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## Some Guidelines for Conceptualizing Success in Conflict Resolution Evaluation

Marc Howard Ross  
*Bryn Mawr College*, [mross@brynmawr.edu](mailto:mross@brynmawr.edu)

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## Some Guidelines for Conceptualizing Success in Conflict Resolution Evaluation

### Abstract

The immediate job of project evaluation is to decide what worked and what didn't. However, the more challenging task is making sense of why success or failure occurred and in so doing to propose appropriate future action. Effective evaluation of conflict resolution initiatives is complicated since interventions involve multiple goals and cross-level connections where indirect effects are often not seen in the short-run. This paper argues that there is no single best instrument or method for evaluating the extent to which conflict resolution practice has been successful. However, this does not mean that evaluation should be ignored. Instead projects need to develop methods that are good enough to be applied in contextually appropriate ways. To assist in this process, this article offers six guidelines for deciding when, how, and the extent to which specific conflict resolution interventions are effective. Good evaluation requires a self-conscious effort to articulate the most significant goals of different groups of participants and to track goal evolution in the course of a project using multiple, operational criteria. It should address the question of transfer, the ways in which direct work with only a small number of project participants, is expected to have more extensive, indirect effects on the course of the wider conflict. If it is done well, good evaluation helps practitioners define future activities and helps interveners and funders to imagine good-enough conflict management asking not whether they have fully resolved a complicated conflict but whether they have improved conditions sufficiently so that the parties in the conflict are more likely to develop the capacity to manage it constructively in the future.

### Author Bio(s)

Marc Howard Ross is William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Political Science at Bryn Mawr College where he has taught since 1968. He received his degree in political science at Northwestern University and in addition he spent a year studying at the Philadelphia School for Psychoanalysis. He has done research in East Africa, France, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Spain and South Africa. His current work has two major themes (1) social science theories of conflict and their implications for conflict management and (2) the role that cultural performance and memory play in the escalation and deescalation of ethnic conflict. He has written or edited six books including *The Culture of Conflict* and *The Management of Conflict* both published by Yale University Press and several dozen articles that have appeared in diverse academic journals.

## SOME GUIDELINES FOR CONCEPTUALIZING SUCCESS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION EVALUATION

**Marc Howard Ross**

### **Abstract**

*The immediate job of project evaluation is to decide what worked and what didn't. However, the more challenging task is making sense of why success or failure occurred and in so doing to propose appropriate future action. Effective evaluation of conflict resolution initiatives is complicated since interventions involve multiple goals and cross-level connections where indirect effects are often not seen in the short-run. This paper argues that there is no single best instrument or method for evaluating the extent to which conflict resolution practice has been successful. However, this does not mean that evaluation should be ignored. Instead projects need to develop methods that are good enough to be applied in contextually appropriate ways. To assist in this process, this article offers six guidelines for deciding when, how, and the extent to which specific conflict resolution interventions are effective. Good evaluation requires a self-conscious effort to articulate the most significant goals of different groups of participants and to track goal evolution in the course of a project using multiple, operational criteria. It should address the question of transfer, the ways in which direct work with only a small number of project participants, is expected to have more extensive, indirect effects on the course of the wider conflict. If it is done well, good evaluation helps practitioners define future activities and helps interveners and funders to imagine good-enough conflict management asking not whether they have fully resolved a complicated conflict but whether they have improved conditions sufficiently so that the parties in the conflict are more likely to develop the capacity to manage it constructively in the future.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

The immediate job of project evaluation is to decide what worked and what did not. However, the more challenging task is making sense of why success or failure occurred, and in so doing to propose appropriate future

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the USIP Symposium on Best Practices in Conflict Resolution Training, Washington, D. C. June 2000 and at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for Political Psychology, Cuernavaca Mexico July 2001.

action. Both success and failure can teach us a good deal about what constitutes effective conflict resolution, but only when we are able to comprehend their significance and draw lessons from them. To do this we must see conflict resolution practice as derived from working hypotheses about human behavior, specific conflicts, and plausible ways to modify them. From this perspective, evaluation must consider evidence from two different sources of failure (a) those arising from the specific training and intervention methods and/or (b) those resulting from an incorrect hypotheses about the conflict itself.

Effective evaluation of conflict resolution initiatives is complicated for several reasons. Most conflict resolution practice involves multiple goals, diverse participants, shifting time frames, and seeks change in behaviors, perceptions, and/or institutional practices. There is uncertainty about the relationship between the direct effects of a project on those who participate in it and its more indirect impact on the wider context in which the project is embedded—the problem of transfer (Kelman 1995). The deceptively simple question then of how to decide when conflict resolution is effective is often not one that can be answered easily.

