

Strategic peace mediation and dialogue efforts to shift conflict systems

Written by Anita Ernstorfer

With foreword by Maja Jakobsson and Pontus Ohrstedt, FBA

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Table of Contents

Foreword	6
Strategic peacebuilding: What is it and why is it important for dialogue and mediation initiatives?	8
Why is a systems approach to strategic peacebuilding helpful?	9
Developing strategic peace initiatives: What is your strategy?	13
How do we know we are making progress?	14
Final observations	16
Relevant resources and further reading	17

Foreword

WORKING WITH OR IN (VIOLENT) CONFLICTS means working with complex and often chaotic systems. Understanding how to contribute to positive substantive shifts in such conflict systems is not an easy task. How can we increase the likelihood that interventions we design, implement, and facilitate genuinely contribute to conducive and constructive political processes? How can we enable stronger conditions for positive changes in the conflict system that prevent further conflict and help build sustainable peace? These are questions that do not have easy or perfect answers. However, as practitioners we need to ask ourselves these questions when we engage in dialogue, mediation and peace process support. What we have come to understand is that we need to continuously explore these difficult questions to ensure we contribute as best we can to improving the lives of people in conflict-affected countries.

Given the Folke Bernadotte Academy's mandate and work in complex conflict systems, the FBA has over the past years developed more iterative, results-based approaches to support context specific peacebuilding processes and projects. For almost a decade, teams leading FBA's work on dialogue, peace mediation and peace process support have not only asked the above questions, but also engaged in conversations on the topic both internally and with partners. During these conversations, we came across CDA Collaborative Learning's (CDA) ambitious Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) project and have been inspired by the lessons and approaches it presents. It has led us to facilitate system conflict analyses in several conflict contexts where we work, and to use it as our main analytical tool that we teach in our capacity-building interventions. A conflict systems analysis approach has helped us to identify the current key driving factors of a conflict, and to explore where we and our partners can best engage and support to make a positive contribution to peace. CDA's programming approaches and practical tools and frameworks, namely the "RPP matrix" and the "Building Blocks for Peace", have inspired and informed our work to identify and design suitable and strategic dialogue, mediation and peacebuilding interventions. The questions and dimensions these approaches raise have strengthened our understanding of how our interventions best contribute to 'Peace Writ Large'.

In other words, our intention with this process and this paper is to deepen the conversation and improve FBA's own practice when it comes to identifying, designing and implementing the most strategic dialogue, mediation and peace process support interventions. With this, we believe we will have even better conditions to contribute to peacebuilding effectiveness and help shift conflict systems.

During this reflection and learning process we have received helpful support from peace programming expert Anita Ernstorfer, through her support in helping us to both understand and apply these tools in a continuous conversation and exchange. In this paper, Anita – with her experience, and as part of our partnership – summarizes, and reflects on, these key approaches to strategic peacebuilding, with a particular focus on dialogue, mediation and peace process support. We hope it will increase understanding and ignite reflections and conversations for other actors navigating the daunting task of making meaningful contributions to societies and people affected by conflict.

By: Maja Jakobsson, Head of Dialogue and Peace Mediation Unit, and Pontus Ohrstedt, Head of Peace Process Support Unit, Folke Bernadotte Academy

About FBA's dialogue, peace mediation and peace process support work

Since 2002, FBA has supported national and international partners with process and facilitation support around dialogue, mediation and peace processes, through advisory services, capacity-building support, facilitation, etc. Currently, we work with partners and processes in the national contexts of Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq, Liberia, Mali, Mocambique, Myanmar, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and regional contexts of Africa, Eastern Europe and Western Balkans. We also have an extensive and 15+ year partnership with the UN, in the area of dialogue, mediation and prevention.



1. Strategic peacebuilding: What is it and why is it important for dialogue and mediation initiatives?

STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO PEACEBUILDING are critical for dialogue and mediation work. They help us see how specific dialogue or mediation processes respond to the wider peace and conflict dynamics in a given setting. They also help us understand how dialogue and mediation initiatives make specific contributions as part of longer-term peacebuilding processes that rely on a series of contributions from different initiatives.¹

In order to ensure that peace (building) initiatives are strategic, a number of factors need to be in place. Designing strategic peacebuilding initiatives requires a systemic understanding of peace and conflict dynamics. It also requires an understanding of our own role(s) in the peace and conflict system, as well as a clear and collaboratively developed long-term vision for peace and positive change in the specific context. Engagement in strategic peacebuilding is based on an honest and deep reflection on how different actors might contribute to shifting patterns in these systems, in partnership with and alongside other stakeholders. Strategic peacebuilding also requires developing mechanisms to both identify possible unintended (negative) impacts of initiatives – an unavoidable outcome despite the best of intentions – and to mitigate them, a key foundation for a conflict-sensitive approach.

