Disseminating Knowledge from the World around the World – The Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation

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GENERAL OBJECTIVE OF THE SESSION

The proposed presentation introduces the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation, a global online platform which aims to collect and disseminate first-rate theoretical and practical knowledge in the areas of conflict resolution, development, human rights work and social change. It discusses the vision and idea behind creating such a resource; successes and challenges in its development; and advantages and limitations of its online, virtual nature. If appropriate, it will conclude by focusing on substantive ideas raised in the most recent Berghof Handbook Dialogue on Social Change, discussing the question how useful a dialogue format, which presents diverse and sometimes contradictory experiences and expertise, can be for the practitioner and scholar in the global field.

The Berghof Handbook is a comprehensive and cumulative website resource that provides continually updated cutting-edge knowledge, experience and lessons learned for those working in the field of transforming violent ethnopolitical conflict. The website content comes from two central resources: 1) commissioned Articles by leading experts from current practice and scholarship; and 2) a Dialogue Series on key issues, in which practitioners and scholars critically engage with and debate one another in light of their varying experience.

The Berghof Research Center started this project back in 1999, based on the conviction that responding constructively to inter-group conflicts requires more ingenuity, creativity and hard work than had so far been invested in this area. Almost 10 years later, we want to pose the question how far we have come, and how we need to adjust our approach in the light of current developments in our communities of learning, in politics and in technology.

BACKGROUND AND AIMS OF THE BERGHOF HANDBOOK

Three overarching principles inform the Handbook's approach, namely:

- to narrow the gap between practice and theory in conflict transformation; supporting in particular the voices of practitioners in the debate, and making the best of new and relevant academic thinking available in practical form
- to support and engage scholars and practitioners, especially those from the South and other developing regions
- to play a coordinating and clarifying role among the diverse voices and organisations in this multi-disciplinary field

In the Berghof Center's analysis, one of the main challenges the field of conflict transformation faced in its early days was the weak relationship between practice, research and theory. In addition, there seemed to be a lack of communication and joint learning between fields that all had an important role in the prevention and transformation of violent conflict - namely peace work, development cooperation, humanitarian aid, and human rights work. With many colleagues, we shared the belief that the time was ripe for a systematic presentation of the current state-of-the-art in practical, empirical and theoretical knowledge. In addition, this project sought to identify lessons learned and best practices in a way that would engage practitioners and scholars from different fields and disciplines, as well as those working on different levels of political action.

Thus we set the following aims for our endeavour:

- to give practitioners and researchers an overview of the currently available concepts, methods, and techniques in the area of civil conflict management, including their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their potential for adaptation
- to give an up-to-date general overview of what methods are most promising in which situations, how to apply these methods, what dilemmas might unfold when using the methods, what strategies there are to deal with these dilemmas, and where to obtain further relevant information
- to analyse the role of the various actors in peacebuilding, including international governmental organisations, national governments, development agencies, non-governmental organisations, and other actors in civil society
- to discuss strategies of coordination and networking between these actors
- to reflect upon lessons learned, best practices, and the challenges of assessing the impact of conflict transformation efforts
- to involve scholars in order to document the state of research in these areas, address open questions and unresolved problems, and give impulses for practical (action) research and reflection, and
- to support and complement existing attempts to define civil conflict transformation and to close the 'theory gap' in this field

It is our vision that the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation will be used by practitioners and scholars from different parts of the world and contribute to better practice in preventing civil war and dealing constructively with ethnopolitical conflict. Five broad areas are therefore covered in five different sections: Concepts and cross-cutting Challenges; Conflict Analysis and Assessment; Capacity-Building and Third-Party Tools; Structural Reforms, Institution-Building and Violence Control; and finally Post-Conflict Regeneration and Reconciliation.