Any evaluation has to begin with that project's specific goals while, at the same time, recognizing that project funders, implementers and participants may not all have the same goals or motivations for participating in a project. Central to goal articulation is making explicit the presumed linkages between a project's goals, its specific activities, and how these can impact the larger conflict. Many projects, for example, emphasize that success in conflict resolution should produce an improvement in the relationship between opposing communities and build a capacity for disputing parties to manage future problems. But there is a great deal of variation in how practitioners try to accomplish these goals—some do this through capacity building, others through sustained dialogue to reframe intergroup perceptions, and others emphasize the articulation and achievement of joint goals. Consequently, it is important to understand success in terms of multiple (often continuous) criteria—what Rothman calls “pieces of peace” (Ross 2000b; Rothman 1992). This means that there is no single best instrument or method for evaluating conflict resolution practice. As a result my objective here is not to say how to do program evaluation nor is it to evaluate any specific project. Rather it is to encourage approaches that support different forms of “good enough conflict management” (Ross 2000b). Good enough conflict management improves the relationship between parties in a conflict and is a developmental, transformative process that works to build institutions and practices that allow the parties to deal with tensions and differences more constructively than they had in the past.

The discussion of evaluation in conflict resolution here has three parts. The first section discusses theories of practice, project goals, and the roles each plays in evaluation. The next section draws on research Jay Rothman and I conducted in the 1990's on the theory and practice of non-governmental conflict resolution interventions. It discusses difficulties

employing traditional evaluation methods in conflict resolution work, and argues that just because evaluation is difficult and imperfect doesn't mean it should be avoided. There is no one best way to evaluate all projects, but when results using a variety of methods and indicators converge, we can be more confident (Campbell and Fiske 1959). The final section offers six guidelines to designing evaluation to decide when, how, and the extent to which, specific conflict resolution projects are effective. They emphasize that good evaluation requires a self-conscious effort to articulate the most significant goals for different groups of participants and to track goal evolution in the course of a project using multiple, operational criteria. In addition, evaluation should address the question of transfer, the ways in which direct work with only a small number of project participants, is expected to have more extensive, indirect effects on the course of the wider conflict. If it is done well, good evaluation helps practitioners define future activities and helps interveners and funders to imagine good-enough conflict management asking not whether they have fully resolved a complicated conflict but whether they have improved conditions sufficiently so that the parties in the conflict have developed the capacity to manage it constructively in the future.

### **Theories of Practice and Project Goals**

*Theories of practice.* All practice is grounded in beliefs about the nature of social, political, and psychological reality. These often implicit worldviews guide practitioners and provide keys to understanding how they expect to produce their intended effects. Making these core beliefs explicit permits us to better understand the working assumptions underlying specific projects interveners design, to articulate the theory of intervention consistent with these assumptions, and to revise practice if, and when, the core assumptions on which the project is based are found to be imprecise or unwarranted.<sup>2</sup> It is especially useful to make explicit practitioner's assumptions about the roots of the conflict in which he or she is working to understand how these assumptions affect the design of an intervention, and the criteria used to evaluate the project's success.

Theories of practice are particularly important if we are to understand how practitioners approach a conflict and what they believe would happen to the wider conflict if their programmatic goals were achieved. In a recent comparison of six theories of ethnic conflict<sup>3</sup> resolution, I found a great deal

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<sup>2</sup> The terms worldview or schema describe the core assumptions about how the world one lives in works, about the motives of different social actors, and about the consequences of action on others. All social actors possess such theories, and the ones of particular interest here are the assumptions conflict resolution practitioners make about the nature of identity based conflict, what can be done to manage it constructively, and judgments about what constitutes success and failure in conflict resolution.

<sup>3</sup> There are many who prefer the term identity based conflict, communal conflict or ethnopolitical conflict rather than ethnic conflict since most of these conflict are not about

of variation in how practitioners thought about conflict and what they tried to do to mitigate it (Ross 2000a). I found a wide range of assumptions about the presumed causes of conflict, great variation in specific strategies of conflict resolution, and quite varied criteria of success even among practitioners working on the same conflict. Figure 1 (reprinted from Ross, 2000b) presents six different approaches to practice in ethnic conflict resolution: community relations, principled negotiation, human needs, identity, intercultural miscommunication and conflict transformation. There are few direct disagreements between the approaches, but each one has a very different emphasis in how they define conflict, what concrete steps they take to address it, what are its indicators of success, and how they presume cross-level transfer will occur. Understanding the diversity of theories of practice is important to consider the wide range of goals in conflict resolution projects.