All too often, decisions about peace interventions are made solely based on formal mandates, funding availability, or the preferences of donors, staff or organisations (*'we are really good in facilitating local community dialogue, we strongly believe in that approach, and we already have lined up a donor who wants to support this, so that's what we are doing here'*). For peacebuilding efforts to be strategic, such decisions must be based on an understanding of the core drivers of peace and conflict and the dynamics of the specific context, together with a deep understanding of the leverage points for positive change in the conflict system (and what areas cannot be leveraged at a given moment). Actors who decide to engage in a specific context must make critical assessments of their own roles and the role of others in order to identify who might be best positioned, and the actions they are best equipped to undertake in synergy with others.

Strategic peacebuilding requires a long-term perspective that goes beyond working on specific conflict and crises issues (such as acute violence or threats of violence in conjunction with a referendum or an election) to instead aim at transforming relationships among different actors and stakeholders (such as those between government and civil society), shifting sub-systems (for example, how different actors within the rule-of-law system interact or how structures, mind-sets and relationships might shift in a specific community or locality). Strategic peacebuilding ultimately is about making a contribution to the wider system, aiming to shape an environment that is conducive to achieving a broad-based vision for peace in a given society: Peace Writ Large.

¹This paper speaks to both 'peace' processes and 'peacebuilding' processes, which for the purposes of this publication can be distinguished as follows. Peace processes are often more clearly defined in terms of timing (for example, focused on a specific dialogue effort, a mediated transformation of a specific conflict situation or the negotiation of a peace agreement). At the same time peace processes are often part of longer-term peacebuilding processes and do not (and should not) happen in isolation. Peacebuilding processes usually include a broader array of efforts by various actors at multiple levels that work towards sustaining peace, with a focus on addressing the structural drivers of violent conflict over longer time scales. The boundaries between peace and peacebuilding work are fluid and not static; often, a specific mediation or dialogue effort happens alongside or within longer-term peacebuilding activities.

If such a holistic and multi-level approach is critical for successful peace, dialogue and mediation efforts, how can we be strategic in getting there?

This reflection paper introduces several related concepts and approaches, based on practice and experiences from the peacebuilding field and lessons from peacebuilding practices over the past two decades. It draws on findings from the Reflecting on Peace Practice Program (RPP), which CDA Collaborative Learning organised as a forum to examine the foundational question: *what works in peacebuilding?*² The RPP's findings are contextualized here with respect to dialogue and mediation initiatives. Even though the RPP's findings are a few years old at this point, they still offer unique and foundational guidance in the peacebuilding field. These recommendations have been adopted and used by many organisations and have also strongly influenced policy guidance throughout the field, such as the OEAC DAC peacebuilding evaluation guidelines.³

More specifically, considering the specific context of dialogue and mediation work, the paper introduces a systems approach to strategic peacebuilding and conflict systems analysis and emphasises the importance of having a clear engagement strategy, including a practical model that can be helpful in this regard (the RPP Matrix). Finally, we propose five criteria for peace effectiveness as a way to spark reflection and analysis on how strategic interventions can contribute to 'Peace Writ Large'.

2. Why is a systems approach to strategic peacebuilding helpful?

THE TRACK RECORD OF INTERNATIONAL support for peace (building) processes is mixed, for a myriad of reasons. Many past initiatives have not lived up to the expectations of the people they were designed to benefit. Additionally, many efforts suffer from a singular focus on *program or operational effectiveness*: understanding whether a specific initiative achieves its intended goals in an effective manner. But when considering strategic peacebuilding efforts, what really matters is understanding how such initiatives contribute to *peace effectiveness* in the wider context: whether, by meeting specific goals, the initiative contributes to reducing key conflict drivers.⁴

In other words: many initiatives hit their targets but miss the point. A formal evaluation of a dialogue and mediation effort might find that all the activities that were initially planned were successfully completed in and of themselves. However, the overall situation in country might be exactly the same as before, and tensions between the stakeholders involved may be running as high as ever. No broader changes in the context have been achieved.

