
The Cyprus Issue Project

January 20, 2014

Conflict Resolution Vs Conflict Transformation

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The purpose of this part is to delineate the theoretical approach that this project intends to embrace in dealing with the Cyprus conflict. To this direction, it brings up a theoretical debate on conflict resolution and conflict transformation approaches and explains why our project leans towards the latter.

The notion of conflict resolution

In the sound of the Cyprus conflict, the buzzword that has long captured the UN intentions on the conflict is its **resolution**. The resolution of conflict is considered a path to a *static "end-state"* which is peace, even in its negative form, meaning the absence of violence. As a concept it is designed to single out the causes of violence (problem) and to tackle them in an appropriate way (solution). Based on this, conflict resolution becomes an antinomy of political violence.

Nevertheless, this linear, problem-solving approach, deals with certain limitations. It often takes the dominant power relations and institutions on the conflict ground for granted, neglecting the need to alter their basic structure and nature. In the mindset of the people living on the conflict-ground, resolution is associated with a danger of co-optation, an effort to get rid of conflict, when at the same time significant and legitimate issues are raised. In their eyes, conflict resolution reflects the simple imposition of a settlement.

Vasilis Karakasis is Project Lead of the Cyprus Issue Project at Bridging Europe

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The notion of conflict transformation

Seeking to overcome the narrowness of conflict resolution and drawing upon Lederach's work (1998 & 2003), this project intends to embrace a different approach on the Cyprus conflict, the **conflict transformation**. Its rationale rests upon the premise that conflict is a dynamic phenomenon, inherent in human relationships, and motor of change. Bearing this in mind, this dynamism applies to the concept of peace as well. Rather than treating peace as a final status, conflict transformation considers it as a continuously evolving and developing quality of relationship between the conflicting parties (Lederach 2003; 20). Instead of channeling the whole energy on searching for a solution to the problem(s), the mediators –in the spirit of conflict transformation strategy-are supposed to center on the **relationship** factor.

Even if conflict is inevitable, the destructiveness emerging from it might be not. Designed to limit such destructiveness, conflict transformation suggests that the conflicting parties and the mediators involved in these intractable conflicts should shift away from the problematic objective of resolution. Rather than looking at the problem of the conflict as a single entity and asking how it can be completely resolved, we should look at multiple dimensions of the conflict process (Burgess H. & Burgess G. 1996; 307)¹.

¹ Table 1 highlights the distinction line that Jean Paul Lederach draws between the perspectives of conflict resolution and conflict transformation.

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The three necessary lenses in dealing with a conflict

In dealing with the multiplicity of an intractable conflict, we need a set of lenses- special “eyeglasses”, through which we could view its complex realities. Although each lens has a different function, they are held together in a single frame. We need lenses that bring varying aspects of the conflict complexity into focus and at the same time create a picture of the whole. To this direction, Lederach (2003; 11) lists these three lenses that we need:

- a. a lens to see the immediate situation
- b. a lens to see the deeper patterns of relationship between the conflicting parties.
- c. and a lens whose role is twofold. On the one hand, it holds the two above mentioned perspectives (lenses) together, enabling us to embed the immediate-presenting problems into the deeper relational patterns. On the other, it creates a platform to address the content, the context and the structure of the relationship. From this platform onwards, parties can start elaborating on creative responses and solutions.

A crucial step of the conflict transformation process is the *diagnostic stage* that will help us understand the parameters that make the Cyprus conflict tick. This stage, analyzed in the forthcoming part, consists of a conflict map. This map will be designed to identify all active and potential adversary groups and intermediaries along with their interests and positions. It will help us visualize the development of a strategy to constructively transform the conflict.

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Table 1

Comparing the perspectives between Conflict Resolution and Conflict Transformation

	Conflict Resolution Perspective	Conflict Transformation Perspective
The key question	How do we end something not desired?	How to end something destructive and build something desired?
The focus	Content-oriented	Relationship-oriented
The perspective	To achieve an agreement and addressing the presenting problem creating the crisis.	To promote constructive change processes, inclusive of -- but not limited to -- immediate solutions.
The development of the process	Built around the immediacy of the relationship where the presenting problems appear.	It is concerned with responding to symptoms and engaging the systems within which relationships are embedded.
Time frame	Short-term horizon	Long-term horizon

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View of the conflict	Need to de-escalate the conflict process main priority	Conflict viewed as conflict as a dynamic of ebb (conflict de-escalation to pursue constructive change) and flow (conflict escalation to pursue constructive change).
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Source: Lederach (2003; 33)

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