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Interactive Problem Solving in Intercommunal Conflicts

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Intercommunal conflicts are frequently the subject of third-party interventions. As used here, intercommunal conflicts refer to large-scale, expressed struggles between rival nations or groups, which may occur within the borders of a state or beyond them. When such conflicts occur, at first, it would be natural to assume that the parties should settle their own conflict because this is their concern, their business. But due to the very nature of conflict—the tension of hostility, lack of trust, mutual suspicion, impulse to secrecy, biased communication, lack of bilateral thinking, and so on—conflicting parties are the least equipped to initiate a peace process by themselves. Hence, third-party intervention often becomes a necessity in the process of peacemaking.

Third-party involvement in a peacemaking process is intended to facilitate a settlement and covers many different types of strategies under a variety of labels, such as mediation, good offices, or conciliation. Special attention should be drawn to one of the little known, and perhaps less appreciated, third-party interventions in intercommunal conflicts: the interactive problem-solving approach (IPSA). This approach aims to bring together unofficial representatives of the parties in conflict for informal meetings to analyze their conflict and create new approaches for its resolution. The operating assumption is that a durable peace necessitates a transformation of hostile relations between the communities in conflict. According to Eileen Babbit and Tamra d'Estree, rival communities have to develop a working trust to make it possible for existing and future problems to be dealt with in a constructive way.

The IPSA is derived from the seminal work of John Burton and Herbert Kelman, and has been used in several conflict settings, including the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Cyprus conflict, and both the Lebanese and Sri Lankan conflicts. Questions remain, however, regarding the efficacy of IPSA in the overall peacemaking process in intercommunal conflicts. Although the practitioners of IPSA tend to highlight the utility of the approach, a deeper, and perhaps more critical, inquiry is needed to evaluate the approach as a conflict resolution strategy.

The paradigmatic application of IPSA is represented by problem-solving workshops, mediated or facilitated, ideally, by psychologically sensitive third parties. Problem-solving workshops are intensive, private and non-binding meetings between politically influential (but unofficial) representatives of conflicting parties drawn from the mainstream of their respective communities. For instance, in the work of Herbert Kelman, who arranged several workshops between the Israelis and Palestinians, the participants included parliamentarians, leading figures in political parties or movements, former military officers or government officials, and journalists or editors specializing in the Middle East. Academic scholars who were major analysts of the conflict for their societies were also included, according to Kelman, some of whom had served in advisory, official, or diplomatic positions.

Recruiting participants is one of the most challenging tasks for the third party preparing to arrange workshops. Effective recruitment requires intimate familiarity with the two sides of the conflict and their political elites, establishing links to various networks within the communities and maintaining both parties' trust. Many potential workshop participants may consider approval from their political leadership, but recruitment is generally done on an individual basis. Participants are invited to come as individuals, rather than as formal representatives.

As we learn from IPSA practices, the composition of workshops is also crucial to their success. Ideally, great care must be taken to choose participants who, on the one hand, have the interest and ability to engage in the kind of learning process that workshops provide and, on the other hand, have the positions and credibility within their own communities that enable them to influence the thinking of political leaders, political constituencies, the media, and local leaders. Because the third-party's role during workshops is facilitative, the critical task of generating ideas and infusing them into the political process should be done by the participants themselves.

The number of participants varies, but in general a typical workshop includes three to six members of each party, as well as a third party. The third party is usually a conflict specialist or an academic who is well aware of the conflict and who possesses third-party skills. According to Jacob Bercovitch and Allison Houston, the third party's communication ability, impartiality, and sensitivity to the needs of the parties serve as the basis of its credibility. Thus, the success of problem-solving workshops also depends, among other things, on the selection of an appropriate third party. The third party normally does not offer solutions, but assumes a strictly facilitative role (passive mediation).

The recruitment process is usually completed through the snowball method. That is, as a start, one key person on each side is selected. Then

consulting with that person, the rest of the team is chosen. As Kelman points out, an essential part of the recruitment process is a personal discussion with each participant of the purposes, procedures, and ground rules of the workshop before obtaining his or her final commitment to the enterprise.

A typical workshop consists of a preliminary session of four to five hours for each of the parties and joint meetings for several days. The workshops often take place in an academic setting, for universities have the advantage of providing an unofficial, non-binding context, with its own set of norms to support a type of interaction that departs from the norms that generally govern interactions between conflicting parties.

The discussions in problem-solving workshops are completely private and confidential. Hence, there should be no publicity, no record, and no audience. These workshop features are designed to enable and encourage workshop participants to engage in a type of communication that is usually not available to parties involved in an intense conflict relationship. The third party creates a constructive atmosphere, establishes norms, and makes occasional interventions to ensure the smooth continuation of workshops. Participants engage in an open and free discussion where they address each other, rather than the third party or their constituencies, and where they listen to each other so as to understand their differing views about their conflict. Overall, the parties are encouraged by the third party to deal with the conflict analytically rather than polemically. This analytic discussion helps them penetrate each other's perspectives and understand each other's concerns, needs, fears, priorities, and constraints.