**FIGURE 1: MAJOR THEORIES OF PRACTICE OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION**  
(Reprinted from Ross, 2000b)

	<b>Causes and/or nature of ethnic conflict</b>	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Effects on participants in interventions</b>	<b>Mechanism for achieving effects</b>	<b>Transfer: Impact on the wider conflict</b>
<b>Community Relations</b>	On-going polarization, distrust, and hostility between groups exacerbate existing conflict	Improving communication and understanding; promoting tolerance acceptance of diversity; encouraging structures which safeguard rights of all	Build community self esteem through successful local institutions and projects making decisions on issues important in daily life	Self-esteem, efficacy and reinforcement from prior successes through local institution building	Increased community capability and self-esteem facilitates cooperative problem solving on matters of mutual interest

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ethnicity per se. While I think there is much of merit in this claim, I use ethnic conflict here to be consistent with my earlier usage in the larger project.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR CONCEPTUALIZING SUCCESS IN  
CONFLICT RESOLUTION EVALUATION

<b>Principled negotiation</b>	Incompatible positions and zero sum view of conflict	Positive sum agreements between the parties—i.e. ones which provide for mutual gain	Build analytic ability to identify mutual interests and devise solutions which offer mutual gain	Separate people from the problems; focus on interests not positions; generate possibilities for mutual gain; use objective standards to judge outcomes	Spread of skills to others; increased sense that agreements are possible; benefits to communities from prior agreements
<b>Human needs</b>	Unmet or frustrated basic needs	Shared recognition of core needs and exploration of ways to meet them through joint action	Discovery of shared goals and objectives; recognition of common needs; greater sense of choices and options	Problem solving workshops led by skilled third parties who encourage analytic dialogue	Transfer of new perspectives from influentials and near influences changes the idea of what is possible for the wider community
<b>Identity</b>	Threatened identity rooted in unresolved past loss and suffering	Changed relations through mutual recognition; development of a sense that agreement is possible; lowering fears to allow exploring options	Overcomes barriers to dialogue by focusing on deep identity issues involved in past losses so the parties learn what possible agreements can offer	Mourning past losses and suffering; track 2 and other channels which focus on identity threats and fears; symbolic and ritual action to affirm group identity	New understanding of the conflict through changes in discourse and symbolic actions which feed new understandings into the policy process
<b>Intercultural miscommunication</b>	Incompatibilities between different cultural communication styles	Effective intergroup communication; weakening negative stereotypes	Builds awareness of other cultures; develops new metaphors; information exchange to overcome cultural barriers to effective communication	Increased awareness of communication barriers; use of third party 'translators'; deconstruction of historical accounts	Improved communication makes it easier to reach agreements and increased public support for cooperation

<b>Conflict transformation</b>	Real problems of inequality and injustice expressed through socially and culturally constructed meanings	Changing relationships and moral growth which produces justice, forgiveness and reconciliation	Transforms relationships to produce self-reliant persons; empowerment and recognition	Elicitive training which develops culturally relevant models of conflict resolution; mediation aimed at empowerment and recognition	Empowerment leads to transformation of relationships in the larger society built on culturally appropriate models
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*Understanding goals.* Over the past decade, there has been widespread attention paid to the various ways to prevent or end destructive ethnic conflicts and civil wars. Governments and international organizations have considered and adopted options such as the development of early warning systems, preventative diplomacy, training special negotiation and mediation teams, and the development of multinational rapid reactions teams to intervene in ethnic conflicts that escalate out of control. Non-governmental organizations engage in less expensive, faster, more flexible, more focused, more limited and far less politically complicated interventions than governmental and/or international efforts. Sometimes non-governmental entities try to address very specific concerns through the provision of particular services or the creation of institutional structures valued by all sides. At other times they work to create a context in which the parties can explore options while getting to know those on the other side without committing themselves publicly to political risks.

Most governmental efforts focus on achieving a formal settlement (which in some cases may be no more than a separation of the warring parties) or in implementing an agreement once one is reached. Non-governmental groups rarely seek to broker a peace or implement a formal accord. They are far more likely to focus on creating the preconditions that might move the parties to the table where more formal negotiations can take place, encourage acceptance and implementation of an existing agreement, and alter relations among disputants. This is not surprising for non-governmental organizations do not possess the resources or political clout to broker an agreement or implement one that has been reached. Rather non-governmental projects are widely viewed as possessing important capabilities that can complement those of governments and intergovernmental organizations. These initiatives exist in dozens of settings and in some there are literally dozens of projects in place. Their rapid development raises the question of how we decide when, why, and in what ways these efforts are successful. We are left with the question of what constitutes success and failure for most of these initiatives, and how do they or their funders evaluate them.



