1-1-2005

Mapping the peace and conflict fields – imagining the future

Kevin Clements

ADR bulletin

The monthly newsletter on dispute resolution

Guest editorial

Mapping the peace and conflict fields – imagining the future

Kevin Clements

General Editor

Laurence Boulle
*Professor of Law,
Bond University, Queensland*

contents

Conflict resolution as a field is divisible into four general theoretical and practical schools. Each one is characterised by institutional arena, theory and methodology. The four schools are Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), Public Policy Disputes, Analytic Conflict Resolution and Conflict Transformation/Reconciliation. Each school promises different outcomes and requires different value assumptions. The perspectives that these schools represent can be construed as lying along a continuum from total agreement to total enmity about the basic values and structures foundational to society.

The ADR school provides an alternative to traditional litigious means for resolving disputes. It is not generally aimed at changing basic social institutions but simply making them work better. It fulfils useful purposes in society and is used to develop specific skills and processes of mediation and arbitration. Many within this school refer to their work as conflict management. Theorists and practitioners within this framework focus their attention on negotiation, mediation, arbitration, ombudsmanry, reg-neg or negotiated rule making. Although the intentions of ADR practitioners differ, those who usually practice within this school are content to work within and to reinforce the socio-political status quo.

The school that deals with public policy disputes can be thought of much more in terms of incremental social engineering. It wishes to make public policy processes more transparent and accessible to citizens in order to make policy making more effective. It is based on devising creative ways of incorporating relevant stakeholders into decision making processes and argues that pragmatic incremental reform is the best method for generating agreement and resolving conflict. This consensus-based model for public policy disputes grew exponentially during the 1980s as a response to various public policy failures in the 1960s and 70s.

The analytical conflict resolution and problem solving perspective argues that each minor or major conflict (especially those that are violent) represents an invitation to explore better and different ways of organising social and political relationships. Its preoccupations are with broken or traumatised personal, social, community and political institutions and relationships. The role of the conflict analyst, in conjunction with the parties to conflict, is to engage in a deep diagnosis of the conflict and to determine a range of outcomes from separation and healing to the restructuring or reconstitution of the broken relationship in order to satisfy human needs better. This perspective normally focuses on deep-rooted and intractable conflicts and, unlike the ADR and public policy approaches, is deliberately transformational. Scholars such John Paul Lederach, John Burton, Adam Curle and others view conflict analysis primarily as a critical force in socio-political change.

The assumptions that underlie the reconciliation/ conflict transformation school are harder to define. There is debate about whether this perspective is essentially a set of techniques, a political philosophy, an analytic perspective, a systemic vision for peace or a spiritually-inspired utopia. This particular school argues that conflictual relationships will only become cooperative if there is widespread commitment to the pursuit of peace, justice, compassion, forgiveness and sustainable development. This is what gives this perspective its transformational edge. It asserts that a concentration on personal or collective forgiveness processes or an individual's compassionate disposition, without equal attention to structural violence, will result in peaceful and reconciliatory illusions.

I would like to argue, therefore, that the field of conflict transformation has both radical and conservative utility. Where agreement exists about central social values and institutions then ADR, utilising conflict resolution techniques to make basically sound institutions work better, is perfectly acceptable. Where there is disagreement about the central values and institutions, then an application of ADR or public policy techniques may be inappropriate, or worse, prevent the transformation of relationships that need to be changed to achieve structural stability and stable peace. In so far as some theorists and practitioners adopt essentially a therapeutic approach to conflict there will be a desire to change individual attitudes and behaviour. If the theorists are more structurally inclined there will be a greater focus on group,

organisational and institutional change. This is especially so for those who embed their analysis and practice in conflict and change theory. In this orientation more weight is given to processes of empowerment and liberation from dependent and unequal processes.

Understanding the deforming effects of power and powerlessness on social relationships will result in different kinds of conflict analyses and prescriptions. Those who understand both power and the economy will work to ensure that peace-building is as much about unmasking the sometimes latent sources of power and equalising unequal relationships as it is about solving the manifest and presenting problems. Construed in this way, conflict resolution has a radical agenda and is aimed at enhancing peace, justice and autonomy.

