

# Intractable Conflicts: Keys to Treatment

Christopher R. Mitchell

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# INTRACTABLE CONFLICTS: KEYS TO TREATMENT ?

## 1. Introduction

I was three years old in 1937 when Gernika was being bombed by the Condor Legion. Three years later I was six years old, and watching bombs fall on my own city —London. Three years after that I was nine years old and watching bombers on their way to drop bombs on other cities —in France, in Italy, in Belgium, in Germany. One year later I was ten, and watching pictures of a Europe that was in ruins.

In this way, I had an early introduction to the results of attempting to settle conflicts by intransigence, coercion, retaliation, escalation and force; and to the notion that violence and counter-violence were not necessarily the best form of “treatment” for the protracted conflicts involving France and Germany, Soviet Russia and Austria, Britain and Germany, Germany and Poland, Soviet Russia and Turkey and all the other intractable conflicts that existed in 20th Century Europe and that threatened to engulf the continent in open warfare again and again, as they had between 1870 and 1945.

Fortunately for my own generation, this view was shared by a number of political leaders such as Jean Monet, Maurice Schumann, Alcide de Gasperi, Konrad Adenauer, Dean Acheson and Willie Brandt, so that conflicts both intractable and resolvable are now handled by political means —at least in most of Europe. Perhaps we need to start looking for some guides to treatment in the post-1945 reconciliation in Europe.

Regretably, the rest of the world has been somewhat less fortunate. In the era of post Second World War “peace” between 1945 and 1990, there were 350 “local” wars between but mainly within countries. According to some calculations somewhere in the region of four million people [mainly civilians] have been killed during the post 1945 cold war and, long peace.” Clearly, the world has not yet found ways of treating intractable conflicts, save by using the age old keys that re-open the weapons stores and the armouries.

I have been asked by my colleagues at Gernika Gogoratuz to speak about intractable conflicts and “keys” to their “treatment” which makes me feel like a combination of a doctor and a locksmith, rather than the political scientist specialising in conflict research, which is my actual trade. In agreeing to do this I am, inevitably, accepting an important basic assumption, namely that we do currently face a major problem in the widespread existence of conflicts that are, indeed, *intractable* in the sense that they are both:

- *Protracted* as they not only continue for long periods of time but can actually span decades and [most importantly] generations; and
- *Deep-rooted* in the sense of being:
  - resistant to a solution;
  - able to re-emerge after a long dormant period [for example present Croat/Serb & Muslim/orthodox Christian conflicts];
  - passed on from generation to generation, therefore becoming centrally connected with people’s *identity* and [often] *ethnicity*.

My first task is to examine this assumption. In other words, I have to confirm the existence of the disease [or the door to be unlocked] before suggesting treatments or keys.

## 2. Intractable conflict: the extent and nature of the problem

I want to adopt two approaches to delineating the extent of the problem of intractable conflicts as we approach the end of the 20th century. The first is to examine the *current* situation and ask about the number and seriousness of protracted and deep-rooted conflicts —“conflictos crónicos”— which are on-going as we reach the middle of the 1990’s. Secondly, I will try to look into the future and ask whether we are likely to see a continuation of this problem of intractable conflicts, and why.

### 2.1. Intractable Conflicts in the 1990’s

There have been a number of studies in recent years, describing the nature and extent of various types of lethal conflicts, both brief

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and protracted, that have occurred since the last world wide convulsion of violence that ended in 1945; and of the effects that these have had upon politics, economics and people involved in and affected by them.

Even official studies of violent conflicts make sober reading. A study of “regional conflicts”, produced by the US Government and presented to the United Nations in early 1996, for example, was aimed at providing data about the number of people affected by such conflicts and likely to need long term humanitarian relief as a “long term condition”. The study divided unresolved “regional” conflicts into six categories for the purposes of analysis: intense conflicts [e.g. Afghanistan, Burundi]; simmering conflicts [Chechnya, Sri Lanka]; severe government repressions [Iraq, North Korea]; suspensions of violence [Georgia, Azerbaijan]; and post agreement reconstruction and reconciliations [Cambodia, Eritrea.]

The report noted that in the decade between 1985 and 1995 the number of all such on-going conflicts had increased from 4 to over 20 and the number of people “at risk” from direct violence, starvation and disease had increased by 60 %. In all, over 42 million people were in danger of starvation or life threatening disease at the end of 1995, and while this number was down from a peak of 45 million in 1993-94 the implication was that the numbers were unlikely to be much further reduced in the near future.