Questions for the Participants

- What do you see as strengths and weaknesses of the resource?
- How comprehensive is the range of issues covered by the Handbook? Where are gaps? What features are you missing?
- What use can such a resource find in the context of your work?
- How accessible would such a resource prove in the context of your work (pdf-downloads, limited hard copies)?
- What are comparable experiences? What do the numbers tell us about outreach, availability, visibility, usefulness?
- What do you take away? What would you suggest we learn and improve?

BERGHOF HANDBOOK DIALOGUE SERIES – THE ISSUE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

The Berghof Dialogue Series is an offshoot of the Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation. Each topic in the series is chosen because it is particularly relevant to societies in conflict and the practice of conflict transformation, and because it raises important issues at the present time. In each dialogue, practitioners and scholars critically engage and debate in light of their experience.

Typically, a Dialogue includes one lead article from key experts, and four commentaries from practitioners and scholars. Rather than presenting a single analysis, these practitioner-scholar dialogues stimulate debate, integrating different perspectives, challenging prevailing views, comparing research findings with experiences and insights on the ground. Importantly, Dialogues, as works of broad relevance, are also distributed in print version.

Contributors to the Dialogue on "Social Change and Conflict Transformation" were five reflective practitioners and scholars (Christopher Mitchell, Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR), George Mason University, USA; Ed Garcia, International Alert, UK; Chris Spies, independent consultant/formerly UNDP Guyana; Ilana Shapiro, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA; Vivienne Jabri, King's College London, UK; Daniela Körppen, Berghof Foundation for Peace Support, Germany). In collecting the responses to Mitchell's lead article, it was interesting to note what diverse routes they took. One question poses itself: Do practitioners and scholars talk to each other in a language that each can hear and understand? Can we, amidst this critical dialogue, find seeds for a common approach to the challenge of social change?

A number of themes and topics stood out as particularly salient, some finding broad consensus, some remaining controversial.

• First, there is the issue of **individual and social change**, some would even say individual *versus* social change – and the related question of what conflict transformation can hope to influence. Its goals are far-reaching, encompassing individual and structural change. At the same time, its instruments, it has repeatedly been argued, are much more suited to inter-personal, small-group conflicts. Mitchell's approach suggests that whereas there are tractable and intractable dimensions in every conflict, crucial escalation and de-escalation paths are human-made, and can thus be influenced by working with the people involved, particularly at decision-making levels. Garcia approaches the issue more from an advocate's standpoint, thus asserting that social change is necessary and a goal worth striving for, while not specifying what the nitty-gritty details of this process look like. Spies asserts that processes of learning and change are ultimately about people and that the learning of some key people can create ripple-effects in the larger social fabric. Shapiro shows that conflict interventions indeed start at diverse levels of analysis and assume different levels of influence – it is in her contribution that the issue of what needs to change (first) becomes most tangible and reveals its potentially counterproductive consequences. Jabri and Körppen argue that a positivist way of approaching the challenge of social change necessarily neglects the way in which the individual and social are interwoven, and in which the endeavour of conflict transformation is an inherently socio-political struggle. Thus, while there seems to exist a tentative consensus that both levels – the individual and the social – can and must be influenced, we do not yet understand very clearly how the transfer from one level to the other works, builds up and is sustained.

• A concern that runs through all contributions is the **quality of change processes**. It takes various forms: Mitchell's emphasis on creating learning environments in order to break patterns of entrapment; Garcia's proposition of guiding principles; Spies' framework for the development of "dormant faculties" and emphasis on respectful listening; Jabri's call that politics – particularly the politics of inclusion and exclusion, of symmetry or asymmetry of power – must enter much more prominently into the equation. They all remind us that the way in which we engage and pursue the objective of social change will have a profound influence on the outputs and outcomes we help to create. This leaves us with the challenge to continue to look closely and critically at our assumptions, analyses and actions in an ever-evolving circle of critical (self-) examination.

