did

8 See Max-Neef, 'Human Scale Development', accessible at http://www.wtf.tw/ref/max-neef.pdf

9 International Alert is a conflict resolution international NGO based in London and working globally. The author worked at the time in the Eurasia Team of International Alert. The Georgia Regions action research dialogue project was funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the British government, and implemented with local Georgian NGO partners, the Foundation for Development of Human Resources (FDHR), over 2.5 years from 2000-2002 in Georgia.

in 1991-92. The three fragile regions include Javakhetia – where the majority were Georgian citizens, but mainly of Armenian origin, and therefore an ethnic minority within Georgia. In the region of Samegrelo, adjacent to Abkhazia, the people were Georgian citizens, but a linguistic minority, mainly speaking 'Mingrelian'. The third region is Adjara, consisting of Georgian citizens and a religious minority of mainly Muslims.

The Georgian Regions Project staff of International Alert and our local Georgian NGO partners were called into the offices of a senior government official prior to the initiation of action research dialogue workshops in Javakhetia and Samegrelo.[10] It had been noted that DFID was funding 'a project of *conflict prevention*' in Georgia's fragile regions. This official expressed, in very strong terms, that simply going to those regions and talking, in any way, about 'conflict prevention' was dangerous and risked provoking conflict, simply by raising the possibility of conflict or researching the situation. These regions were deemed very sensitive and very fragile. The topic of the research was then reframed as an examination of the structural and institutional relationship between 'regions' and 'the center'. The Georgian central government was weak, the regional governance and civil society structures were weaker. The entire situation was entirely dysfunctional from the perspective of minority Georgian citizens, who felt that their identity, security, participation and development human needs would not be satisfied within the context of the new Georgian state.

Research dialogue workshops were held in two regions, with participants from local, regional and national governmental and civil society structures. Narratives were built around peoples' experience of the weaknesses and dysfunctional institutions of governance; for provision of services; weak security structures; poor infrastructure and development prospects; and profound economic challenges. An extensive list of specific problems was developed based on these narratives – including such issues as: unemployment; criminalized economic activity; lack of trust of the Georgian police; corruption; lack of intergroup tolerance and understanding; inadequate health care; lack of consultation in policy making; inadequate public management; educational migration; lack of knowledge of human and legal rights; physical and informational isolation. An original list of 137 problematic issues was scaled down to 37 serious problems. At this point in the process, while the 37 serious problems were confronting for participants, the dialogue process was improving working relationships, building some measures of trust, and the adversarial assumptions that had dominated

10 The region of Adjara proved to be inaccessible in a manageable time frame and was not included in the eventual project.

early consultations were transforming into a shared sense of the need and potential for joint problem solving.

The introduction of the human scale development framework allowed for the reframing of issues. The 37 specific problems became sets of 'symptoms' of just a few underlying 'problems to solve' described as unsatisfied human needs. In this analysis:

'The *security needs* of people in the region are not adequately satisfied, because of these structural problems and issues':

1) criminalized economic activity
2) lack of confidence in the security forces
3) lack of knowledge of human and legal rights
4) rumors and fears
5) informational isolation
6) geographic and ethnic isolation
7) lack of ethnic/national understanding and tolerance
8) corruption

'The *identity needs* of people in the region go unsatisfied because of':

1) informational and geographic isolation
2) economic and education migration
3) local governance frustrations
4) ethnic/national policies
5) language policies
6) lack of ethnic/national understanding and tolerance
7) corruption

'The *participation needs* of people in the region may go unsatisfied because of these issues':

1) inefficiency of local administration
2) lack of mass media
3) inadequate information for problem solving
4) lack of effective NGO cooperation
5) non-transparency of local governance
6) lack of higher education opportunities
7) perceived economic and political bias

The problem to solve becomes not specifically lack of mass media, or corruption in local governance, but social structures and institutions that do not function adequately for the satisfaction of security, identity, participation and other fundamental human needs.

Participants then went through an extensive brainstorming exercise to develop joint proposals that would involve individuals, organizations and institutions at the levels of communities, regions, and the central government. Every joint project was framed so that 'successful implementation of this project will contribute to improving institutionalized satisfaction of the human need of security (or identity, or multiple human needs)'. Every successful initiative then strengthens the working relationships between region and center, both interpersonal and structural— thereby contributing to reduced tensions, better needs satisfaction, increased capacity for problem solving and dialogue, and ultimately conflict transformation.

Conclusion

This article has outlined some of the basic elements and processes relevant to de-escalating conflict and providing safe spaces for dialogue. In the brief case study above, government officials, local leaders, and civil society representatives faced a situation where the country of Georgia was at risk of breaking up violently, a process that had already begun. A small but well placed and well implemented project to engage those leaders in action research as a safe space for dialogue had the result of contributing to reduced tensions in the country; improving the understanding of complex issues through action research; reframing the fundamental shape and purposes of problem solving between the regions and the center; and making a modest contribution to conflict prevention.

If the drivers of conflict and violence in Latin America include similar problems – criminalized economic activity; lack of ethnic tolerance, lack of confidence in security forces; all manner of challenges for sustainable development; inefficient and ineffective governance structures; corruption – then we could recommend some of these processes in communities and societies. De-escalate conflict by transforming adversarial, win-lose assumptions into opportunities for problem solving dialogue in safe spaces. Engage in trust building and relationship-based work. Build capacity for, and institutionalize conflict and context analysis, and facilitate that activity to directly involve the protagonists of conflicts. Evolve societies such that social structures and institutions exist for the purpose of ensuring the satisfaction of fundamental human needs.

A crucial role that third parties can play is to facilitate conflict analysis with stakeholders, whether that happens with just one party, or with both parties in a carefully designed joint process. Eventually, dialogue used to reframe conflict analyses to create shared narratives for negotiation or mediation will be essential to any positive conflict transformation effort.

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