None of this mapping of the field is meant to diminish any of the four perspectives. It is, however, important to have higher levels of clarity about the relative utility and applicability of each perspective to different types of problems. Clearly ADR and public policy dispute strategies have relatively low utility in those areas of the world that are afflicted by, or on the verge of, war. These require very different perspectives. What is clear, however, is that we need much better diagnostic capacity so that we can assess which conflict resolving perspective might have the best chance of generating problem-solving capacities.

The Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies is working hard to try and combine the analytical strengths of ADR/public policy and commercial

dispute resolution with the collaborative problem-solving and reconciliatory approaches. We are focusing specifically on some of those critical development/peace-building relationships in the context of Australasian conflicts and conflicts within the South West Pacific and South East Asian Regions. We are launching the Centre with a major regional conference on Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in the Asia Pacific Region at the University of Queensland, from 31 March–3 April 2005.

Some of the lessons that the Centre has learned in its first year of operation are:

• The necessity for a close relationship between theorists and practitioners. Theorists need to be challenged by practitioners about which of their theories best explains violent situations and which best helps them design processes for dealing with them. Practitioners, interested in helping parties devise durable solutions to their problems, also need to be informed about which practices work and which do not and what is likely to reinforce or undermine agreements.

• The evolution of the field of conflict resolution requires an acknowledgment of its dual role as an agency of both control and change. Both of these tendencies need to be held in tension. Transformation without some sense of how to maintain order and continuity will generate anarchy (as we are observing in Iraq at the present time). The maintenance of order without some sense of how to alter dysfunctional relationships and institutions in a positive direction will generate repressive and oppressive conditions. The challenge facing conflict resolutionaries is how to facilitate changes which will eliminate the root causes of conflict by handling contradictory and conflictual relationships in a non-violent and creative fashion. Thus conflict transformation, of which peace-building and problem-solving processes are two critical elements, is primarily about intentional social and economic change and a quest for justice and peace by peaceful means.

• The field is in desperate need of an ethical framework which ensures that the movement towards peace and justice will be by peaceful and just means. International Alert, an independent international NGO working for peace in conflicted places, for example, has developed a Code of Conduct for practitioners working in conflict zones. Nevertheless, there is nothing comparable to the fundamental principles of the Red Cross, and there should be if we are to guarantee higher levels of accountability and responsibility and give more attention to learning lessons from different types of intervention.

• The Centre has discovered the importance of better intelligence gathering for effective conflict transformation, especially in field situations. Just as good military operations require effective command, control, communication and intelligence systems, so too do those designing processes for dealing with violent conflicts. Intelligent information about the parties to the conflict, detailed awareness of its sources and a sound ethnocentric appreciation of the cultural and linguistic contexts of the conflict are all critical to successful outcomes.

• Finally, and somewhat paradoxically, the Centre is discovering that conflict resolvers discover their own distinctive niches in the field, not by separating themselves from the painstaking processes of development, democratisation, building resilient civil society organisations, leadership and management training but by joining with those engaged in these activities and working out what distinctive roles conflict resolution might play in them. Thus the structural prevention of violent conflict requires conflict resolutionaries to join forces with socio-economic and political development specialists and thinking through what conditions are essential to advance human, as opposed to state and national, security.

The world clearly needs new ways of thinking about old problems and new ways of acting if we are going to survive the 21st century. The most powerful nations in the world have been far too quick to resort to the use of military

> [Conflict resolution] is about generating options where there seem to be none, about radical dialogical engagement with those who seem to be enemies.

force rather than exhausting all non-violent options before contemplating the use of coercion. It is vital, therefore, that students and practitioners of peace and conflict work out ways to harness their creative imagination so that we can envisage a positive future and ways of realising that future. This imagining cannot be narrow – it must be broad, inclusive, interdisciplinary and systemic; but it has to begin if we are to have a viable future. Furthermore, it must be based on an openness to change.

At its best conflict resolution/transformation within any of the four schools mentioned above is about personal and collective empowerment. It underlines the consciousness of the possibilities that lie in seemingly impossible and desperate situations. It is about generating options where there seem to be none, about radical dialogical engagement with those who seem to be enemies. In the final analysis it is about conquering threat-based systems of governance with institutions that rest on persuasion and consensus. It is about generating socio-economic and political situations conducive to realising the full potentialities of the human spirit. ●

Professor Kevin Clements is Director of the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Queensland and can be contacted at k.clements@uq.edu.au.

(2005) 7(6) ADR **95**

Published by ePublications@bond, 2005

3