In thinking about conflict resolution goals, it is analytically useful to distinguish between *internal* criteria of a project's success and *external* criteria which are those linking a project's activities to the conflict as a whole.<sup>4</sup> For example, an intervention that brings Israeli and Palestinian schoolchildren together might define success in terms of internal criteria such as the extent to which they learn about each other's traditions, develop a more nuanced appreciation of the other side's values, and treat members of the other group differently than they had in the past. External criteria of success would measure how such an intervention moves the Israeli-Palestinian conflict towards a viable settlement or changes daily life in their community. Such criteria would be derived from a theory of linkage that hypothesizes how changes in individual (and small group) beliefs and behaviors, such as those of the school children in this hypothetical project, can eventually affect the kinds of larger political agreements political leaders make.<sup>5</sup>

Rothman and Ross found that among the projects they studied, while interventions are not always able to fully articulate their objectives, for the most part they do a far better job in spelling out internal than external ones (Ross and Rothman 1999). What this means is that their theories of practice are more explicit about how their actions should affect the people with whom they work than about how they are likely to affect the course of the wider conflict in which the intervention occurs. The problem, however, is that while the rhetoric of project designs generally encourages broad claims about how a project will make a difference in the wider society, the connection between a project's daily activities and this rhetoric are not well articulated. Furthermore, this imprecision sometimes leads to disappointment with conflict resolution efforts when it is subsequently found that project activities fail to transform a society as promised. This was certainly the case with Doob's interactive conflict resolution workshops (Fisher 1997).

Another major finding was that rarely are intervener's initial goals the same ones that emerge as projects develop over time. This was particularly clear when we they got practitioners to articulate specific project goals and not just general "all purpose" objectives, such as making peace. This should not be surprising for a number of reasons. First of all, conflicts themselves change and so do the goals of intervention efforts. Second, organizations evolve as they learn what they are good at and what they are not, as sources of funding shift, and as personnel develop particular skills and concerns. Third, conflict resolution practitioners develop new insights and methods that lead to changes in how, what, and why they do what they

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<sup>4</sup> I find it useful to consider this distinction as parallel to the one between internal and external validity (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). Internal criteria of success are those over which a project exercises a good deal of control while external criteria of success are refer to the wider impact of an intervention.

<sup>5</sup> Kelman (1995) provides a good discussion of this issue in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

do. All this means that an intervention's goals are likely to evolve over time. At the same time however, too few projects could articulate *specific operational* objectives, and as a result know when or how to alter their behavior in response to changing conditions or feedback.<sup>6</sup>

Rothman and Ross found that practice is often opportunistic (in the good sense), taking advantage of unanticipated possibilities. Effective projects are, no doubt, responsive their environment, which means they can make mid-stream course changes. Flexible and proactive program design in response to emerging trends can be very useful but hard to anticipate, and difficult to evaluate using traditional evaluation procedures. So while being opportunistic may be good policy, it is also tough on evaluation.

### **Limits to Traditional Evaluation Tools**

Traditional evaluation grows out of experimental and quasi-experimental traditions (Campbell and Cook 1979; Campbell and Stanley 1963; Pawson and Tilley 1997; Rossi, et al. 1999).<sup>7</sup> Many of the procedures these require are hard, if not impossible, to apply in conflict resolution work carried on in the context of sometimes-bitter conflicts. Where typically there are often more independent variables than cases, no random assignment of subjects to treatment groups, difficulty in gaining pre and post test measures, changing contexts in which interventions are implemented, shifting goals, uncertainty about what constitutes success, problems of instrumentation, selection bias, reactivity, too few resources, and poor designs. In addition, there can be additional issues of confidentiality and data collection that further limit evaluation work. Often at best qualitative, not quantitative, data are all that is available to judge whether a program or activity was successful (Robson 2000; Shaw 1999). So why don't we just pack it in? The most important reason is because despite the fact that evaluation cannot be perfect doesn't mean that what can be not be useful (Pawson and Tilley 1997). On the contrary, I argue that good evaluation in conflict resolution requires making the best judgments possible in tough circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Conflict resolution projects are generally small-scale initiatives with 10-20 participants and activities that are not easy to replicate in standard formats. As a result, when significant effects are found, one can legitimately

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<sup>6</sup> Rothman and Ross asked a number of project directors about parts of their initiatives that had not been successful. Interestingly those projects which stuck us as more successful—and certainly more interesting—had no trouble giving us precise answers to this question while projects which were less defined (sometimes because they were more recent in origin) frequently could not provide much detail and tried to evade it.

<sup>7</sup> There is a huge literature on evaluation that is not the main focus of this paper. For example, see Rossi et al, 1999 and Pawson and Tilley, 1997 for a good review of the field.

<sup>8</sup> Don Campbell once told me that he was appalled that many people understood his work on quasi-experimental designs as saying that good research was not possible outside the laboratory. He meant it to empower researchers to improve field research on important questions.

ask the extent to which they can be attributed to the content of the intervention as opposed to the personal characteristics of the intervener(s). Another methodological problem is that interventions are rarely isolated changes in a social or political environment. It is not realistic to think we can be very precise about the degree to which any single intervention is responsible for diminished political violence or any move towards settlement that might emerge.<sup>9</sup> All this makes it difficult to attribute subsequent changes in a conflict to a single intervention although many interveners clearly believe their work made a significant contribution. In short, when there are independent variables and possible interaction effects it is hard to be very certain about when a project has a clear impact and when observed effects reflect the sentiments of a well-intentioned intervener.