• The third prominent issue is the question of how best to **sustain change** after having initiated it, presumably in the direction of a more just and peaceful state. Garcia points out that peace constituencies spanning generations, levels and sectors must be mobilised and certain "pillars" erected, including the adherence to human rights, truly inclusive processes of governance, accountable security forces and economic development. All contributors remind us that these are long-term, and, in all truth, probably never-ending endeavours. Conflict, as Spies formulates a key assumption of conflict transformation, is "a necessary and inevitable dynamic in all human relationships" – which is why "process is as important as outcome" (Spies in Dialogue No. 5, pp. 3-4 of his contribution). And while Körppen confesses some unease related to Mitchell's outcome-orientated formulation that "solutions can be found", it can be considered a shared conviction that the transformation of conflict, and the inducement of social change, is a task that will pose itself over and over again.

• A fourth issue taken up by most contributors is the role of **change agents**. More specifically, some debate centres around the question of the relative importance of **third-party** interveners ("outsiders") versus **insiders**. One of the criticisms concerning Mitchell's attempt to systematise potential roles of change agents is that there is an implicit over-reliance on external agents. In contrast, Spies, Garcia, and Körppen explicitly state that there is no replacement for insiders and internal resources. While third parties can therefore play a facilitating role when things get stuck, "there is no alternative to local ownership" (Spies in Dialogue No. 5, p. 3 of his contribution; for a discussion of the problematic aspects of this catchphrase see Reich 2006). How to act in ways that turn this conviction into a reality remains a challenge in most conflict interventions.

• Associated with the insider/outsider issue, and intimately linked with assumptions guiding present analysis and intervention practice, is a final issue that crops up regularly: that of **asymmetry of power**. This entails the searching critique that our intervention repertoires are not well suited to situations in which the parties to a conflict are inherently unequal. Jabri formulates this most pointedly with respect to Mitchell's generic categories: "All are equalised, when in actuality – and in the conflicts that matter in present-day global politics – there is no such equality" (Jabri in Dialogue No. 5, p. 3 of her contribution). This leaves us in a position where we need to re-examine and possibly re-align our categories of analysis and modes of engagement.

Regarding the practice, theory and politics of change, the contributions to Dialogue No. 5 show that these component parts of social change present separate challenges, yet are interwoven in many ways, some of which we are only beginning to understand. Bridging the gap between theory and practice, but also between conflict transformation and politics, is a continuing challenge. A positivist and a constructivist approach, in particular, have come up against each other, suggesting an underlying struggle of paradigms. While there are distinct and relevant advantages to the constructivist stance, such an approach to the practice of conflict transformation which will leave a tangible imprint on the politics of conflict and peace has yet to emerge. If we follow the lead of most contributors to this Dialogue, one thing is clear: the further development of a theory of social change needs to accommodate practice, not simply in providing empirical answers, but by integrating practitioners into the process of generating questions.

Questions for the participants

- In light of your own experience, how insightful and how helpful do you find the presented approaches to social change? What would you use in your own work? What would you not use, and why?
- Are these the people you would like to hear about on the issue of social change? Who is missing? Why?
- What would your recommendations be for improving the accessibility and outreach of such a Dialogue on Social Change, and the Dialogue Series in general?

LENGTH AND STRUCTURE OF SESSION
90 minutes; two short presentations (20 minutes & 15 minutes respectively); discussion time

SUPPORTING MATERIAL

- Homepage of Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation: www.berghof-handbook.net (for the purpose of the presentation, a beamer and a labtop with internet connection will be needed in order to familiarise participants familiar with the virtual space of the Berghof Handbook platform)

- Berghof Handbook Dialogue No. 5: Social Change and Conflict Transformation. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Transformation 2006. (see http://www.berghof-handbook.net/std_page.php?LANG=e&id=134&parent=5 and http://www.berghof-handbook.net/uploads/download/dialogue5_sochange_complete.pdf; a limited number of hardcopies will be available during the session).

- Statistics of online use of the Berghof Handbook Homepage (will be prepared as a handout close to the conference in order to show most current data)

- Table of Contents for online Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation, up-to-date for July 2008

REFERENCES

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