Good understanding enables good solutions

"I have heard that before – I think that you should solve the problem in this manner" is a common comment from a partner, student or friend when someone has started to explain a problem. Sometimes the listener understands the situation and is correct in his/her analysis of it. At other times, however, the problem is not at all what the listener thought it was. This often leaves the person telling the story in frustration, and the suggested solution is often mismatched because the real problem has not been understood. The same goes for conflicts – if you do not understand you cannot fix it – but a good understanding enables a good solution.

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To be able to solve a problem you need to understand it. When it comes to conflict, core aspects that need to be understood are: Who are the most important actors? What are the main problems at hand? What effects will a certain initiative have? Are there any potential risks with a particular suggested solution? Often, concerned peace activists see a deplorable situation and react intuitively and argue that, "we need to do something". This is an understandable and heartening reaction from concerned citizens and should definitely be encouraged. However, it is important that this "something" turns out to be something useful for the victims of the conflict, instead of something that just eases the heart of the concerned citizens. Good intentions are a good start when it comes to peace initiatives. However, the issues at hand are much too important for good intentions to be enough; it is the results that matter. To reach the intended result a careful conflict analysis is needed. If you do not understand the context in which a conflict takes place, you run the risk of harming the peace rather than helping it.

The complexities of conflicts

An important aspect of understanding conflicts is to realise that they often consist of several parallel conflicts. Conflicts are often described in dichotomies such as Israel-Palestine, Hutu-Tutsi and United States-Iraq. A more correct version should instead describe conflicts as Matroyoshka Dolls, in each conflict you have another conflict.

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is a useful source for understanding conflict, and they divide organised violence into three main categories: *State-Based Conflicts*, which consist of war between countries or civil wars. *Non-State Conflicts* are the second category and consist of non-state actors fighting each other. Often these conflicts are fought between different rebel groups or between different communities. *One-Sided Violence* is the third category, and is violence intentionally directed against civilians, for instance, massacres, genocide and terrorism that deliberately target civilians. These different types of violence often take place in the same countries and interact in various forms. This categorisation is very helpful as it deepens the understanding of conflicts and illustrates the complexities, which are important for choosing the appropriate peace initiatives.

The Darfur situation

The continuing crisis in Darfur illustrates such complexities and dynamics in a clear manner. The conflict in Darfur has been described as an environmental conflict, a conflict between Arabs and Africans, and at other times as genocide. There is some truth in these labels, but each of them leaves out a vast amount of information and creates a simplistic view of a complex problem. More correctly, the crisis in Darfur can be described as consisting of four parallel conflicts:

1. Communal conflicts – primarily conflicts between different pastoral and farming communities over land.
2. Local elite conflicts – different rebel leaders seeking power positions, who fight against each other. There also exists conflicts between traditional leaders (elders) and young aspiring leaders.
3. Centre-periphery conflicts – Sudan is a very centralised country with many of the peripheral areas being extremely marginalised; one such area is Darfur.
4. Cross-border Conflicts – the crisis in Darfur also crosses border and adding to the complexities is that Sudan and its western neighbour Chad have been involved in a proxy-war, which means that both countries have supported the rebels in the other country.

In addition to this, there are also problems in the United Nations and the

five permanent members of United Nations Security Council. They are sharply divided in issues related to Sudan, with Russia and China advocating a softer attitude against the Government of Sudan than the other three permanent members, United States, United Kingdom and France.

In 2003 and 2004, the death rate in Darfur peaked with most of the atrocities in the region being carried out by the infamous Janjaweed militia and the Government of Sudan. The United Nations estimates that 300,000 people have been killed in Darfur between 2003 and 2011, most of these deaths are not caused by violence but by problems that follows from the violence such as diseases. The ethnic cleansing in Darfur appalled people, and many activists started to organise themselves in order to stop the ongoing atrocities. The horrifying situation in Darfur also led to engagement from many Hollywood stars such as George Clooney and Mia Farrow. The analysis of the Darfur situation among these activists and in the media often lacked depth, and the immensely complex situation was often simplified as a conflict between Arabs and Africans. Such a view missed much

of the dynamics and demonised the ethnic groups in Darfur with a more Arab identity. In reality though, many of these groups were victims and not perpetrators. For these reasons, the suggested solutions where not comprehensive enough because they did not include all victims and the dynamics were not understood.

The Darfur situation was also severely misunderstood by the wider international community and people engaged in trying to find a negotiated solution to the conflict. During the spring of 2006, the demands on the international community to do something about the disastrous situation in Darfur were immense. Negotiations were ongoing in Abuja, Nigeria, in order to find a solution. During that time, there were three rebel groups in Darfur fighting against the government: Sudan Liberation Movement Army - Abdul Wahid (SLM/A-AW), Sudan Liberation Movement/Army - Minni Minawi (SLM/A-MM) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) led by Khalil Ibrahim. The view among the international community and among the negotiators was that a peace agreement would solve the situation. For this reason the negotiators tried to force

the rebel leaders to sign a Darfur Peace Agreement. Moreover, the international pressure caused the negotiators to set up an artificial deadline for how long negotiations could take. SLM/A-MM was the movement with the most military might during that time and the negotiators concentrated on getting them to sign the agreement.