### **Internal versus External Criteria of Success**

The distinction between internal vs. external criteria of success raised above is central to the issue of evaluation. While all projects seek to have an impact on the people and groups with which they work, the cross-level transfer that produces changes in the larger conflict in which it is located are critical to long-term success (Kelman 1995; Maoz forthcoming). Here I say more about internal and external criteria of success raising questions of how transfer works in conflict resolution interventions.

*Internal criteria.* Internal criteria of success indicate the extent to which a project achieved its immediate goals. Specific context-based criteria are needed if these are to be adequately assessed. Effective projects not only are attentive to how and when they are meeting their goals, but they are also characterized by the existence of multiple and sophisticated indicators of success. Multiple indicators of success and failure are necessary because exclusive reliance on one indicator will fail to measure the multi-dimensional nature of most interventions. Shifts in interests and interpretations are often subtle and are rarely tapped effectively with a single measure. Sophisticated notions about success are also worth developing (Maoz, forthcoming). For example, attention to changes in people's stories, modification of affect, shifts in the events are emphasized in narratives, and the use of new language and metaphors tells a great deal about how an intervention affects participants—although these are difficult to measure. Behavioral change measures are particularly good indicators of an intervention's effect—or its absence. While most interventions are ultimately interested in changes in behavior, Rothman and Ross (1999) found that few projects develop explicit measures of changes of the parties' interests even though such measures could provide useful indicators of an intervention's effects.

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<sup>9</sup> This leads to the hypothesis that perhaps single projects cannot be fully evaluated by themselves but must be understood in terms of what else is taking place in a region, the need for a division of labor and specialization among projects, and a consideration of what projects accomplish themselves but also what they accomplish in working with others. How to do this is not intuitively obvious.

While articulating clear internal criteria of success is important, Rothman and Ross (1999) found that evaluation is sometimes transformed from a mechanism of self-correction to a self-serving one. An obvious example of this involves asking participants in a workshop or training session to evaluate the intervention through a questionnaire. Many of the questions are worded in such a way as to favor a positive response, a problem which is compounded in situations where people are paid to participate and believe that their future remuneration is tied to their answers. Pre- and post-workshop data can be valuable, but only if there is some integrity to the process.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, one should be critical of measures of success which simply count the number of participants in workshops or the number of cases processed without providing attitudinal or behavioral outcomes of an intervention.

### **External Criteria**

The question of external criteria of success links the specific effects of an intervention to the wider conflict in which it occurs. While projects generally have a good sense of internal criteria, Rothman and Ross (1999) found that there was far less explicit articulation of the link between these goals and the impact they expect their achievement to have on the wider societal conflict.<sup>11</sup> While no small intervention can be expected to end a long-term intransigent conflict itself, one can ask practitioners to hypothesize what specific impact a project, or a group of projects, should be expected to have on the larger conflict. Yet Ross and Rothman found that few practitioners could articulate explicit hypotheses about spillover and multiplier effects. I suggest that spelling out these hypotheses is often less difficult than interveners believe and could lead to significant learnings about what does and does not work in conflict resolution.

Here Kelman's work stands out (Kelman, 1987; Kelman, 1995). Since Kelman began problem-solving workshops in the Middle East in the early 1970's, he has been clear on who he sought to participate in his workshops—unofficial near-influentials; what he wanted them to acquire—a clearer sense of the other side's thinking; and how he believed they would have an impact on Israeli and Palestinian societies—injecting new ideas into

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<sup>10</sup> Rarely do projects collect data after a significant passage of time to see if the effects found in a workshop are still present a year or two later.

<sup>11</sup> Knox (1993) is a real exception here. He was interested in the impact of the effect of adoption of community relations programs by local councils in Northern Ireland. Using comparative survey data, he found that over a four-year period the program had an impact on attitudes concerning fair employment, prejudice, and tolerance. Perhaps the effects were confounded with the independent variable in that councils adopting the program may have been located in areas more predisposed to attitude change. Nonetheless, he makes the case that even if this took place, putting these programs in place still had an independent impact on attitudes. To me, the key point is the seriousness of the effort to measure a program's wider impact.

public discourse including the notions that there were people on the other side to talk to and things to talk about with them (Kelman, 1987, 1995; Fisher, 1997: Chapter 3). At the same time, I am not aware of any systematic effort to assess the extent to which his hypotheses about the dynamics of transfer are correct. In part this is because Kelman has long felt that issues of confidentiality needed to take precedence over collection of data that could be used in evaluation. In addition, even if Kelman had been determined to measure transfer, the task would have been daunting. It would not have been easy to say, for example, that when public discourse did shift in Israel and Palestine, it was because of the interactive conflict resolution workshops and not one or more of the dozens of other initiatives going on at the time, or changes in international and regional politics.