Once both sets of concerns are on the table and have been acknowledged, the parties are encouraged to engage in a process of joint problem solving. In this respect, they are asked to work together in developing new ideas for resolving their conflicts in ways that would satisfy the fundamental needs and allay the existential fears of both parties. Afterward, they are asked to explore the political and psychological constraints that have prevented the parties from moving to the negotiation table. According to Michael Bavly, a central feature of this process is the identification of the steps of mutual reassurance through displaying a collaborative effort—a non-threatening, de-escalatory language, as well as a shared vision of a common future.

The IPSA has many expected utilities. To begin with, although intercommunal conflicts are societal and intersocietal phenomena that cannot be reduced to the individual level, there are, nevertheless, many aspects of such conflicts for which the individual represents the most proper unit of analysis. John Burton suggests that the satisfaction of individual human needs would be the ultimate criterion for a mutually satisfactory resolution of any conflict. Unfulfilled needs, especially identity and security, on the other hand, usually breed conflict and create barriers to its resolution.

In this respect, by probing beneath the parties' incompatible positions and exploring the identity and security concerns, it may become possible to develop a mutually satisfactory solution. Problem-solving workshops provide a setting in which brainstorming and idea-exchanges can occur. To be more specific, according to Louise Diamond and John McDonald, informal discussions provide an opportunity for the parties to examine the root causes of and the underlying human needs in conflict, to explore possible solutions out of public view, to identify obstacles to better relationships, and to look at the issues not yet on the official agenda. What is more, changes at the level of individuals, in the form of new insights and ideas, resulting from the micro-level process of the workshop can then be fed back into the political debate and the decision making in the two communities, hence becoming vehicles for change at the macro level.

Second, intercommunal conflicts should not be seen merely as a political problem. Insofar as the conflict is between two societies, it becomes necessary to make peace at the societal level, among the ordinary people as well. Without considering intersocietal relations, peace agreements signed merely at the official level are unlikely to be durable, because the ultimate legitimacy is the support and cooperation of the public itself. In that sense, by allowing face-to-face communication, problem-solving workshops would help antagonists arrest the dehumanization process, overcome psychological barriers, and focus on relation building. These points are particularly important, because in almost all conflicts, the parties develop a distrust of one another in the form of negative images that, in turn, inhibit the search for a peaceful solution. Hence, establishing, or re-establishing, trust between the parties in conflict often emerges as an important prerequisite for preparing for peace.

Third, although problem-solving workshops are not official negotiations and are not intended to substitute for them, they are closely linked to formal negotiations in that they play a significant complementary role at all stages of the negotiation process. In the pre-negotiation stage, for instance, problem-solving workshops may help create a political climate conducive to moving people to the table. In fact, some conflict specialists, such as Babbit and d'Estree, argue that the historic Oslo Accords, in which the Israeli–Palestinian relationship was irrevocably changed by the unprecedented acknowledgment of each nation by the other, were made possible by the cumulative results of problem-solving workshops carried out over a period of time. In the active negotiation phase, on the other hand, problem-solving workshops may help to overcome obstacles to productive negotiations and to frame issues not yet on the table. In the post-negotiation phase, finally, they may contribute to the implementation of a negotiated agreement. In short, it is precisely the non-binding feature of workshops that allows their unique contribution to the larger negotiation

process. That is, Kelman suggests, they create an opportunity for sharing perspectives and exploring options, an opportunity not often readily available at the official negotiation table.

Indeed, a broader understanding of intercommunal conflict as a societal phenomenon requires a broader view of diplomacy as a complex mix of formal and informal peace efforts. Likewise, conflict resolution requires a wider range of influence processes than those typically employed through traditional methods. It is usually necessary to move beyond the influence strategies based on power-supported diplomacy, and to expand and refine strategies based on mutual understandings or positive incentives.

In fact, many practical applications of IPSA confirm the utility of the approach, in this regard. For example, Herbert Kelman, who conducted many problem-solving workshops between the Israelis and Palestinians, observed that the workshops allowed the participants to gain insights into the perspective of the other parties, to create a new climate of trust, and to develop greater awareness of how the other party may have changed. Similarly, Edward E. Azar, who also organized several workshop exercises around the Lebanese and Sri Lankan conflicts, claimed that the workshops allowed the parties to discover their common needs and values, to establish informal networks, and to widen their agendas toward a mutually acceptable solution. The utility of IPSA has also been acknowledged by The Center for Multi-Track Diplomacy, a Washington, D.C.–based non-governmental organization, in re-humanizing the relationships between the parties in conflict and in generating a wide range of alternatives for resolution.

