

A systems approach to peacebuilding

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When my children were little, I used to look at a picture book with them called *Close, Closer, Closest*. The book would take an object and first show a close-up picture of a small part, then zoom out a bit to show more of the object, then zoom out a lot so the viewer could see the whole object in context.

The game is that for each picture you try to guess what the object is. Only when you get to the last picture, which shows the object in a broader context, do you know with certainty what the object is, and realise, with some humour, how far off your original guess was. For example, what looks at first like a symmetrical pattern of red, blue and green dots (perhaps a piece of cloth?), is actually a child's face, which is in fact a child's face on a television screen being watched by another child.

The book illustrates a useful lesson: one's ability to see objects or events in a broader context changes one's sense of what the object or event means. If this lesson is applied to a children's book it may make for a fun afternoon. But when applied to complex social systems, such as societies that are experiencing violent conflict, it matters a great deal more.

This twenty-second Accord publication is a case in point. Any particular peacebuilding challenge, such as in Somalia, Afghanistan or Colombia, is difficult in its own right. However, the core problem may be that of using political boundaries to define the challenges and opportunities that these conflicts present. For example, instability and violence in 'Somalia' have much less to do with the boundaries that delineate the political entity we call Somalia, than with relations between groups within Somalia and other states – such as Ethiopia, Kenya, some Muslim and Arab states, and the US – international organisations – such as the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU) or the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) – cross-border criminal groups, international aid

agencies, the Somali diaspora in the Gulf States, and global non-state armed actors such as al-Qaeda.

However, donors, foreign ministries, and international and non-governmental organisations (IGOs and NGOs) tend to organise their peacebuilding efforts around political boundaries. From a systems thinking perspective, this presents peacebuilders working in specific countries with a 'close, closer, closest' problem: how they define the 'problem' and what they believe constitutes 'success', and the strategies they pursue to move from one to the other, will be fundamentally different depending on whether their unit of analysis is a country (an 'up close' perspective) or a complex social system defined without regard to national borders (a holistic perspective).

Thinking systems

Systems thinking is based on a few fundamental premises, including the following:

- *Interconnectedness*: events and social phenomena do not exist in a vacuum but are connected to other events and social phenomena
- *Dynamic causality*: causality does not flow in only one direction but any causal event touches off a chain reaction that will eventually have an impact on the initial causal event itself (feedback)
- *Holism*: seeing the whole tells one more than just understanding all the parts that make up the whole

Systems thinking is a reaction to 'reductionist' approaches that try to eliminate the confusing aspects of complexity by breaking a messy 'whole' into its component parts. This may be useful when trying to fix a car engine, but it can be very unhelpful when dealing with a social system that produces violence.

In this sense, an approach to peacebuilding that stops at national borders is reductionist: it disconnects a part (a nation state) from the broader whole (a trans-boundary social system) in an attempt to better understand and 'fix' that part.

More importantly, the three basic systems thinking assumptions make this approach to peacebuilding fundamentally different, even from other trans-border approaches to peacebuilding. Systems thinking and corresponding approaches, such as looking at the idea of political space and not just geographic space, provide a reason to look beyond political borders.

For example, an effective peace process in Somalia needs to include more than just internal political actors, but also external actors as mentioned above. However, from a systems perspective, looking beyond borders is not an end in itself. The assumptions of interconnectedness and dynamic causality mean that to understand Somalia as a social system that is characterised by high levels of violence and instability, one must follow the causal chains, wherever they lead. And the purpose of this is to get a different understanding of Somalia, rather than to just identify additional players that should be incorporated into a negotiation process.

A systems view will provide a definition of peacebuilding issues in Somalia that is different than a non-systemic view. In terms of the example from the children's book, a holistic, systems view versus a reductionist view is like the difference between thinking one is looking at a piece of cloth and looking at a child that watches too much television! Similarly, a non-systemic view of Somalia may lead one to see the problem as a conflict between combatant parties – Al Shabab and the Somali transitional government – and ignore the complex system of dynamic relationships and social trends (both internal and external to 'Somalia'), one impact of which is to cause internal Somali actors to fight each other.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict may provide a better illustration of the above point. Looked at from a reductionist perspective the conflict might be defined as existing between Israelis and Palestinians over the status of their respective political entities. In this frame of reference, one might define the problem as the lack of a political settlement that would determine borders and settle land disputes, enable economic and social development, increase security for both communities, strengthen the conditions for healing, and perhaps even enable steps toward reconciliation.

A systems view would characterise the situation very differently. Stepping back from specific developments in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, one can see recurrent patterns of interaction. There have been signs of progress in the peace

process, such as agreements between Israel and Egypt, and Israel and Jordan, Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and south Lebanon, the Oslo Accords, reform and capacity building in the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and so on. There have also been significant setbacks, including the wars in 1948 and 1967, the Intifadas, breakdown of the Oslo Accords, Hamas and Hezbollah rocket attacks on Israel, Israeli attacks in Lebanon, bombings in Israel, Israeli armed crackdown in Gaza, expansion of settlements.

Over time, progress toward a political settlement between Israelis and Palestinians is intertwined with setbacks in a recurring pattern. Leaders from the two parties, along with leaders from key external actors (such as the US, the EU, and some Arab States such as Egypt), dedicate themselves to a renewed negotiation process, expend significant political and financial resources, and hail progress in the form of 'key steps' toward an ultimate Israeli-Palestinian political settlement. These events are met with new roadblocks, periods of negotiation impasse, heated rhetoric and accusations, acts of violence, internal shakeups within key actors, and one or another party withdrawing from the peace talks.