A similar picture is painted by Professor Peter Wallenstein and his colleagues at the University of Uppsala in their annual survey of armed conflicts for 1994. While the Swedish team also argue that the number and intensity of armed conflicts across the globe has declined since the peak in 1992-93, they still present a picture of a world plagued by organised violence and protracted conflicts.

Most particularly, Wallenstein et al. discovered that, while the number of large scale *wars* [over 1,000 deaths in each year] had started to decline, the number of *intermediate conflicts* [1,000 deaths since commencement] had increased over the six year period from 1989, as conflicts that had started at low levels continued to claim lives and spread destruction. The conclusion was that “... the number

of armed conflicts remains high, and there is a potential for renewed fighting in many situations ...” [Solleberg *et al.*, p. 8.]

Perhaps more worrying data emerge from the studies undertaken by Professor Ted Gurr at the University of Maryland, where the “Minorities at Risk” project has its intellectual home. Among other things, Gurr’s project makes a special study of what he terms *ethnopolitical* conflicts, where the issues in contention involve:

- Ethno-nationalism [which includes religious nationalism];
- Indigenous rights;
- Inter-communal contention for power;
- Related economic, ideological and class issues.

Gurr’s studies of this type of conflict, rooted in the competing identities and claims of ethnic communities such as the Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, or the Serbs and Croats in former Yugoslavia, reveal that, in 1994, there were 50 “serious or emerging” ethnopolitical conflicts in the world, either involving or on the brink of major violence.

Nor does Gurr’s work offer much hope of a better future, unless we rapidly discover some ways of “treating” these ethnopolitical conflicts. If Gurr is correct, and situations involving rivalry between different ethnic communities have a high potential for producing conflicts and then violence, then the number of such potentially violent conflicts is very high, given the number of ethnically divided societies in today’s world.

Expressed simply, Gurr’s data seem to show clearly that the world is full of former Yugoslavias —countries that contain within their territorial boundaries an explosive ethnic mix of communities divided by language, religion, culture and [most important] by sense of identity. The situation of the Ingush, the Kurds and the Albanians as ethnic minorities in Eastern Europe is matched by that of the Karens, Nagas and Meos in Asia, of the Oromo and Somalis in Africa and the long suppressed indigenous peoples of South and Central America.

In all, Gurr calculates that, at the end of the 20th century, the world contains 233 ethnopolitical minorities that are “at risk” and

this potential parties to intractable, identity based conflicts.

## 2.2. The Characteristics of Intractable Conflicts

The major aspect of all these data that I want to emphasize is that they cover a wide variety of cases and circumstances, and that we may be dealing here:

- with very different types of conflict; or
- with conflicts at different stages of a common conflict life cycle.

Whatever view we take, it is clear that contemporary intractable conflicts can differ greatly in their degree of intensity, and can become more or less intense over time. I can illustrate this in a simple diagram (table 1).

Although the conflicts we currently confront appear very different from one another, I would agree that most share a certain number of key characteristics. They are:

- Violent —many follow Gurr’s characterisation of “people against states” and some tend towards genocide.
- Protracted —even if, in some, there are long periods of no *overt* conflict.
- Internal —but with effects on and from neighbours and the international system.
- Extensive —in that they frequently come to involve larger and larger collectivities.
- Inextricable —in that adversaries cannot realistically end the conflict by complete separation; they will have to go on living

together after the termination of the conflict.

The last characteristic seems to me to be very important, particularly when we are thinking about acceptable and stable resolutions of conflicts. The solution to any conflict is seldom that the other side should simply “go away” [and stop bothering us] or that the whole conflict would be solved if only —in some miraculous way— we could “get rid of” the other party.

Historically, it seems very rare that such a solution is even theoretically possible, and [especially with the ethnopolitical conflicts of the 1990’s] solutions appear inevitably to involve the requirement that the adversaries continue, in some way, to live together.

I would also argue strongly that “ethnic cleansing” [or, as it is more euphemistically known “exchange of populations”] is not a long term, “solution by separation” —in fact, it is not a solution at all. In the medium and long term, there is always the problem of refugees, of dealing with their right of return, of dealing with their memories of dispossession.

If the history of the Palestinians, of the Armenian diaspora, of the displaced Greek and Turkish Cypriots teaches anything, it is that such “solutions” simply perpetuate conflicts and —usually— make them more intractable in the long run. Such a strategy of separation is neither a stable solution, nor a treatment for the sources of the conflict, nor a key opening a door that might lead toward a genuinely acceptable solution for the conflict.