²The Reflecting on Peace Practice Program (RPP) consisted of multiple years of collaborative learning from a variety of peace efforts across various countries and dozens of initiatives. Associated consultations and feedback workshops involved hundreds of practitioners, policymakers and donors at the international, regional and country levels. The first phase of the initiative (roughly between 1999 and 2010) led to some of the foundational insights, including some of the Reflecting on Peace Practice lessons highlighted in this paper. The second phase of this undertaking (roughly between 2010 and 2018) led to further developments in relation to systems thinking, collective impact and evaluation. The author of this paper directed CDA's peacebuilding effectiveness practice area from 2013 to 2019 and shaped and contributed to several of these processes, specifically in relation to systems thinking. For some of the key lessons and foundational insights from RPP, see RPP Basics, 2016

³See OECD/DAC Evaluating conflict prevention and peacebuilding guidance, 2012.

⁴RPP basics, p. 2.

At the core of this challenge is often a limited understanding of the context: a superficial understanding of its true peace and conflict dynamics. This shortcoming is frequently accompanied by a linear way of going about designing peace, dialogue and mediation initiatives that do not recognize and embrace the complexity of the issues at hand and that fails to incorporate mechanisms to monitor actual changes in the broader context.

A systems approach that accounts for complexity tries to avoid such 'fixes that fail': it avoids the application of discrete linear solutions to complex 'problems'. A systems thinking approach also puts a very clear emphasis on understanding the organisation's own role in peace and conflict systems. Organisations and individuals that support peace (building) processes, whether from the outside or inside, are necessarily part of 'the system' and need to understand their intended and unintended footprint and impacts.

Conflict systems analysis

Conflict systems analysis is an approach to conflict analysis that helps identify the bigger picture, with an emphasis on understanding the dynamic relationships between the most important factors in peace and conflict. Systems analysis focuses on understanding the nature of the relationships amongst different elements and sectors with particular concern for 'feedback' in the system (issues that influence, reinforce or counterbalance each other). Such an approach helps show how elements are connected and interrelated.

Like in any other conflict analysis approach or process, different people and groups in a society will have different perspectives on and perceptions of what constitutes the core conflict and peace dynamics in that setting. Conducting a conflict systems analysis in a collaborative manner therefore increases the likelihood that these different perspectives and narratives regarding conflict dynamics will be incorporated.

Practically speaking, a systems analysis frequently makes use of a systems map (a graphic illustration) and an accompanying narrative, both of which are centred on the most important peace and conflict dynamics in the chosen unit of analysis (national or sub-national, for example). This format is often more user-friendly than long narrative analytical reports. Conflict systems analysis helps to facilitate conversations amongst staff and partners regarding the core peace and conflict dynamics and is fairly easy to update on a regular basis – a valuable feature given that most peace and conflict contexts change rather quickly.

The following shows examples of reinforcing and balancing dynamics that were elaborated using a simple example taken from a classic 'arms race' scenario between two parties, 'A' and 'B'.

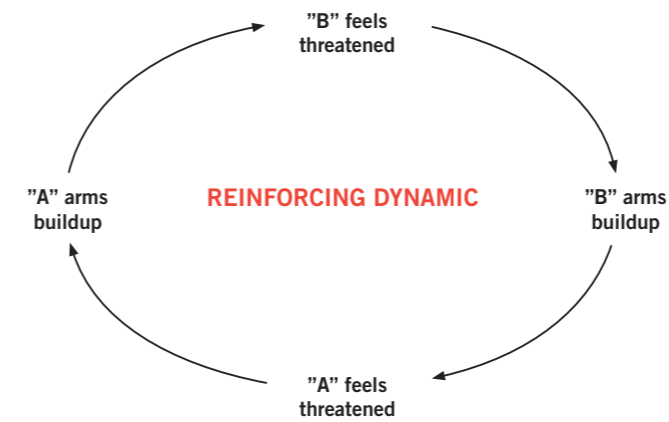
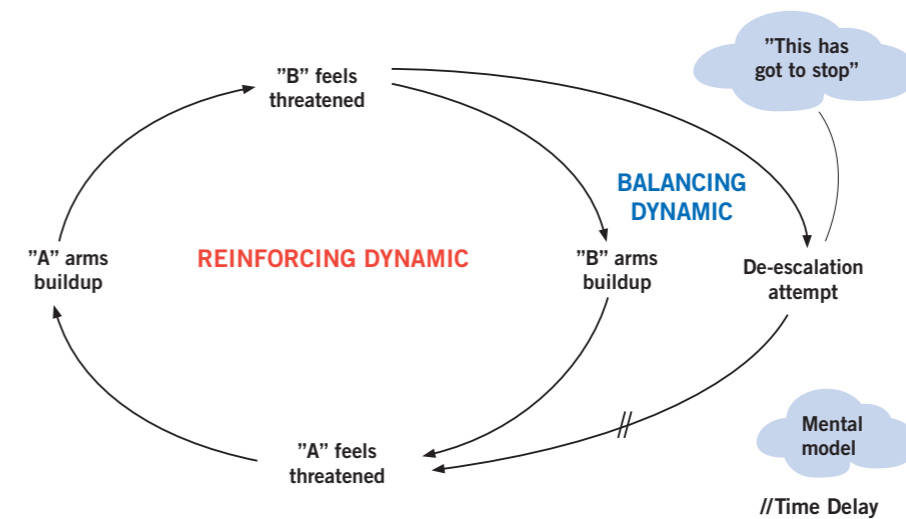