Further, these patterns of behaviour that constitute the Israeli-Palestinian social system have a dominant purpose. It is not a purpose that is defined by the intentions of the actors in the system, but rather by the key outputs of the system over time. If judged by its predominant output over time, the purpose of the peace process does not seem to be a political settlement, rather the purpose of the Israeli-Palestinian social system appears to be 'resolution OR reconciliation avoidance'. The parts of this system deftly interact so as to avoid reaching a political resolution or reconciliation – weaving its way between tangible signs of progress and escalating violence (but never enough violence to cause the system itself to collapse).

Neither Israeli nor Palestinian leadership – nor external governments – seem willing to bear the potential costs of a political settlement. Marked political rifts exist within both communities, such as between Fatah and Hamas on the Palestinian side, and between the hard-line right wing of the Israeli electorate and those Israelis more comfortable with the concept of trading 'land for peace'.

Analysts such as Nathan J Brown claim that many leaders in the Arab world are 'addicted' to the image of Israel as the enemy in order to deal with domestic pressures. In the US, political leaders would face political backlash from Israeli leaders and from internal US constituencies if the terms of an agreement appeared to be too pro-Palestinian; and backlash externally, especially with Arab and Muslim allies, and in war zones in Iraq

and Afghanistan, if the terms were too pro-Israeli. Of course, the same agreement might be simultaneously viewed both ways.

This systemic view of an Israeli-Palestinian social system whose purpose is to avoid settlement implies very different strategies for how to intervene in the system to increase the level of peace in the region. From the reductionist, geographically defined perspective, it would make sense to enlist international support to pressure leaders of the two communities to engage in negotiations, and to bolster support for such a process among regional players such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, as well as to deal with intra-communal tensions, such as between the ultra-Orthodox right wing and the liberal political parties in Israel, or the split between Fatah and Hamas.

From a systemic perspective, however, this approach is unlikely to be effective as it is futile to ask actors in a system to act contrary to the overall purpose of the system because larger dynamics in the system will undermine those actions. So, even if the US, the EU, Egypt and Turkey were able to pressure President Abbas and Prime Minister Netanyahu to support a political settlement, other actors or agents in the system would likely counter this move (for example, one or both might lose their jobs, new acts of violence might break out, external spoilers might intervene).

Systems response

A systems approach suggests that intervention should not be designed to impose change on the system itself, like pressuring Israeli and Palestinian leaders to make much the same compromises that previous leaders were reluctant to make. This does not mean that people should not seek to affect and change systems over time. It does suggest that some approaches will be more effective than others.

For example, changing part of the system – like installing a new leader, or adding more development assistance – is also likely to fail. Rather, systems analyst Donella Meadows describes how intervention should start with ‘listening to the system’, to identify where change is already happening in the system and nurture that change in the direction of a more peaceful, less violent trajectory. Brown suggests that a much more detailed analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian social system is necessary to spot these potential opportunities, which might include working with the slow process of institution building started by Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority, Salam Fayyad, or the renewed growth of the Israeli economy.

The central point here is not to present a cogent systems analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Rather, the general dynamics of this process help illustrate how a systems approach

to peacebuilding is very different from one that uses political borders that define national states to determine how one analyses and responds to peacebuilding challenges. There is a need to draw sensible limits around one’s analysis and interventions into conflict. An analysis that says everything is connected to everything else, and avoids setting priorities, is not helpful.

Rather, it is a matter of how to set one’s ‘level of zoom’ – to borrow a term from photography. If one stands too far away from their subject, then the useful details are obscured (that is, a view from Mars would make key dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian social system unrecognisable). Conversely, a view of the situation solely from within the borders of what is recognised as Israel and the Palestinian Territories and does not recognise the broader context will lead to unproductive or even counterproductive interventions.

Systems thinking provides a more reasonable set of criteria to set a helpful field of vision for peacebuilders. The concepts of exogeneity (what is external to the system you are studying) and endogeneity (what is internal to the system you are studying) are key aspects of systems thinking. If key actors or social dynamics exist outside one’s view of a conflict, then those factors are more likely to be taken as a given and not included in interventions aimed at addressing the conflict. However, if something takes place outside of a national boundary, such as funding for insurgents from a diaspora community or demand for drugs that fund insurgent groups, they need to be recognised as part of the system.

A starting point for a better approach to peacebuilding is to abandon a view that is bounded by political borders. Peacebuilders need to follow the dynamic causal strings they encounter: taking positive or negative aspects of a conflict environment and asking ‘why’, and then following the analysis to its natural ends, regardless of whether it takes one across a national boundary. Peacebuilders need to look for dynamic feedback loops and start from the assumption that any observable feature of a conflict is both a cause of some other feature and an effect of other factors in that system.

Lastly, peacebuilders need to look for the main drivers of big systems change: the key factors – *structural* (basic systems and institutions), *attitudinal* (widely held group attitudes and beliefs), and *transactional* (how key people work together to deal with conflict) – that both help explain why a social system is the way it is and focus attention on the necessary building blocks for sustainable peaceful change.

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