Good, measurable, external criteria of success are especially difficult to develop in situations since often the objectives include preventing undesirable events from taking place. For example, a project may try to halt the spread of intergroup violence and may take deliberate steps to limit tit-for-tat reprisals between groups or seek to ease relations between the police and local communities. Since the goal is to prevent undesirable events, such as retaliatory violence, how are we to decide the extent to which the intervention is the reason why such an event fails to occur? Only if there is an explicit statement of expectations (counter-factuals) against which outcomes are evaluated is this possible.

Faced with significant barriers to traditional evaluation, conflict resolution practitioners need to follow Campbell's advice and find ways to make important decisions about what works and what doesn't as best they can. Sound theory and incomplete knowledge must be the guide. In the spirit of improving our capacity to make better decisions I offer three different tests which might help evaluate a project's effects. While none of them is infallible, agreement across them might be sufficient (if not fully adequate) to decide what was successful in an intervention.

*Face validity.* Is it plausible that the activities of a project are likely to have contributed to an outcome (or a non-outcome)? For example, Kelman (1995) suggests why it is likely that problem-solving workshops and various Track 2 efforts significantly contributed to the 1993 Oslo Accord and subsequent Israeli-Palestinian agreement. He argues that these interventions over 20 years significantly altered the frames of reference of both political elites and the mass public as well as showing key figures on both sides both that there was someone on the other side with whom they could talk. While Kelman doesn't assert his workshops were more important than the end of the cold war and the PLO's weakened political position following the Gulf War, he builds a plausible case that conflict resolution mattered, and this claim has face validity for many familiar with the Oslo process.

*Consistency with theory.* A second test is whether an outcome is consistent (or clashes) with one or more accepted social science theories. This test can be particularly useful in raising questions about well-

intentioned but naive interventions.<sup>12</sup> For example, claiming significant impact as a result of short-term interventions, such as training sessions, flies in the face of what is widely accepted about the need for social support for attitude and behavior change, the sometimes negative effects of intergroup contact, and the problems people in emotionally charged situations have in transferring learnings across social settings or individuals.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, methodological considerations, such as those Campbell and Stanley (1963) raise ought to make us cautious about claims of the impact of particular micro-level events on macro-outcomes. Unfortunately, issues of selection bias, reactivity, and instrumentation, can lead wishful thinking that leads interveners to believe that their impact is greater than it really is. Faced with this kind of question, the best thing to do is to gather multiple, independent measures that point in a common direction as well as parallel results across workshops and contexts.

*Consensus among disputants.* Face validity generally refers to reactions from implementers and outside observers. Another useful test of a project's impact could come from the members of the disputing communities themselves. Two different kinds of evidence might be sought. One would try to collect local perceptions about why particular outcomes had or had not come about. For example, at the time of the cease fires in Northern Ireland in 1994 there were many conflict resolution specialists (and other observers) who warned that there were likely to be continuing violent incidents similar to those had taken place in South Africa and Israel-Palestine following initial agreements because, the wisdom went, the paramilitary groups could not control all their members. Yet since 1994 there has been only one major violent incident and all parties in the region denounced this one.<sup>14</sup> Why? Is it because the paramilitaries do have more control over their followers than is assumed or is it because there was sufficient buy-in to the political

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<sup>12</sup> Theory, of course, is not always clear about what to expect. For example, should attitude or behavioral change come first? how might changes in one affect the other? However, theory is especially useful in rejecting what seem to be overly optimistic claims projects make in either a burst of enthusiasm or as part of their appeal to funders.

<sup>13</sup> Boltjes (1999) reports on one project that got large funding although there was little theoretical reason to think it could have worked. The Conflict Management Group sought to transform the culture of the former Soviet Union from a culture of hierarchy into a culture of negotiations. Considering that the specific project activities involved working with a relatively small elite, groups for very limited amounts of time such sweeping goals are clearly inconsistent with virtually any plausible theory of social or political change to which either project should have had access. We simply have no good theories that would allow us to expect that intense workshops, even (and sometimes especially) with highly influential political figures, are hardly likely to lead to sweeping culture change (especially in a country as large and complex as Russia).

<sup>14</sup> There have been many smaller scale incidents especially in neighborhoods in Belfast as well as internecine violence particularly involving Protestant paramilitaries. In addition there have been regular confrontations, sometime involving violence, around parades in Portadown and a few other areas.

agreements to limit the violence? Was it the widespread public support for ending the violence? Learning what people think is at work can be useful—particularly if the answers are consistent with the first two tests. Second, one might try to get the reactions of a more focused sample of community leaders, political and security officials to see to what extent they find specific interventions effective in their eyes. While political perspectives may color such reactions, they might also help us learn about what makes certain projects effective. Finally, when a project conducts multiple workshops over time, the reflections of returning participants might provide particularly good evidence of how the project has been effective to date.