Figure 1: Reinforcing dynamic

In the reinforcing dynamic, the elements build on and strengthen each other. In the example here (Figure 1), we see a seemingly never-ending pattern of escalation, in a self-perpetuating vicious cycle: a typical arms race scenario.

Systems analysis can also depict balancing dynamics, where patterns of behaviour and action serve to return the situation to a certain desired state of equilibrium or to counteract a reinforcing dynamic.

Figure 2: Reinforcing and balancing dynamic



In our simple arms race example (see Figure 2), this means that one party – B in this case – decides to initiate an attempt at de-escalation (for example, by offering an opportunity for dialogue to Party A) to counterbalance the vicious dynamic that has developed. This action might be driven by certain mental models (attitudes, beliefs, mind-sets etc.) that enable this opening. Any given action (e.g., an offer to talk) might not lead to immediate results, and hence, there will most likely be a certain 'time delay' before seeing a response to this de-escalation attempt. The possible change process resulting from this effort is therefore not linear – progress may be interrupted by setbacks and so on.

⁵The arms race examples and graphics are adapted from Designing Strategic Initiatives to Impact Conflict Systems: Systems Approaches to Peacebuilding. A Resource Manual. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2016, pp. 14–15.

‘Systems change best when systems change themselves.’

Very importantly, systems analysis helps us see points of leverage in the system and how organisations can support positive changes in the system that are already unfolding. In this regard, it is important to understand leverage from the perspective of the system, as well as from the perspective of the organisation:

- Leverage from the perspective of the system: What opportunities for leverage does the system offer? Which of those opportunities are most promising? Which of these attempts are driven by key people within the system and have the greatest potential for success? For example, is there a desire and attempts from some to pursue constitutional reform?
- Leverage from the perspective of the organisation (that is seeking to interact with the system): Which of the most promising opportunities is the organisation best positioned to work with? For instance, which of the attempts at constitutional reform is the organisation in a position to influence, based on its expertise and resources? How might the organisation best use those opportunities? How can it cooperate with other actors?

Example: Systems Analysis in Iraq ▼

DURING THE SECOND HALF OF 2021, FBA and SIDA teams working on the Iraq situation collaborated to conduct a joint conflict systems analysis of that country. The process was designed to feed into the new Swedish MFA strategy on Iraq (2022–2026). The analysis process included (i) online meetings to develop a joint understanding of the conflict context in Iraq that was informed by existing analyses, public research and interviews conducted by the team; (ii) in-person meetings to review and discuss the draft systems analysis of Iraq and add further nuances; and (iii) individual and focus group meetings with local Iraqi partners and international experts to validate the draft analysis and make necessary adjustments to it.

The main takeaways from this phase of the process were a deeper shared understanding of peace and conflict dynamics in Iraq, as well as improved cooperation both within the FBA teams and between FBA and SIDA. The validation process also helped deepen relations with local partners and served as a forum for important discussions regarding conflict dynamics in Iraq. The flexibility that the team used throughout the process was crucial for its success, allowing the process to be tailored to the needs of the group and adapting and changing along the way. The resulting system analysis then formed the basis for the operationalisation of the Iraq strategy and laid the foundation for the theory of change and an understanding of FBA's role in the system.