TABLE 1 Conflict intensity		
Minor violence in a limited region	Significant organised warfare in a large area of the state	Complete collapse of state in a civil war
-----		
CONFLICT INTENSITY		
Northern Ireland, Kurdistan	Sudan, Sri Lanka	Somalia, Liberia, former-Yugoslavia



### 3. Remedies, keys and treatments; some principles

If “solutions of separation” simply exacerbate conflicts, particularly ethnopolitical conflicts, what other approaches might offer some hopes for a stable and supportable solution?

#### 3.1. Traditional Approaches

One rather traditional way of thinking about “treatments” for intractable conflicts is to envisage some kind of structure which alters the relationship between the adversaries [but not too much!]

With ethnopolitical conflicts, which usually take the form of a struggle between the state and a group of “dissidents” and in which the issues are defined as being about [initially illegitimate] demands for changes in the *status quo* [what some writers have described ruefully as “the sacred status quo”, given its resistance to change], solutions are often framed as a choice of final structure for the government or the central authorities, who can re-structure relationships through:

- Exit —where the dissidents break away completely to form a new and separate political entity.
- Autonomy —where the dissidents achieve varying degrees of self-rule within a given territorial area.
- Access —where dissidents are given agreed, participatory roles in the central decision making system.
- Control —where the dissidents take over and become the central decision making system.

As Gurr points out, each of these end structures can apply to three major aspects of life —political, economic and cultural. Thus it is possible to have cultural control where the identity group or community determines for itself such things as official language, educational policy etc., accompanied by political autonomy and economic access —to central banks, trade organisations etc.

Moreover, he notes that, historically, states and central authorities seem to use four strategies or “keys” to deal with protracted ethnopolitical conflicts:

- Containment.
- Assimilation.
- Pluralism.
- Power-sharing.

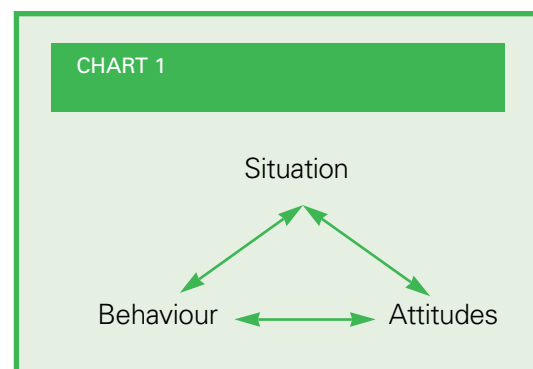
However, as Gurr himself admits, these strategies often seem not to work [although not infrequently they do]; so the question becomes when and why do such traditional keys not work, or such forms of treatment fail? and, what alternatives might there be?

#### 3.2. Some Principles of “Treatment”

Suggestions may be gained by considering the basic principles that might underlie the search for a treatment, the first of which must surely be to develop an acceptable common definition from the adversaries of *what the conflict is about*.

Here I would suggest that there are two ways of getting at some basics from conflict analysis and thence to ideas about possible keys and treatments. The first is to envisage conflict itself as a complex *structure*; the second and equally important approach is to think about conflict itself as a *process*, which needs to be altered if a solution is to be found and the problems caused by conflict to be treated.

The *structural* approach to analysing a “conflict” suggests that it helps to envisage a conflict as a complex phenomenon consisting of [at least] three major elements or “dimensions”, all of which interact, and all of which require treatment if any search for a lasting solution is going to be successful:



“Treatment” will thus need to find ways of dealing with all three dimensions, for affecting behaviour without addressing underlying issues will merely suppress overt signs

that a conflict exists, while dealing with the issues without addressing attitudes, beliefs and images will simply treat some of the causes while leaving residues of hostility and mistrust that are likely to poison future relationships and lead to another conflict cycle involving the same parties.

Efforts to deal with individual dimensions of a protracted conflict take a variety of forms, but the principle that effective treatment deals with all three is clearly reflected in recent United Nations assertions that ending protracted and deep-rooted conflicts calls for a combination of:

- Peacekeeping which affects adversaries, behaviour;
- Peacemaking which seeks means of resolving the issues in contention; and
- Peacebuilding—which is concerned with changing attitudes, images, expectations and relationships.

The second approach to the idea of a “conflict” is to envisage it as a complex *process*, taking place over time and moving forwards [and, occasionally, backwards] through a number of stages or sets of conditions, some of which offer fruitful opportunities for a lasting treatment, while others present more obstacles than opportunities.