Finally, having and working on the common goal of resolving conflict would enhance bonds among the participants in a number of ways. One is by reducing the salience of group boundaries. That is, people who are working toward a common goal are in some sense members of the same group and therefore, they are not so likely to be antagonistic toward one another. Another is by a reinforcement mechanism. As people work together, each rewards the other and produces a sense of gratitude and warmth in the other. Pursuing a common goal also means that each party sees itself as working on behalf of the other, a view—according to Dean Pruitt, Sung Kim, and Jeffrey Rubin—that is likely to foster positive attitudes.

Unfortunately, aside from its strengths, IPSA has many serious short-comings. First, there is much research to suggest that informal meetings can change negative attitudes only if certain conditions are met, and in the absence of such conditions, interactions between conflicting party members may even exacerbate the existing tension. For instance, according to the research by Miles Hewstone and Rupert Brown, five conditions are particularly important: the contact should be between persons of equal status; the

general climate should favor such interaction; the contact should be intimate, not causal; the workshops should be pleasant and rewarding; and there should be important common goals.

Obviously, in practical applications of IPSA, these conditions are rarely met. Problems may especially be experienced regarding the issue of finding participants of equal status. In most conflict situations, power disparity between the parties itself would be a source of inequality, as members of the more powerful side tend to view their counterparts as lower-status people, regardless of their individual status. Similarly, in order for problem-solving workshops to be effective, they should be a continuing process that requires a reasonably long time. In reality, however, most workshops are arranged on a causal basis due to limitations of time and other resources.

The second problem regarding IPSA is the questionable assumption that intercommunal conflicts are mistakes caused by excessive misunderstandings or misperceptions. This might be the case at times. But such conflicts may also result from real, rather than perceived, clashes of interest. In that case, cognitive changes or changes in perceptions may have limited utility to create a resolution unless a formula is successfully found to meet the parties' mutual demands.

Third, the end of the Cold War and fundamental changes taking places in international relations have changed the character of conflict. The dangers to global peace today do not come from major-state confrontations any more, but from another source: intrastate conflicts, conflicts within national boundaries. Intrastate conflicts involve ethnic, religious, cultural rivalries, as well as power struggles for dominance and governance. In such conflicts, usually, the heart of the issue is as much about social identity as it is about personal identity. Particularly in a deeply divided social structure, characterized by a long history of conflict, social identity penetrates the personal sphere to such an extent that interpersonal contact, even under the most favorable conditions, has little chance to alter substantially established social relations.

Closely related to that, embedded enemy images and the psychological tendency for "hypothesis confirmation" may cause individuals to see what they want to see and ignore what they wish to ignore. That is, contradictory information may be re-interpreted to confirm negative images about the other side. At best, individual change may occur. After workshops, participants may actually change their negative attitudes toward one another, but the general image of groups may remain unchanged. Thus, large studies are needed to determine the utility of IPSA in transforming hostile relationships between conflicting communities.

Finally, let us assume that everything has gone well. But what happens to those individuals who have changed their negative images

about the other side? How will they be treated when they return to their own communities? If they allow group pressures to overpower their personal experiences, then the meetings will have no practical value. If, on the other hand, they refuse to conform, they are likely to be faced with a number of group sanctions. Exclusion or isolation of the deviant individual (a cutting off of the communication) is one obvious reaction. Other sanctions would be the physical ones imposed by the threat, or fact, of bodily harm or loss of some property. But the most effective group sanction operates more subtly. The mere psychological stress of being isolated from the group is often enough to make individuals stand by group perceptions.

IPSA, as a peacemaking strategy in intercommunal conflicts, has both strengths and weaknesses. The weaknesses obviously limit the success of the approach and alert peacemakers to avoid over-optimism. But, on the other hand, it should be acknowledged that achieving intercommunal peace requires multilevel efforts, and IPSA can have a role to play in the overall process of peacemaking. Thus, it is worth trying.

It has been argued, in this regard, that a continuing workshop sustained and facilitated by a third party can make a contribution to the larger peace process. It may, step by step, enable conflicting parties to re-humanize the relationship, distill their differences, and come to terms with each other's essential needs. Similarly, a continuing workshop may push the process of conflict analysis further, allowing for an interactive and cumulative process, based on feedback and correction. The participants have an opportunity to strengthen, expand, or modify the ideas developed in the course of a workshop by gathering the reactions of their own communities. Further, an ongoing workshop may contribute to the development of shared visions of a desirable future, helping the participants to generate ideas about the shape of a solution that meets the basic needs of both parties, as well as ideas how to get there. Above all, the symbolic nature of workshops is also important, for it represents a voluntary effort to initiate the process of transforming the relationship between former enemies and the hope that one day, a new language of dialogue can replace the language of conflict.

Overall, the problem of intercommunal conflict is many-sided and obviously there is no single, magic formula to cope with it. The wisest thing to do, therefore, is to approach from many directions and to use every single chance. Small and informal efforts may not have immediate dramatic effects on the resolution process, but they may produce cumulative results over time. In that respect, despite its shortcomings, IPSA can be viewed as one of many tools that can be used by both policymakers and committed civilians of peacemaking.

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