Everyday peace: How ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict

Many conflicts across Europe and the rest of the world appear impossible to resolve. Yet as **Roger Mac Ginty** *explains, even in the most intractable of conflicts there remains room for individuals and small groups to establish spaces of tolerance and conciliation.*

Conflicts often develop a logic that is difficult to break. This helps explain the long-running and seemingly intractable nature of many contemporary conflicts around the world – a number of which are within or bordering the European Union.

There might be a reciprocal and escalating exchange (tit-for-tat) between antagonists that is difficult to break. Or there might be a political economy that means that ending the conflict would mean that some actors would lose financially or in terms of status or legitimacy. Conflicts are often accompanied by narratives, stances and mindsets that stress the righteousness of the cause and the danger of deviation from it. To question one's own group might be seen as weakness or disloyalty.

In a sense, there is a path dependency associated with many violent conflicts, in which political economies, identity, and power structures 'trap' antagonists and narrow their ability to investigate alternatives to conflict. And pro-peace actors, including the EU with its stated aims of conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding, need to be careful lest they reinforce the very conflicts they seek to de-escalate.

So how do conflicts end? There is no simple answer to that question, and conflicts don't really end in a definitive sense. All conflicts have an afterlife and legacy. The best that can be hoped for is a substantial lowering of tensions and the institution of new ways to manage and possibly transform the conflict.

Here we can think of cases like Northern Ireland or Colombia where there have been negotiation processes, or South Africa and Sudan where there have been transitions of power. None are perfect. Indeed, each has very significant problems and continuing societal dysfunctions. But lives have been saved and improved, new systems of governance (and sometimes redress) have been put in place, and the locus of power has shifted.

While there is a burgeoning literature on the onset of conflict – or the factors that trigger violent conflict – there is less literature on ways to lower the cost of conflict and, perhaps, reach some sort of negotiated outcome. A prominent exception is [work by I. William Zartman](#) which examines how a 'mutually hurting stalemate' might encourage conflict actors to scope out alternatives to a zero sum win. There is also very useful literature that views conflicts as complex adaptive systems, and as such as having systemic aspects that prioritise the continuation of the system.

Conflict disruption

With this systemic view of conflict in mind, it is useful to think of ways of disrupting the system – of disrupting the logics, narratives, political economies and stances that constitute and normalise conflict. This is the topic of my new book, [*Everyday Peace: How so-called ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict*](#). The terms conflict prevention, conflict management, conflict resolution and conflict transformation are common in the peacebuilding lexicon. Perhaps we can think of adding another: conflict disruption.

Conflict disruption can be seen as a way of upsetting the conflict equilibrium and – in the best case scenario – shocking conflict actors into alternative modes of behaviour that can de-escalate the conflict and save and improve lives. In a worst case scenario, it might embolden conflict actors to redouble their efforts to reach a unilateral victory. But for our purposes, it is useful to think of ways in which a conflict can be shocked into a new pro-peace dynamic. Here we can draw from economics and Joseph Schumpeter's notion of '[creative disruption](#)' whereby markets change and some actors are able to take advantage. We have seen this in terms of new airlines or streaming services disrupting traditional business models and introducing new ways of delivering services, sometimes at a lower cost.

In terms of conflict systems, we can think of actors who have disrupted the 'business as usual' narratives, stances, and logics. This often requires idiosyncratic behaviour that contravenes group norms. As such it may be risky, particularly from within one's own group where there may be accusations of treachery or weakness. At the micro-level, we might think of acts of compassion on the battlefield such as the extension of medical aid to an adversary, or the decision to take prisoners rather than execute. Such actions transgress the narratives of conflict in which the other side are depicted as depraved and not worthy of mercy.

At the mezzo-level, we might think of community initiatives – such as the declaration of peace zones in Central and South America or no-fire zones in violent areas of US cities – whereby communities express a wish to step outside of the dominant conflict logic. At larger scales, we can think of civil rights movements – often assemblages of citizens, lawmakers, lawyers and civil society – who have pushed items onto the political agenda and refused to go away. Or we could even think of political leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev, Ian Paisley, Abdullah Öcalan or FW de Klerk – who all for very complex reasons – decided that a step-change was necessary.

These disrupters changed the conversation – perhaps only momentarily, and perhaps not in ways that they anticipated or hoped. But they were able to puncture the notion that conflicts were unchanging, and that conflict narratives and stances were unopposed. Providing a glimpse that there are alternatives to conflict can embolden other actors, including external actors, to help further disrupt the conflict. In this way, lives have been saved and improved. The notion and practice of conflict disruption is not without its pitfalls, but it is worth elevating alongside established terms and practices like conflict prevention and conflict management.

For more information, see the author's latest book, [Everyday Peace: How so-called ordinary people can disrupt violent conflict](#) (Oxford University Press, 2021)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Colter Olmstead](#) on [Unsplash](#)