The *processual* approach to conflict argues that it is helpful to think of the conflict [and hence also the *treatment*] as a developing process. Treatment, therefore, involves analysis

as well as activity and, to be successful, must take into account the interests and activities of [1] adversaries, [2] intermediaries and [3] stake-holders.

## 4. Some keys to facilitate a conflict resolution process

If conflict “treatment” is a process, then two basic questions can be raised about the nature of that process:

- What ideas might be offered about “keys” that could unlock doors and enable that process to advance?
- What might be the order in which the keys should be used, in other words, is there a sequence of stages in the treatment process that tells one to do X before Y and Z, or to do X under the following circumstances? [Or is it merely a matter of doing X when an opportunity arises?]

I have always felt that it is probably dangerous to try to provide isolated suggestions about keys or treatment sequences, on the grounds that attempting to resolve a conflict is not like cooking, or even treating a familiar disease or pathology.

[Anyway, is conflict really a “pathology” or simply a normal—even healthy—symptom of a changing and dynamic society?]

However, let me suggest nine “keys” that might at least help in a treatment process for protracted and deep-rooted conflicts:

## KEY 2

### **Involve all parties in the discussions and decisions that are relevant to the conflict resolution/treatment process**

In analysing any conflict, one of the fundamental questions is; “Who are the parties to this conflict?”, and the tendency is to concentrate only upon those who are most directly involved and thus the most visible. Hence, the practical results of such a view involve taking into account only a narrow range of parties usually the most violence prone adversaries—which often fits in with these parties’ wish to control any settlement on the slogan: “This is something to be decided by us!”

An alternative, almost opposed rationale for narrowing down those who become involved in a conflict resolution process is to exclude “extremists,” whose presence will wreck any chance of agreement through their intransigence and extreme demands. Many adopt a settlement strategy of excluding those they regard as likely to lessen the chance of agreement.

Another view entirely takes in the conception of a “stakeholder” —namely, all those who are affected by a conflict but who [because of lack of power, voice, resources or organisation] remain relatively unheard and unnoticed. The “key” here is a difficult —and counter intuitive— one to use, because it appears to require;

- the enlarging of those to be involved in any peace process to include those not apparently acting in the conflict —the voiceless; and
- the inclusion of those who seem least amenable to any form of solution save that of gaining their goals (if necessary) through violence.

The reason for arguing that this is an important key is both pragmatic and theoretical. Pragmatic reasons raise the dangers of those who remain excluded from any conflict resolution process becoming a “veto group”, that can prevent any solution they reject from being implemented. The pragmatic key thus becomes a rule that says it is necessary to include all those who can prevent a solution.

The theoretical argument connects ideas about “procedural justice”, and how choices and decisions are made or solutions reached. There is much evidence to support the view that people often enquire about two aspects of any process before deciding whether it is acceptable:

- Is the outcome, the distribution of goods or rewards, a fair and acceptable one; but also
- Was the process by which the outcome was reached a fair and acceptable one ?

The latter aspect of reaching a solution —the how a settlement was reached— often seems to be simply connected with the issue of participation [“Were we fully involved”?] in determining the solution to a conflict —the extent of devolution, the form of security guarantees etc. Lack of participation in the process seems to be correlated with lack of acceptance of the content of any resolution. Hence the argument for involving the maximum number of “parties as stakeholders”, as possible.

With this “key”, there is the problem of past decisions that [obviously] the current “we” could not be involved in, so the issue becomes one of whether the larger “we” —namely, those then representing our “identity group” [family, community, nation]— were involved at the time when solutions were arrived at, and distributive decisions actually made. The question therefore becomes “Were ‘our’ voices adequately heard at the time?”

The key of participation becomes especially important when there is criticism of the process by which a current status quo [political and other] was created. One issue in the conflict often becomes “We were excluded from this!” In such cases, practical problems for conflict resolution include [at least]:

- Envisioning a mutually acceptable process for changing the [often sacred] status quo; and
- Retrospectively including those previously excluded —and does this always have to involve going back to some arrangement that existed before the present [disapproved] status quo?

**KEY 3**

**Recognise that any conflict resolution process has to take place at a number of social levels if it is to be successful**

A familiar way of thinking about conflict resolution and peacemaking is to concentrate at the level of political elites and their activities, looking for conciliatory statements, prenegotiation manoeuvres, high profile bargaining and negotiation, and shuttle diplomacy by important intermediaries. In this framework, conflict resolution is seen as a top-down process. starting with elites and then —if they are successful— involving the remainder of society.