### **What “Good Enough” Evaluation Looks Like**

The previous pages offer an approach to thinking about evaluation in conflict resolution. The emphasis is on doing the best possible job in complicated situations. Good enough evaluation improves conflict resolution in three ways. First, at the level of specific projects, it provides rapid and effective feedback so that ineffective activities are dropped and ones that are working are enhanced. Rothman has developed a formal set of procedures, Action Evaluation, which tries to make such changes and adjustments during the course of an intervention (Ross, 2001; Rothman, 1998). It involves all stakeholders in reflection on goals, the extent to which they have been achieved, and their redefinition over time. Second, for communities in which interventions are taking place, evaluation can provide tangible evidence of desired change that may be crucial in a political climate where interventions (by insiders or outsiders) are viewed skeptically. Third, sound and effective evaluation can help funders feel more confident about what they are getting for the money they spend. When funders better appreciate what evaluation can and cannot provide, they may be more likely to continue to be engaged in the field. This process is one which includes educating agencies and foundations about not only what works and what doesn't, but what is realistic to achieve, the importance of partial successes, and the long term nature of transforming most bitter, intransigent conflicts.

The spirit of the argument here is not to offer a simple evaluation checklist that can be used across situations. Rather, I propose six guidelines that follow from the perspective offered here to help decide whether and how conflict resolution projects (or parts of them) are effective or not.

(1) *Good evaluation requires a self-conscious effort to articulate the most significant goals of disputants and interveners and to track goal evolution over time.* In many long-term conflicts the demands of groups in conflict appear to be like a shifting target. When initial demands are met, newer ones arise. In part this is because the conflict itself evolves, and in part because settling one set of issues brings others to the fore. For example, in Northern Ireland when the British reimposition of direct rule in the region significantly diminished the most blatant public sector anti-Catholic discrimination—a primary goal of the late 1960's Civil Rights Movement, a

new set of demands came to the fore having to do with the constitutional arrangements of the north. The 1998 Good Friday Agreement provided a constitutional arrangement and questions including Loyal Order parades, police restructuring and decommissioning of weapons became focal points of the conflict. Finally, it is wrong to assume that the goals of the parties locked in conflict are clear to themselves and to their opponents. This is not always the case.

Goals of conflict resolution initiatives evolve in response to both disputants needs and changing conditions. The challenges of pre-settlement and post-settlement periods are, for example, often very different and quite different goals are appropriate in each. Rothman and I felt that projects we intuitively sensed were vibrant and effective often develop new and/or changing goals over time. Although there was no explicit time dimension in our analysis, we contend that evolved objectives, when clearly articulated in an operational manner, regularly evaluated, and revised can serve as powerful tools for program development. Rothman then made this central to his concept of Action Evaluation (1998). More attention to goals—and the articulation of operational indicators of their success or failure—will mean more realistic and careful planning of projects, but also more self-conscious linkage between goals and the specific activities in which a project engages.

Goals do not always change, but the ways that participants talk about their own and those on the other side can shift in important ways. To understand this dynamic, evaluation can look at how discourse changes, the degree to which each side is able to employ the others' language and metaphors, changes in adverbs and adjectives indicate decrease negative affect, the number and intensity of blame statements, and the degree of sustained back-and-forth dialogue as opposed to one-sided pronouncements.

(2) *Good evaluation spells out operational criteria of success linked to specific project activities, and seeks good evidence to determine the degree to which they have been met.* This is often harder than it sounds. Many practitioners bristle at being pinned down in terms of specific operational goals. They contend that goal setting often cannot be done up front. Surely this is correct at one level. However, at some point vague goals such as “increasing understanding between two communities,” or “providing conflict resolution training to 2000 people” without saying what they will do with it is not good enough. Good evaluation requires spelling out criteria so a project knows when goals have not been achieved as well as when they have. When goals are too vague, it is easy for interveners to avoid deciding that something they are doing is or is not effective or that their theory is inadequate. Just because clear goals are enunciated, does not mean they won't shift over time. In addition, we need to better understand the disputing parties' changing goals, and changing priorities of conflict resolution initiatives. When and how do they evolve, converge, diverge and what are the problems for practice these produce?

Interventions vary greatly in the time frame they adopt. For example, programs aimed at changing attitudes through school curricula can only



expect to have an impact over a relatively long period of time. Other interventions, such as the development of a mediation center in a local community, can realistically expect to have a faster impact. Longer-term goals are often more problematic to funders pushing project directors to show results relatively quickly. However, as Lederach (1997) argues, there is little theory that leads us to expect rapid transformation in conflicts. Rather an important task is communicating what is achievable in a given time frame and resisting the temptation to promise what there is no reason to believe can be delivered.