3. Developing strategic peace initiatives: What is your strategy?

INVESTING IN A SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING of peace and conflict dynamics is only useful if it is matched by an **alignment of strategy and programming**. This means using the systems analysis, proactively and on an ongoing basis, to shape activities and interventions that consider the identified drivers of conflict, capacities for peace, and leverage points for change.

Below we introduce one of the key tools from the Reflecting on Peace Practice process: the RPP Matrix. Many organisations have found it useful for understanding whether their peace initiatives actually contribute to the wider context and to achieving Peace Writ Large. The RPP Matrix helps us identify if and how an initiative actually moves from program or operational effectiveness to peace effectiveness.

The Reflecting on Peace Practice Matrix (RPP Matrix)⁶

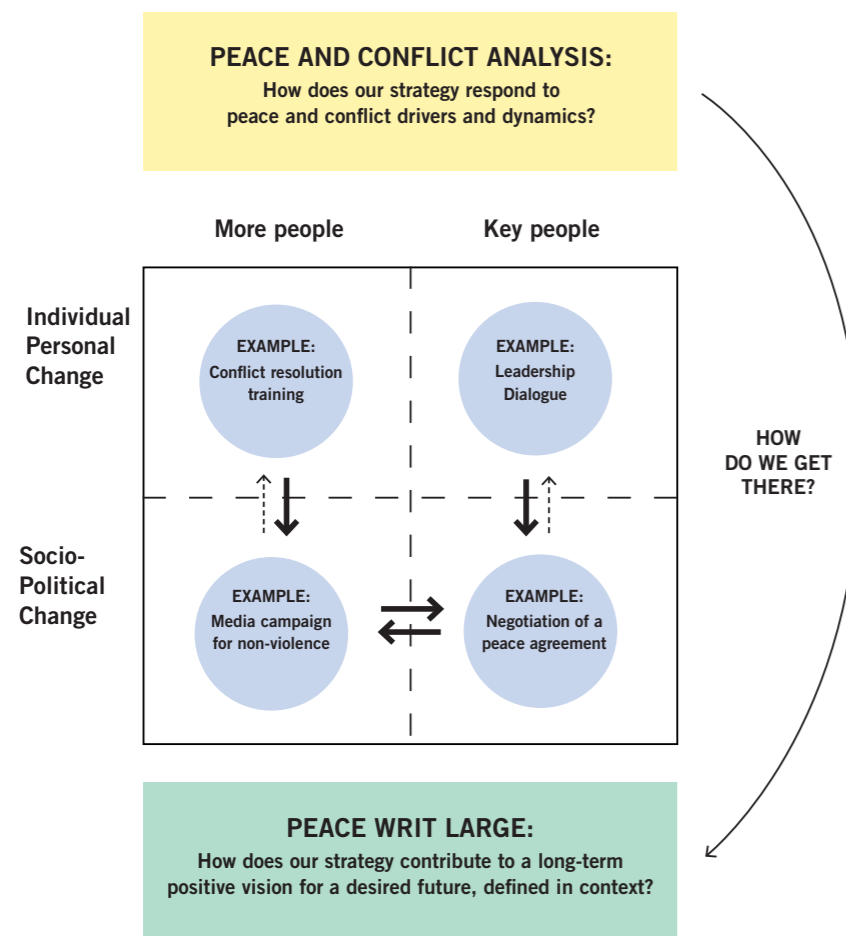
For peacebuilding initiatives to be effective, they must link change at the **individual level to change at the socio-political level**. The individual level refers to initiatives that aim to address attitudes, perceptions, behaviours, skills and interpersonal relations. The socio-political level includes relations among social groups, public opinion, social norms, societal institutions and deeper elements embedded in social, political and economic structures and culture.

These linkages are key: evidence from the RPP shows that initiatives that focus on change at the individual/personal level but that fail to translate this into action at the socio-political level have no discernible effect on peace. Socio-political changes also need to be linked back to individual-level change if the changes are to be meaningful and sustainable (for example, putting in place clear implementation and follow-up measures for a national policy so that people can benefit at all levels).