There can be no denying the importance of this elite level. If leaders cannot find a framework within which a conflict resolution process can take place [at the least involving a cessation of violence and coercion], then other conflict resolution initiatives are unlikely to be prolonged or successful. For example, all the local and regional conflict resolution activities in South Africa would have been pointless without the National Accord signed by the political leaders.

However, a comprehensive conflict resolution process [and many scholars argue that one has to be comprehensive to be successful] involves two other levels beside that of the political leadership and members of the decision making elite in each party:

- Political elites, leaders and decision makers.
- Middle range leaders, influentials, opinion leaders.
- Grass roots leaders at local levels and often in traditional roles.

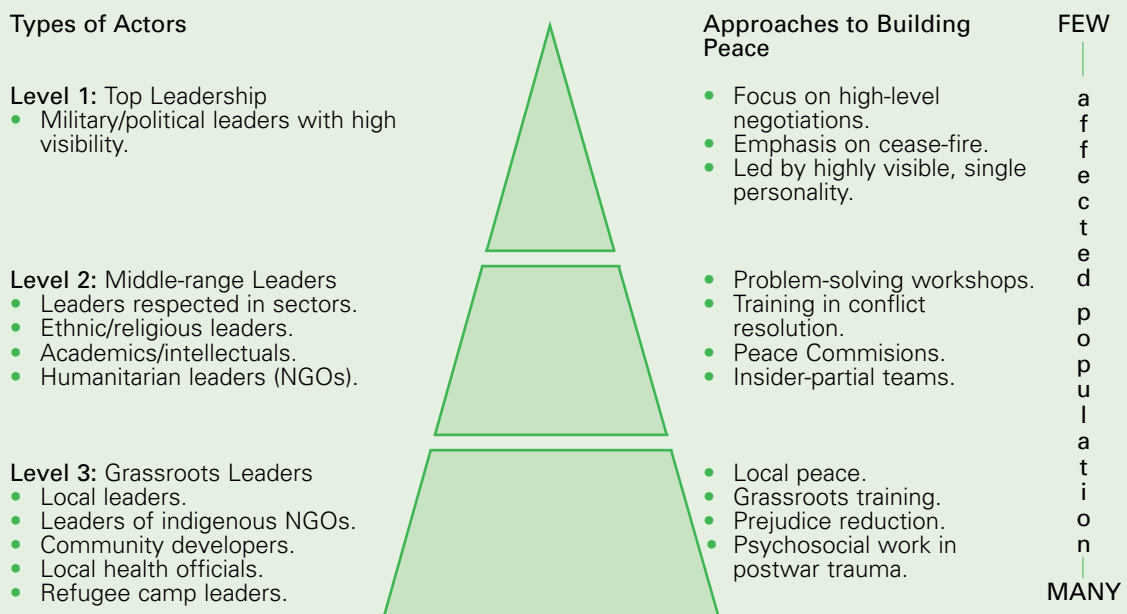
The use of this “key” therefore involves the necessity for working on resolution processes at all three levels, and not just at the top. Agreement by leaders simply does not mean local peace and the continuation of local conflict usually means the breakdown of any settlement or solution reached at elite level. In Liberia, for example, over a dozen peace accords, involving disarmament and elections, were concluded by the leaders of the warring faction between 1992 and 1996. None of them held.

The “key” also implies that:

- Efforts at all levels need to be made, but also coordinated.

**FIGURE 1**

**Actors and Peacebuilding Foci Across the Affected Population**



### KEY 3 (continuation)

- There can be important roles for internal intermediaries or “bridgebuilders”.  
[The second of these implies clearly that it is not necessary to rely on outsiders to act as intermediaries or go-betweens although they can be useful to endorse or “sanctify” a solution.]

A good example of this multi-level approach can be found in the recent peace process in South Africa, which has involved:

- The National Accord.
- Regional Peace Committees.
- Local Peace Committees.

Even in this case, however, the national level process was put into serious jeopardy by local fighting between ANC and Inkatha members [encouraged clandestinely by members of the South African “security” forces] —a good example of the possibility of grass roots conflict continuing despite an overall national agreement being in place.

The whole multilevel approach has been summarised by John Paul Lederach in the diagram previous, which outlines those likely to be involved at the three levels mentioned in this “key” and also some practical methods of conflict resolution at each of the levels.

### KEY 4

## Utilise structural changes [political, economic, social] in the conflicts environment in searching for a solution

One key to protracted conflicts is to recall that, while conflicts might go through repetitive cycles, the environment in which they take place is always dynamic, and changes can provide opportunities for resolution via innovative ideas and creative options.