(3) Good evaluation leads to the development of multiple criteria of success, and helps projects understand partial successes and failures. Specific goals often help both disputants and interveners to appreciate the many dimensions to a complex conflict and the ways in which there can be partial, but not insignificant, movement towards goal achievement. In Northern Ireland, if one only saw success in terms of a signed political agreement, for years conflict resolution would have been seen as a failure. However, other measures of success such as the level of effective power sharing between Protestants and Catholics in local councils would have given a different answer.

While it is not always pleasing to politicians to announce partial successes, they need to understand the significance of the idea of pieces of peace. Existing theories of conflict resolution are partial and contingent, not general ones. They rarely compete with each other directly. Rather, each partial theory (Figure 1) is likely to be appropriate in some contexts and certain stages of a conflict. Gaining a better appreciation of the connections between theories, contexts, and stages is needed for good evaluation. Too many peacemakers have, at present, too little guidance from social science theory and evidence to be able to answer questions about how to proceed very easily either in general or in a particular case.

(4) *Good evaluation addresses the question of transfer, the ways in which direct work with only a small number of project participants is expected to have more extensive, indirect effects on the course of the wider conflict.* The transfer problem is perhaps the thorniest issue for the field. The funding process encourages projects to make large claims about their impact when, in fact, more modest ones are warranted. As noted, Lederach (1997) argues deep change is a long-term process, and yet many funders want to show short-term effects. Just consider the decrease in interest in central and Eastern and Central Europe today as opposed to fifteen years ago to see how fickle funders can be. Perhaps if some opportunistic activists had not promised almost instant change, and had a keener appreciation of the dynamics of transfer, there would have been fewer, but more sustained, interventions.

Another dimension of the question of transfer concerns what is the impact of a project after the short run funding ends. What is left? A common answer Rothman and I found is that good projects “need to leave something behind” meaning either functioning institutions that local groups would run

or particular skills (or even perspectives) which would continue to be valuable in the society. While this answer is not foolish, this mantra can be self-serving unless either (a) there is clearly a local expression of need for the institutions and skills, and (b) there is a clear commitment that the institutions are sufficiently valued locally and therefore will be maintained and that the skill training provided will benefit more than just those individuals who received it.

(5) Good evaluation helps practitioners define future and stage appropriate, activities that variously build on what has been successful and/or modifies activities in light of what has not. Different stages of conflict require different kinds of interventions so generalizations across stages may be inappropriate. Elsewhere I hypothesize that in severe conflicts addressing hostile interpretations needs to precede efforts to bridge competing interests (Ross 1993: Chapter 8). Another important stage-linked consideration is when it is more appropriate to work separately with disputing groups and when they should be brought together. In Northern Ireland, for example, community relations efforts for years have emphasized the importance of “single tradition” work so that when people from the different sides get together interactions can be constructive. Another stage related consideration calls for examining the needs of disputants in pre-settlement and post-settlement conflicts and emphasizing the different skills and resource required to be effective in each. By identifying specific tasks associated with particular stages, we may better spell out the contingent nature of success (Fisher, 1997).

(6) Good evaluation helps disputants, interveners and funders to imagine good-enough conflict management (Ross, 2000a). It does this not by asking whether they have fully resolved a complicated conflict but whether they have improved conditions sufficiently so that the parties in the conflict are likely to develop the capacity to manage conflict constructively in the future. Successful management of ethnic conflicts is helped by the development of models and examples of constructive dispute management. Such models can serve two purposes. One is to help develop specific techniques that can be applied to a wide range of conflicts. In recent years there has developed a small cottage industry of scholars and practitioners teaching particular methods of conflict management in a wide range of settings rather than accepting the idea that conflicts need to be either left alone to ripen or can only be stopped by a strong third party. This effort needs to be greatly expanded and refined in a theoretically informed way to be relevant to conflicts in a range of cultural settings.

A second purpose is more overtly political, aimed at changing the widely held beliefs that large-scale intractable conflicts such as those between ethnic groups are unresolvable. The success of the alternative dispute resolution movement and teaching conflict management approaches has been greatest in universities and in industrial settings. In these contexts, conflicts are often moderate to low in intensity, both the interpersonal and economic

rewards of new conflict management methods have been seen quickly.<sup>15</sup> It may indeed be the case that there are very few examples of more severe conflict management with peace and justice. Or it may be how we think about such situations that particularly limit our ability to identify cases. The greatest conceptual danger comes from the *post hoc* nature of many social science analyses. Cases where some kind of accommodation is achieved become easy to dismiss as not relevant to the problem. Why? The fact that some kind of conflict management was achieved is used as evidence that the conflict couldn't have been so severe in the first place. Perhaps, but I doubt it. Good evaluation of conflict resolution initiatives would help see if this hunch is right or not.

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<sup>15</sup> One question worth considering is the extent to which there is a kind of Hawthorne effect here in that in many large organization perhaps it was the fact of change and innovation which was as important for the changes as the specific ones which were made.

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