Another important dimension in designing effective peacebuilding initiatives is to gain clarity on who the organisation should work with. Peace work needs to deepen its engagement in two directions in order to be effective: it needs to engage **More people**, based on the premise that peace needs the support and participation of the general population, and it needs to engage **Key people**, under the supposition that peace cannot be achieved without involving certain people with significant influence on the situation. Who is ‘key’ depends on the context: Key people may be political leaders, key stakeholders who can support the implementation of a peace agreement or local-level community leaders. Key people include individuals, groups of stakeholders and groups with broad constituencies that have the ability to influence peace and conflict dynamics positively as well as negatively (for example, those with conflicting interests and diverging agendas).

⁶See RPP Basics, 2016, p. 34.

Figure 3: RPP matrix, including examples of activities and the importance of linkages between different spheres of interaction.



The RPP Matrix and a systems approach to peace (building) prompt organisations to think about their contributions to Peace Writ Large – the larger vision for sustainable peace in society. No organisation or group of stakeholders alone is able to act in isolation; collective efforts are required. Collective approaches entail more than ‘coordination’: they require honest reflection about the role and particular contributions of every organisation or actor, a deep commitment to working collaboratively and partnering with each other based on trust, supporting a common vision that is shared by all in order to create real synergies. Policy developments such as the sustaining peace agenda⁷ put new emphasis on greater coherence and complementary between different approaches and sectors and make peace everyone’s responsibility. This requires synergetic collaboration among various actors involved in mediation and dialogue and peacebuilding work more broadly. It also requires a greater level of creativity and insight on how to leverage peace contributions across the wider peacebuilding field and how to work in collaboration with development, human rights and humanitarian actors.⁸

4. How do we know we are making progress?

STRATEGIC PEACEBUILDING IS A LONG-TERM investment that seeks to transform relationships, challenge existing power dynamics, enhance accountability vis-à-vis the people that are supposed to benefit from external support, and create a more propitious overall environment for sustaining peace and justice. Monitoring progress can be a daunting task, especially since many traditional and overly technical monitoring and evaluation approaches do not lend themselves to tracking changes in individual perceptions and behaviours or in intra- or inter-group relationships.

Regardless of the nature of a specific initiative, the criteria of effectiveness “(also sometimes referred to as “Building blocks for peace)” set out below might provide useful benchmarks for understanding whether an initiative – a dialogue and mediation process, for instance – is on track to make a contribution towards peace effectiveness. These criteria emerged from the Reflecting on Peace Practice Project and a review of relevant approaches across dozens of peace initiatives in different countries. They can be considered intermediate-level benchmarks of success that are applicable to a broad range of peace initiatives, including dialogue and mediation efforts. They provide a certain ‘north star’ to guide peace efforts and can be used to test progress towards the overall goals of interventions. The effort results in the creation or reform of political institutions to handle grievances in situations where such grievances do genuinely drive conflict.

1. The effort contributes to momentum towards peace by causing participants and communities to develop their own peace initiatives.
2. The effort prompts people increasingly to resist violence and provocations to violence.
3. The effort results in an increase in people’s security, as well as their sense of security.
4. The effort meaningfully improves inter-group relations, reflected in things such as changes in group attitudes, public opinion, social norms or public behaviours.

Example: Supporting young peace leaders in Liberia ▼

AS PART OF FBA’S WORK and contribution to Sweden’s bilateral development cooperation strategy with Liberia, FBA identified a need to support the capacities of young Liberian peace leaders active at the county level. A long-term capacity-strengthening and network-building program was developed and implemented between 2017 and 2019, with follow-up activities still ongoing. Largely inspired by RPP findings, the FBA team and its partners jointly reflected on how the intervention could become more strategic. While the initial long-term program mainly focused on change at the individual level, FBA and its partners also decided to include activities linking those initiatives to the socio-political level. They did so by introducing a dialogue

component that brought together local and national decision makers with the young peace leaders and their organisations. The purpose was to facilitate a meeting space and foster important conversations that, in turn, enabled action at the socio-political level, at both the national and county levels, most recently through support to youth-led “County Peace Dialogues”. One concrete result of these confidence-building efforts is that various national and local actors (including county-level entities working on peace and security issues) to a larger extent now invite young peace leaders to participate in different areas of their work and also seek the support of these leaders to help mediate in specific conflict situations.

⁷UN Security Council resolutions on sustaining peace 2016 and 2020

⁸For a deeper introduction to collective impacts in peacebuilding, see Woodrow/Chigas, Adding Up to Peace, 2018 as well as the experiences from CDA’s collective impact in peacebuilding testing of a framework and related country case study insights. “For a deeper introduction to how different peace efforts ‘add up’ and to collective impacts in peacebuilding, see Ernstorfer/Chigas/Vaughan-Lee, From Little to Large: When Does Peacebuilding Add Up?, 2015 and Woodrow/Chigas, Adding Up to Peace, 2018.” (you can in this case remove the current sentence that starts with “as well as the experiences from...”).