For example, note the massive changes that have taken place in Western Europe as a result of the search for European “unity in diversity,” and questions about how best to live together in a “common European home.” Note particularly some factors that have become important, for example, for the Northern Ireland conflict:

- Increased porosity of European borders.
- Increased ability of regions and sub-regions to collaborate [even to the extent of conducting their own “external” relations] e.g. the Alpe-Adria region, and the linkages between Grenoble, Turin and Barcelona.
- Increased devolution of decision making, upwards to Brussels, and downward to the regions.

More broadly, this key suggests that it is necessary to open up possibilities and for adversaries to enjoy the possibility of innovating —to envisage and invent new structures, forms and relationships. Four suggestions include:

- Changing the structure within which the conflict occurs.
- Taking advantage of newly developing superordinate goals, new opportunities for cross border economic development and growth, for example.
- Exploring the possibilities offered by alternative processes for gathering a consensus and reaching a solution. [For example, reduce reliance on electoral processes which are by their nature adversarial; tend to freeze opinion at the time of elections and polarise complex views; exclude [temporary] losers; and offer only either/or choices on complex issues.]
- Creating new visions and investigating what processes of mutually and interactively creating a vision are acceptable and available. [E.g. “What would a ‘self-determined’ Basque Country look like?”]

#### KEY 5

### Regard conflict resolution as an inter-active process

Again, this key tends to reverse normal procedures used in “settling” a protracted conflict, which tend to be defensively reactive, with the adversaries all insisting that initiatives must come first from the other side.

For example, in the initial stages of any conflict resolution process, when adversaries are exploring the possibility for some negotiated solution, the normal tendency is for parties to:

- require initial moves from the other side;
- demand that the other side first provides clear evidence of its sincerity and trustworthiness, [i.e. passes tests that the other side sets or—even worse— doesn’t set, so that the demand is: “Show us that you are serious you have to devise a satisfactory way of doing this and we will tell you if you have succeeded!]
- threaten further coercive sanctions for the other’s failure to make some conciliatory gesture.

Regarding a conflict resolution process as inter-active first will take away the sense that the initiative is always in the other’s hands; and then will set leaders considering the other’s actions as responses to their own moves.

For example, in considering the issue of obtaining concessions or conciliatory moves from an adversary, leaders might well ask themselves; “What can we do to make it easier for the other party’s leaders to move in the direction we desire?”

#### KEY 6

### Take into account psychological hurts suffered during the conflict

The extent of physical damage sustained by the adversaries during a protracted and deep-rooted conflict is easy to see and thus try to deal with—this is what post war “reconstruction” and resettlement is about. Similarly, it seems to be relatively easy for leaders to envisage and make arrangements for material and political rewards as part of a solution to a conflict.

However, in all protracted conflicts all adversaries suffer major psychological wounds, ranging from rejection and denigration to the results of dehumanisation and loss of identity.

Joseph Montville, for example, talks about long standing “traditions of insult and denigration” between long-standing adversaries, which fuel present conflicts and lay the foundation of future conflict cycles. Vamik Volkan writes about each identity group [clan, community, nation] having its own “chosen triumphs and traumas.” In protracted conflicts, the triumph of one group is frequently the trauma of the other, as in Northern Ireland where the two communities have very different feelings about the “Glorious Revolution” in 1688; or Liberia, where the establishment of the new state in 1846 evokes very different responses among the descendants of Americo-Liberian settlers on the coast and the indigenous peoples of the interior.

Another key to successful conflict resolution clearly involves finding some means of dealing with these psychological hurts and traumas suffered by those involved in the conflict and [often] inflicted on each other.

#### KEY 6 (continuation)

There must be psychological, as well as material, goods for “giving up”, among them acknowledging the hurts and indignities of the other side.

Paradoxically and quite against normally prevailing sentiment, this key indicates a need to find some way of honouring an adversary, rather than regarding [and often continuing to treat] them as “terrorists” [when they think of themselves as soldiers “sacrificing for a cause”]; or as instruments of repression [when they think of themselves as defenders of order and stability.]

#### KEY 7

### **Make serious efforts to replace the “culture of revenge” which becomes especially prevalent during protracted conflicts**

Many people suffer greatly during protracted conflicts and most societies have some aspects of their culture and value system that encourage the idea of revenge or [at least] restitution.

Traditional views that hold sway in protracted conflicts refer back to the Biblical “an eye for an eye” or to the sociologists, “norm of reciprocity”. However, there is room for an alternative even in this tradition. For example, is the “Golden Rule”:

- “Do unto others as they do unto you” or
- “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”?

