

IN DEPTH

Concepts for navigating a sea of uncertainties

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All conflicts are unique and, therefore, difficult to compare. However, conflicts also follow certain dynamics that have been well studied. After all, the questions are usually similar: How can the conflict be resolved? Who can resolve it? How long will it take to resolve?

This article reflects on some of the concepts that can offer guidelines to lead us through the complexity of conflicts¹. Inevitably, the interpretation of concepts involves the author's subjective viewpoint and can therefore be called into question or need complementing. Meanings can also be different depending on the geographical and cultural context from which they are read. In any case, we hope to contribute to the effort of finding solutions to high intensity political confrontations.

Conflict. Clash of ideas or interests between two or more people or groups. Conflicts are social phenomena, and inherent to human nature; in other words, they are natural, inevitable, and even necessary. When they are managed in a constructive manner they allow for social development. The problem arises when those involved do not know how to manage them: the conflicts then become entrenched and can lead to a prolonged or violent confrontation.

Positive conflict management requires the acknowledgement of the conflict's existence and of the legitimacy of the disputing parties.

Polarisation. Conflicts polarise opinions, in the sense that people or groups in conflict position themselves at opposite extremes. This becomes a problem when dynamics arise that reduce complex conflicts to binary views of “good and bad”; that fuel the conflict, “us against them”; and that construct absolute truths that are suspicious of or exclude other viewpoints.

Coexistence. Since people are different by nature, we need to equip ourselves with tools that let us live together while respecting these differences. These tools are normative – laws and institutions to settle differences – but also cultural. Both norms and cultures are constantly evolving, precisely in response to the conflicts inherent in society. One of the most recurrent challenges for coexistence is the ability to understand how what we do and say can affect people with perceptions that are very different from ours (putting ourselves in the shoes of others).

Parties to the conflict. It is usually easy to identify the people, organisations or institutions in conflict, but most conflicts have multiple dimensions that are not always obvious. The parties to the conflict themselves often end up experiencing internal conflicts in relation to difficult decisions.

Conflict analysis. Systematic study of the causes and actors in the conflict, as well as the factors that may influence its resolution. There are multiple tools of analysis. One of the most important exercises is to differentiate between the “positions” of the opposing parties in public debate (what they say) and their “interests” or “needs” (which is what explains their positions). This exercise makes it possible to identify the incentives that could reduce the distance between opposed positions.

Conflict resolution. Initiatives to transform the dynamics (political, social, economic, cultural, etc.) of destructive or violent conflict. This is often also referred to as conflict *transformation*, which means that the destructive dynamics of conflicts can be prevented or transformed into constructive dynamics. Conflict resolution requires the will and ability of the parties to the conflict, and may require the support of third parties.

“ There are no easy solutions for resolving complex conflicts. The obvious option for one party is usually unacceptable to the other one ”

Win-win. A successful transformation of the conflict will allow all the parties involved to feel they have won something. This is only possible if the parties are willing to modify their initial positions.

Red lines. Conditions that are considered non-negotiable. However, many negotiation processes require the parties to end up by modifying their initial red lines.

Dialogue. The most basic way of dealing with conflicts in a constructive manner. Dialogue is a process of communication based on the value of personal relationships and trust, which requires a willingness to change opinions as a result of actively listening to the other parties.

Negotiation. Dialogue with the aim of reaching an agreement. It is a way of obtaining concessions. Good personal relationships are important, but not essential. The negotiators need to have a mandate and the power to sign an agreement. In politics, formal (visible) negotiations are usually preceded by preliminary (discreet) negotiations that make it possible to evaluate the real willingness of the other party to reach an agreement, and to determine the agenda, actors and formats of the negotiation.

Democratic institutions are the usual scenario of political negotiations. But when the usual mechanisms can't prevent the stagnation or worsening of a conflict, it becomes necessary to establish extraordinary negotiation processes.

Complex conflicts need a **negotiation infrastructure**: a wide array of actors who play different but complementary roles. These actors often work behind the scenes, aware that their actions may be publicly disowned if they are not successful. Tasks include:

- Suggesting innovative ideas and proposals.
- Exploring the interest of the parties in these types of ideas and proposals.
- Looking for external backup (technical, political) to assist in the negotiations.
- Training the opposing parties in negotiation processes.
- Generating synergies among actors that may have influence over the opposing parties.
- Offering political and economic endorsements for difficult decisions.

