

ABC of conflict and disaster

Approaches to conflict resolution

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This is the 11th in a series of 12 articles

The potential for conflict is almost limitless, and it is impossible to prepare a recipe for resolution that will fit every occasion. Conflict may be on any scale from an individual to entire states; and no one can be an expert on all forms of conflict resolution. The most that can be asked is that aid workers have an awareness of the issues and can, if required, make some positive contribution to resolution.

Local level conflict

Conflict may start in the mind of one person and spill over to affect the local community. By focusing on that person, an aid worker may be able to defuse the conflict. On this scale, the skills required are those associated with guidance and counselling. Both sides in any negotiation need to have

- A demonstrable understanding of the issue
- A degree of empathy
- A feeling of immediacy, that something must be done
- Shared confidence that it is possible to reach a solution.

Thus the aid worker must have a thorough knowledge of the problem, a positive relationship with the person involved, and confidence that a solution can be found. Such confidence is only likely to come from prior thought and planning. The aid worker should then be able to rely on counselling skills during subsequent discussions.

However, conflicts are more likely to concern groups than clearly identifiable individuals (though individuals are normally members of a group, so personal conflict can be seen as the simplest stage of group conflict). Group conflict can occur as intra-group conflict (when members of a group conflict with one another) or inter-group conflict (when there is a conflict between separate groups). Definitions depend on the viewpoint of the observer; for an aid worker, the main distinction must be practical and concern effectiveness. Can the situation be improved or resolved by work with one or a small number of selected individuals or does it require group work?

Is conflict productive or destructive?

Conflict can be productive in that, as a result of listening to other perspectives, a solution may be found through natural negotiation or collaboration. Conflict is destructive when issues are left unresolved or there is coercion and dominance by one group over others. Destructive conflict requires more positive input from aid workers for it to be resolved.

The key factors that allow aid workers to assess the situation are assertiveness and cooperation. To what degree does each group display each of these features?

Timing can be crucial. Conflict tends to develop through stages, from an awareness that differences exist to a hardening of attitudes and, possibly, open hostility. Cooperation is more easily achieved in the initial stages of conflict, and so an earlier intervention is likely to be simpler and more effective.

Once the setting and nature of the conflict have been established, the focus must be on the perceived cause. The causes of conflict may be subsumed under three headings:

- The issues central to the conflict—political, military, economic, social, legal, technological, cultural, and physical



War damaged Afghan market

Basic principles of conflict resolution

- Paying attention—The person and the problem must receive total attention
- Listening—This requires total focus and concentration
- Reassurance—Show that the argument is being understood and include the use of open questions

Stages in conflict resolution

- Background—The history and all issues relevant to the problem must be collected
- Planning—Develop the framework of a plan that is positive, achievable, and relevant
- First meeting—Show empathy and knowledge of the issue; introduce for discussion the approach that might be adopted
- Subsequent meetings—Emphasise any successes achieved during discussion and, as a result, plan for future meetings
- Final meeting—Production of agreed report, with assurance of continuing support



Azeri women's group meeting

- The people, individually or in groups, involved in the conflict
- The overall organisation and structure within which the conflict takes place.

Key to understanding the issues is access to reliable, accurate, and complete data. An aid worker trying to resolve a conflict must have, as far as possible, full knowledge of all the relevant factors and how they interact. In conflicts, however, misinformation and disinformation all too often prevail.

The most important causes of conflict probably relate to the characteristics of the groups involved, their interests, values, and aims. If these are completely opposed, there is little room for manoeuvre. However, a seemingly fixed position may be rooted in misperception. Values may differ substantively, but they may merely seem to do so as a result of different criteria used to evaluate them. Apparently incompatible interests may be reconciled in the way an outcome is engineered. Conflict resolution means eliminating the conflict to the satisfaction of all the parties involved.

Ideally, management will result in a situation where negotiation leads directly to an agreed solution. The advantage of this method is that resolution is achieved by the opposing groups and the final solution is owned jointly.

Destructive conflict must be confronted so that the tension is reduced to an acceptable level. With detailed background knowledge of the groups involved, the issues, and the causes of the conflict, an aid worker is in a good position to intervene and ensure that a win or lose situation can be avoided

National level conflict

At this level, an aid worker will not play a central part in resolution unless specially trained. The role is likely to be one of facilitator, collector of evidence, purveyor of viewpoints, and provider of guidance and support for the experts involved. Depending on the situation, the work might be for one side in the conflict only or for all sides. Therefore, the prerequisite is knowledge of how the system might work and what might be required to ensure an equitable outcome.

At the national level, conflict intensity is likely to be greater than can normally be generated by local level conflicts, and on the global scale results are likely to be considerably more important. Several classifications for such conflict exist.

Once national interests seem to be at stake, a country's military is likely to be involved. Humanitarian aid workers are often ambivalent about the participation of the military. They may therefore operate with the military in the interests of conflict resolution but may also be in a position to act as spokespeople for the interests, rights, and values of the local population. This dual role allows a clear separation in function from that of the military.