Many recent writers [among them Shriver in his book *An Ethic for Enemies*] have argued that it is necessary to replace this whole “culture of revenge” and reprisal with a different ethic that emphasizes both responsibility on the one side and acceptance [if not forgiveness] on the other. In this and other works, an important aspect of the overall conflict resolution process involves a number of stages:

- Acceptance —of [joint] responsibility for the past.
- Acknowledgement —of damage and wrong done to others.
- Apology —for admitted harm caused [mutually] during the conflict.
- Restitution —for damage inflicted.
- Reconciliation.

Connected with this key is the related idea that a resolution of a protracted conflict is the abandonment of a system of thinking about such conflicts within a framework of fault.

An alternative approach is to acknowledge that conflicts are complex phenomena that have many causes and contributing factors, as with all social phenomena. [For example, whose “fault,” is an economic depression?]

The more parties in conflict can avoid thinking about the problem in terms of:

- monocausality —conflicts are complex events caused by many factors; and
  - fault and hence blame,
- the more likely it is that some resolution can be found other than destroying those whose “fault” it is.

#### KEY 8

### Take into account the fears and concerns of the currently powerful and dominant

Again, this key seems to make a suggestion that is quite counter-intuitive and—in many cases—almost immoral. Why should one take into account the more powerful party whose actions, beliefs and very existence frequently perpetuate a situation of one sided injustice?

Apart from my own doubts about my capacity to pass judgement on whose concerns need to be taken into account and whose neglected, there seem to be a number of pragmatic reasons for suggesting this as a key to resolving protracted conflicts, although this key is often neglected because “top dogs” in control usually seem to be so well placed that they can defend their own concerns very adequately [through coercion or indifference to others] via their own resources.

However, even the dominant have fears for the future, so that the issue becomes one of either:

- Ignoring their fears as impudent or irrelevant;
- Finding some means of dealing with such fears that still permit the fulfilment of other party’s concerns.

I would argue that it is pragmatically more sensible not to drive the dominant into a corner but to take account of their need for reassurances, on the grounds that fear is:

- A greater motivator than ambition—or even greed;
- A justification—and self-justification—for “defensive” coercion and violence.

[A not irrelevant note is that it is probably better for a conflict resolution process to concentrate upon hope and opportunity, rather than fear—but fears always exist and have to be dealt with in some constructive way.]

#### KEY 9

### Do not think of conflict resolution as an end state, but as a continuing process

My last key is a warning against a trap into which all of us fall, even so-called professional conflict resolvers; that of envisaging conflict resolution as a task that can be completed so that we can say “This conflict has been resolved” —rather as fictional detectives claim that their case is closed.

[I recall clearly my parents’ generation having a saying that I heard frequently as youth during the early 1940’s. They would talk about “after the war” as if getting through the struggle against German and Italian fascism would lead to a world in which everything would be solved and life would resemble some mythical golden age from the past. Of course, nothing of the sort happened, and “after the war” the country and that generation found themselves facing huge problems and new conflicts, many of which arose from the very success of the Allies in resolving the conflict through successful force of arms. The conflict may or may not have been resolved, but Germany did not vanish so that a new relationship between the countries of Western Europe had still to be worked out.]

It seems, then, far better to regard conflict resolution as a process than an outcome, although many writers take the latter approach. At the very least, it might be best to acknowledge that the process continues after the peace settlement, and continues at the three levels I mentioned earlier in this talk. Agreements have to be monitored and adjusted



#### KEY 8 (continuation)

over time, new relationships developed, damage repaired, people resettled, hostility and fear reduced and —hopefully— removed.

This approach, it seems to me, applies to all of the “keys” I have talked about so far. The keys to resolving protracted conflict might best be seen as letting adversaries out from a conflict maze in which they have become entrapped. But it is an exit which simply begins a journey towards a new society and a different relationship, a journey which they start, at best, as wary cooperators, and only because such cooperation is in their own long term interests.

Moreover, given the recent past history of adversarial relationships, the journey will not be an easy one and it will require time, attention and effort if it is to be successfully concluded—a point which seems to have returned us to my very first key and its request for patience and application.

## 5. Some keys to avoid

As a last word, I should warn that my experience with trying to resolve protracted conflicts has shown that some keys open doors that lead to cul de sacs, to rooms with no

exits, or even deeper into the heart of the conflict maze.

Let me just mention three in closing, and again I should emphasise that many will disagree that these are keys that lead away from a satisfactory solution for many conflicts.