Mediation. Negotiation with the intervention of an external actor who directs and aids communication.

Facilitation. A process that is less formal than mediation, helping the parties reach an agreement or, at least, to improve mutual trust. Many external actors prefer to play the role of facilitator rather than mediator in order to leave the leading role to the negotiating parties.

The opposing parties request mediation or facilitation when they are unable to reach an agreement on their own. There can only be mediation or facilitation with the approval of all the negotiating parties. Agreeing to the necessity (and the identity) of mediation or facilitation may require a negotiation process of its own. It is common for the party defending the status quo to prefer direct negotiation, while the party pushing for political change seeks external support as a way of gaining recognition and legitimacy, and thus compensating for the asymmetry of power.

Other typical functions of third parties are **good offices** (offering advice and support), acting as a **witness** (observing the negotiations without intervening), **host** (when it is agreed to negotiate on someone else's terrain) or **guarantor** (offering guarantees – generally political – for the carrying out of the negotiations).

Neutrality and impartiality. Normally it is assumed that the person or entity that mediates or facilitates a negotiation must be *neutral*. In practice neutrality does not exist: everyone has their own opinions that can coincide to a greater or lesser extent with those of the actors in the conflict. However facilitation and mediation may demand *impartiality*, that is, an attitude that prioritises the dynamics of the negotiation process without influencing the outcome. Increasing recognition is being given to the value of

“inside mediators”: people who have a clear ideological orientation but are still acknowledged by all the parties involved as being capable of prioritising the reaching of an agreement over the defence of their own preferences.

Agents of change. One of the key questions in politics is how social and political changes occur. The answers are usually quantitative: through electoral or parliamentary majorities, in institutional processes; or through a *critical mass* of people mobilised in the street. However, when dealing with polarising dynamics, which reduce the space for differences, the researcher John Paul Lederach states that “we need surprises, surprising people, willing to get together with unexpected individuals”. A *critical yeast* is needed, the smallest ingredient in bread baking which, if well mixed in, can make the dough rise. This metaphor is an invitation to people and organisations to be creative and put forward innovative proposals, with unexpected alliances.

“ There are no short-term solutions for the conflict in Catalonia. As a society we have to learn to live in conflict, without harming each other ”

In short, conflicts are basically resolved in two ways: with the victory of one party and the defeat of the other; or with some type of agreement between the opposing parties. The natural tendency is to want to win, but victories are often ephemeral because no one is willing to accept defeat. In this sense, dialogue and negotiations usually provide more stable results. However, incentives, willingness and skill are needed for dialogue and negotiation to take place. In the absence of incentives, willingness and skill, conflicts can become entrenched. And the more entrenched they become, the more difficult they are to resolve.

In the specific case of the political and social conflict in Catalonia, perhaps there has not been enough reflection from the viewpoint of resolution. We are in a phase of political confrontation where the actors can't even agree on the nature of the conflict,

let alone how to deal with it. Everyone has many reasons to contradict – and delegitimise – the other. But it is hard to imagine that any of the options will accept defeat. So, sooner or later, a process will be needed that allows the search for a solution based on the premise that all the proposals are valid and worthy of respect.

For now the political conflict remains deeply entrenched. We need a paradigm shift: a *critical yeast* that can mobilise a *critical mass* that supports creative initiatives so that what now seems unthinkable becomes possible. There are no short-term solutions. As a society we have to learn to live in conflict, without harming each other. To navigate this sea of uncertainties, I propose that we treat each other on the basis of CARES: **C**uriosity for different opinions, **A**nd **R**espect for all the people regardless their opinion, and **S**elf-criticism, because nobody has absolute truths.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristian Herbolzheimer is an analyst of peace processes and expert in the role of civil society during transitions, especially in the Colombia and Basque Country cases. He has been observer and he has also participated in the peace processes of Philippines (2009-2014). After being the Director of the Transitions to Peace Programme of the international NGO Conciliation Resources, in September 2018 he became the Director of ICIP (International Catalan Institute for Peace).

1. The definitions that appear in this article are mainly based on the following references: [Berghof glossary on conflict transformation](#) and [USIP Peace Terms](#)

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