On 5 May 2006, the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) was signed between the Government of Sudan and SLM/A-MM whilst the other two rebel leaders refused to sign. The signing of the peace-agreement was hailed internationally and people thought that at last peace in Darfur was achieved. However, Minni Minawi had signed an agreement that was heavily disliked among the Darfurian population, among other rebels, and also within his own rank. Instead of peace, the DPA had devastating effects for Darfur. Firstly, numerous commanders within the SLM/A-MM left Minawi's rank and either joined the other rebel groups or started their own movement. Secondly, the signing of the DPA led to a huge proliferation of rebel groups and at one point there were dozens of rebel groups, making negotiations extremely difficult. Thirdly, fighting in

Darfur increased during the summer of 2006 resulting in that year being much more violent than 2005. Some of this fighting was between SLM/A-MM and rebel groups that had not signed the DPA; others were between the government and non-signatories. Fourthly, DPA being an unimplemented agreement decreased people's belief in a negotiated solution leading many to see a continued armed conflict as the only way forward.

Successful peace agreements

Nevertheless, although it is important to be aware of these problems, there exist many positive examples where a peace agreement has brought peace to the people. Three different examples from three different corners of the world are: Aceh (Indonesia), Mozambique and El Salvador. In all these countries, protracted conflicts that had caused thousands of deaths ended through a peace agreement. In 2004 a tsunami devastated large areas of South-East Asia and one region that suffered the most from this was the Aceh region of Indonesia. In Aceh, an armed conflict had been going on for decades, and bizarrely the tragic tsunami also brought some positive effects to the region. The day after the tsunami both the rebels (GAM – Free Aceh Movement) and the government declared unilateral ceasefires. However the ceasefire quickly broke down, but international pressure from donors led to peace-talks being restarted in 2005. Negotiations led by the former Finnish President Marti Ahtisaari led to a Peace Agreement signed 15 August 2005, and since then no fighting has taken place in Aceh. Interestingly, the tsunami had opposite effects in Sri Lanka that also was severely hit by the tsunami. There, the fighting intensified after the tsunami. However, of course the tsunami was just one among many factors explaining the differences between the peace processes in Aceh and Sri Lanka.

In Mozambique, a very violent conflict started in the second half of the 1970s. Sponsored by the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the Renamo rebels opposed the Mozambique Government. This war included severe atrocities against the civilian population and the Renamo carried out most of the massacres. Several attempts to stop this conflict were carried out during the 1980s, but none of them succeeded. However, at the beginning of the 1990s, the Saint Egidio community, a catholic non-government organisation based in Rome, started negotiations. Representatives from Saint Egido, an Italian politician and a bishop from Mozambique succeeded in getting the parties to sign a peace-agreement in 1992 and peace has remained since.

The third and final example is from El Salvador. At the end of the 1970s guerrilla rebels, critical of the rightist government, took up weapons. In the 1980s the conflict in El Salvador followed the pattern of a typical Latin American conflict during the cold war with the Soviet and the United States supporting different sides in the conflict. In El Salvador, Soviet and other communist states supported the FMLN rebels and the United States supported the government. During the cold war the conflict in El Salvador was very bloody with more than a thousand people killed every year. Attempts to solve the conflict did not succeed, but with the end of the cold war new opportunities appeared and a peace agreement brokered by the United Nations was signed in 1992. Moreover, in El Salvador peace has remained since. These three examples show that no conflicts continue forever and that attempts to try to stop conflicts should never stop. Furthermore, they illustrate the important role different actors can play in achieving peace. Finally, the argument made above, of complexities of conflicts, is demonstrated in these conflicts as local, regional, and global factors were important in all of them.

"Before commencing any peace initiative a thorough conflict analysis has to be carried out"

This article makes a call that good intentions have to be combined with good understanding to create a good solution. Before commencing any peace initiative a thorough conflict analysis has to be carried out. If this is not done there is a clear risk for unintended effects. It is important to realise that something that is supposed to be genuinely good might not have that effect. A peace agreement can bring peace to millions of people or it can be just a piece of paper – sometimes even having a negative effect. As demonstrated by the more positive examples, this article should not at all be seen as a call for less activism, less enthusiasm regarding peace initiatives, or a disbelief in peace agreement. However, we need a good understanding in order to achieve a good solution. ■

PEACE MONITOR

RECOMMENDED READING:

Violent Conflict and Peacebuilding – the Continuing Crisis in Darfur
Brosché, Johan and Rothbart, Daniel, 2012 (forthcoming) London and New York: Routledge

Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement:
Pruitt, Dean and Kim, Sung Hee, 2003, McGraw-Hill Higher Education

Understanding Conflict Resolution. War, Peace and the Global System
Wallensteen Peter, 2011, London: Sage.