#### KEY X

### Avoid the “key” of competing rights

I would argue strongly that this particular key will only take one deeper into a conflict, especially if the adversaries frame that conflict as being about “the right to A...” versus “the right to B...” —which is often the way in which protracted conflicts are framed.

I am not arguing here that rights are not—or indeed should not— be part of protracted conflicts. Almost inevitably, becoming involved in a conflict results in the violation of many people’s human rights, so that such violations and their correction become, in themselves, additional issues in the conflict.

However, the problem of framing conflicts solely as being over competing rights is that—in many cases— the parties are “right about their rights” but that there is no general agreement about a hierarchy of rights or which rights are to take precedence over others.

[This is especially true when the rights in question are collective as opposed to individual (human) rights.]

Hence, where a conflict is framed as being about rights [rather than as involving some behaviours that involve aspects of human rights and their violation] then the only arbiter of whose rights prevail becomes force, and—as I have indicated— I am not a great believer in force as an acceptable process for long term conflict resolution.

[Perhaps an alternative key for use in such a case is one that assists in the reframing of the core issues of the conflict from one of competing’ rights to one of shared dilemmas. One of the latter might then be the dilemma of how the parties might be able to exercise the rights they claim without preventing the exercise of those or other rights by others.]

#### KEY Y

### Avoid the key that has labels attached

Another way of warning about this “key” is to argue that labels should not be allowed to become obstacles, as often seems to happen in protracted conflicts.

The main point is that disputes about whether it is possible to find a solution often become arguments over words and the meaning or interpretation of words. Will parties accept a “federation” or a “confederation”? Is this solution a case of “devolution” or “autonomy”? Would this action transfer “sovereignty”?

Now it is clearly the case that words are symbols, so what you call something is important. However, I would argue that the key to this particular dilemma over labels is to let the words and symbols come later. The important principle is to find some arrangement that fulfils the needs and interests of the adversaries [no small task in itself] and then decide what to call the arrangements.

#### KEY Z

### Avoid ready made keys proffered by others

I feel very strongly that useful and successful keys are those that are made by insiders —they are not brought, ready made, from outside. In less metaphorical language, a conflict resolution process and a range of acceptable solutions have to be developed by the parties to the conflict themselves, as only they know their aspirations, their society and their conflict. Outsiders cannot tell adversaries what will and will not work.

By all means, take ideas and models from elsewhere. Learn lessons, both positive and negative from other cases of protracted and deep rooted conflict. Systematically investigate how others did it, then adapt such lessons and models so that they fit the circumstances of the conflict in which one is oneself enmeshed, bearing in mind the rule that all conflicts are different although some are more different than others.

It always seems to me better to ask what lessons might be learned, rather than to look for blueprints —and this applies to my own suggested keys, which might fit none of your doors, as well as those offered by others.

## 6. Conclusions

In the last hour, I have tried to present a number of useful keys that might help to open some doors leading from the maze of conflict to a road towards solutions to protracted and deep-rooted conflicts.

Even if I have some of the appropriate keys on my key ring, however, we all have to remember that the keys must be put in the correct lock, in the correct sequence and [often] simultaneously, if we are dealing with a dual key system.

[Protracted conflicts often protract still further as the adversaries wait for the other side to insert and turn their own key first.]

And even if we get that right, theory tells us that there are likely to be many other necessary elements before we find ourselves outside the conflict maze and moving towards a resolution —more keys, a little oil for the hinges and much effort to push open the doors. I can only hope that the small efforts we have made at this famous annual remembrance will have contributed a little to the process of shaping keys, finding locks, pushing on doors and escaping from some of

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the conflict mazes in which so many people and societies find themselves at the end of this perilous century.

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**Gernika Gogoratuz** is an independent Peace Research and Conflict Transformation Centre created by unanimous decision of the Basque Parliament in April 1987, coinciding with the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Bombing of Gernika. Its aim is to keep up and enrich the Peace Symbol represented by Gernika. Since 1995, it has been supported by the **Gernika Gogoratuz Foundation**. The task of **Gernika Gogoratuz**, backed by a scientific reflection, is to make contributions for peace, an emancipating, fair, lasting and reconciling peace.

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4. Carries out and promotes research tasks.
5. Organises, in several countries, seminars about training in handling of conflicts, negotiation, mediation and reconciliation.
6. Is developing its own method of education for peace, based on the handling of conflicts.
7. Provides mediation and conciliation services.
8. Has begun and manages the *International Network in Support of Reconciliation Processes*.
9. Co-operates with several universities.

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