In most cases, the basic settlement procedure is negotiation. This is effected by direct dialogue (particularly face to face), between the parties. Negotiations may lead to an agreement or may act as an initial stage, after which a joint commission is set up to agree settlement or there is some form of adjudication. Efforts may be made to insulate the adjudication process from the negotiations so that what is said in negotiations does not prejudice the final settlement. Ground rules for the negotiation may be agreed by the parties, including a time limit, after which the case is abandoned or some other avenue is pursued. The parties retain full control of proceedings throughout negotiations and are not legally bound by the outcome.

If negotiation is judged inappropriate or proves ineffective then, with the consent of all parties, a third party is invited to intervene. Depending on the degree of the intervention, it can be termed good offices, mediation, or conciliation.

Management strategies for conflict resolution

- Ensure that each side of the conflict is treated equally in all respects
 - Check that each side has made its case and understood the case of the opposition
 - Encourage negotiation, including compromise
 - Control the discussion, focusing on the case and eliminating threats
 - Impose intermissions or postponements when appropriate
 - Decide if the meeting should be abandoned
 - Defuse stressful situations
 - Encourage the development of empathy
 - Summarise key arguments, if necessary reducing some to the absurd
 - Encourage sharing
 - Use and encourage humour
 - Judge when the situation is appropriate for more formal resolution
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Example of conflict resolution: Uganda

One conflict concerned whether government funding should be spent on the sinking of a new well or the enhancement of all the main spring sources. The case was presented to all the involved village councils and then to the local regional council. As a result, an agreement was reached on enhancement

Classifications of national conflict

- High intensity warfare
 - Low intensity warfare
 - Covert military action
 - Political action such as terrorist action
 - Diplomatic action such as closure of boundaries
 - Economic actions such as boycotts and sanctions
 - Verbal expressions
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Ethnic cleansing in Bosnia

Definitions in conflict resolution

- *Good offices*—A third party merely acts as a communications link between the two opposing sides and represents an enhancement of communications.
 - *Mediation*—A third party not only acts as a communications link but is an active participant in the negotiations and is encouraged to contribute to them
 - *Conciliation*—This is normally implemented by a commission rather than an individual. The commission requires terms of reference agreed by all parties, and the third party thereby has a legal basis for operation
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Examples of national level settlements in which the author has been involved include the production of scientific background material for the boundary cases of Saudi Arabia, all of which ended by negotiation. Cartographic and scientific research was completed for the maritime and land boundaries of Libya, all cases resulting in decision by judicial settlement. In addition, the direction of a range of surveys and data collection exercises enabled two administrative groups in northern Iraq to appreciate the real situation within their jointly run territory and to work more closely together.

Mid-level conflict

For mid-level disputes such as those between tribes or regional governments, there are opportunities for aid workers to operate in both roles. The main causes of conflict at this level are

- Data—lack of information, misinformation, disinformation, and differing interpretations or perceptions
- Interests—these may refer to the procedure for settlement or the needs of the opposing groups
- Values—these include different aims, lifestyles, ideologies, and religious beliefs and have a major influence on the evaluation of any settlement.

At this level of resolution, less institutionalised, more imaginative procedures can be envisaged. The US Army Corps of Engineers has developed a series of alternative dispute resolution procedures. These include development of role play, important at the local level of settlement, into a rather more formal mini-trial. The disputants would go through the procedures of a trial, but the decision would not be binding. A further development of this is non-binding arbitration.

At the less formal end of proceedings, aid workers can be active participants, whether as managers or mediators. With increased formality, the role becomes more one of offering support and providing evidence. For all settlement procedures, data about the issue, the disputants, and the causes of the conflict are vital. Through practical involvement with the people in dispute, aid workers are in a particularly advantageous position to help facilitate conflict resolution, whichever procedure is selected.

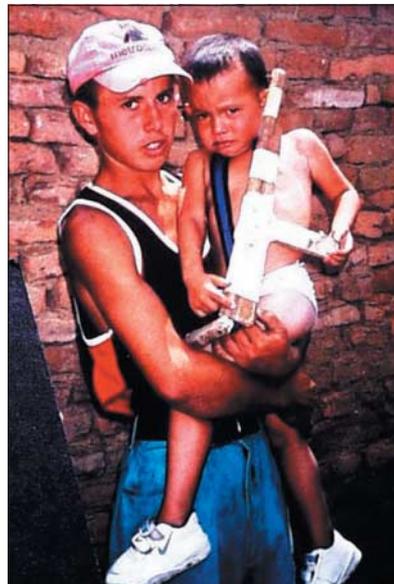
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Landmine clearance centre. Removal of unexploded mines and ordnance is an essential part of conflict resolution



Experiencing conflict can have a profound impact on children, potentially leading to further conflict by new generations

Further reading

- Merrill JG. *International dispute settlement*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993
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