Obviously, these broad criteria need to be further specified for each context based on a solid peace and conflict analysis. While the criteria are additive, there is no expectation that any one organisation can achieve all of them on its own. In fact, effectively contributing to changes in conflict systems requires extensive collaboration and linkages among different efforts. However, if an organisation's initiative contributes to at least one or even several of these criteria, it is more likely that the initiative is peace effective and contributes to Peace Writ Large.⁹

5. Final observations

THIS PAPER ENCOURAGES CRITICAL REFLECTION on how to think about dialogue and mediation efforts as part of a broader, strategic approach to peacebuilding and working for change in conflict systems. It puts forward key considerations that enable us to understand how specific initiatives might make wider contributions to the contexts we work in and to Peace Writ Large. This includes embracing complexity, adopting a systems approach to peacebuilding, and basing strategies on sound analyses of peace and conflict dynamics, as well as a conscious examination of engagement strategies and the types of positive change that the organisation aims to contribute to.

Implementing such approaches in practice requires organisations to potentially make changes to how they currently approach the process of designing peace, dialogue and mediation interventions with their local and international partners. In some cases, it might also require a more fundamental shift in the organisation's internal culture. If organisations are to fully embrace the idea that they are part of the very peace and conflict system that they are trying to influence, they must take a critical look at how accountability is understood and practiced. They must also consider how current power structures and power asymmetries (within organisations and between organisations and their partners and funders at various levels) influence the organisation's footprint and relevance.

Strategic peacebuilding encourages us to become more relational and less transactional in nature, and to challenge existing notions of 'upstream' accountabilities – versus a more horizontal way of working together, rooted in trust. It prompts us to not only conduct sophisticated analyses of peace and conflict systems in the contexts in which we work, but also to replace established and often linear ways of thinking about change at a more fundamental level – to approach dialogue and mediation work with a deeper understanding of human systems dynamics, starting within ourselves and our own organisations.

⁹For a fuller description of the criteria of effectiveness and how to use them in practice, please see RPP Basics, 2016, Module 6.

6. Relevant resources and further reading

- CDA Collaborative Learning Projects:
 - Designing Strategic Initiatives to Impact Conflict Systems: Systems Approaches to Peacebuilding. A Resource Manual. Cambridge, MA. 2016.
 - Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Basics: A Resource Manual. Cambridge, MA. 2016.
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- Schirch, Lisa: *The Little Book of Strategic Peacebuilding: A Vision and Framework for Peace with Justice*. 2004.
- Woodrow, Peter and Diana Chigas:
 - *Adding Up to Peace: The Cumulative Impacts of Peace Programming*. Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2018.
 - *Connecting the Dots: Evaluating Whether and How Programmes Address Conflict Systems*, in *The Non-Linearity of Peace Processes: Theory and Practice of Systemic Conflict Transformation*, Ropers, N. et al., eds. Barbara Budrich Verlag, 2011.

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About the author

Anita Ernstorfer works with leaders and program teams as an independent facilitator, trainer, adviser and applied researcher through her own firm, Untangle (LLC). She applies a systems and complexity approach to transforming organisational practices and programmatic strategies, working with partners across five continents. Her independent work is informed by her prior positions as the Director of the Peacebuilding Effectiveness Practice at CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (the developers of Do No Harm and Reflecting on Peace Practice approaches), as a peacebuilding, conflict prevention and conflict sensitivity adviser with the UNDP and UNICEF, and as a program manager for Latin America with GIZ. Anita has previously worked with FBA on a variety of engagements regarding systems approaches to conflict analysis and peacebuilding, supporting dialogue and mediation processes training, country strategy and systems analysis processes for Palestine and Iraq, and most recently as the facilitator of two research practice dialogues on mediation effectiveness.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the **Swedish government agency for peace, security and development.**

FBA supports international peace operations and international development cooperation. The agency conducts training, research and method development in order to strengthen peacebuilding and statebuilding in conflict and post-conflict countries. We also recruit civilian personnel and expertise for peace operations and election observation missions led by the EU, UN and OSCE. The agency is named after Count Folke Bernadotte, the first UN mediator.

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