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# Social Cartography as a Tool for Conflict Analysis and Resolution: The Experience of the Afro-Colombian Communities of Robles

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# Social Cartography as a Tool for Conflict Analysis and Resolution: The Experience of the Afro-Colombian Communities of Robles

## **Abstract**

The field of conflict resolution is in constant evolution. Every day, theories are defined and redefined, and new contributions are made to the field. This continuous process challenges scholars, researchers, and practitioners to develop new conceptual and methodological frameworks for the analysis of conflict. This article highlights the potential of social cartography (participatory mapping) as a tool for the transformation of environmental and social conflicts at the household, community, national, and international levels. The advantages of social cartography as an appraisal, planning, and analytical tool for conflict transformation are illustrated here with a case study of the Afro-Colombian community of Robles.

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Carlos Gonzalez is one of the founders of The Foundation for the Conservation and Protection of Natural Resources of South of Valle del Cauca Department (FUNECOROBLES). He is a recognized leader of the community of Robles and his accomplishments include the coordination of projects in the areas of education, community construction of knowledge, management of wetlands and organic farming. He also coordinates planning process of natural resources with the communities of Timba, Robles, Chagres, Quinamayo Y Villapaz, south of Valley del Couca and north of Cauca department.

## **SOCIAL CARTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR CONFLICT ANALYSIS AND RESOLUTION: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE AFRO- COLOMBIAN COMMUNITY OF ROBLES**

**Elena P. Bastidas and Carlos A. Gonzalez**

### **Abstract**

*The field of conflict resolution is in constant evolution. Every day, theories are defined and redefined, and new contributions are made to the field. This continuous process challenges scholars, researchers, and practitioners to develop new conceptual and methodological frameworks for the analysis of conflict. This article highlights the potential of social cartography (participatory mapping) as a tool for the transformation of environmental and social conflicts at the household, community, national, and international levels. The advantages of social cartography as an appraisal, planning, and analytical tool for conflict transformation are illustrated here with a case study of the Afro-Colombian community of Robles.*

### **Conflict Analysis and Resolution Field**

The field of conflict resolution has come a long way since the term first gained wide use in the 1950s. Throughout the decades, it has developed through the input of diverse disciplines, which in turn created the basis for controversy in its theory, research, and practice (Kriesberg, 1997, 2007; Burton, 1990). In current debates, scholars still advocate the recognition of conflict resolution as a distinct field of inter-/multi-disciplinary study. Consequently, there is a need to constantly challenge and reexamine concepts, knowledge, theories and assumptions with the goal of developing conceptual and methodological contributions (Sharoni, 1996; Miall, 2004). The field of conflict resolution covers diverse areas of study ranging from alternative dispute resolution, mediation, and peacebuilding studies, to international diplomacy. Therefore, it is not uncommon to experience conceptual change. In the words of John Lederach (1995, p. 17), “terminology that dominates a field or discipline evolves with the changing conceptual processes of its practitioners. Such is the case particularly in the area of conflict resolution”. Key concepts of conflict resolution are briefly defined below in order to provide a point of reference for the terms used throughout this paper.

Burton and Dukes (1990) differentiate between the terms “dispute” and “conflict” based on the time and issues in contention. According to these authors, *disputes* are disagreements that involve negotiable interests. Disputes are usually short-term, and satisfactory solutions for the parties involved can be reached most of the time. There are several methods used to settle these types of issues including mediation, negotiation or adjudication. In contrast, *conflicts* are characterized for involving non-negotiable issues, such as essential human needs, moral differences, or distributional issues regarding vital resources. Conflicts are generally long-term and tend to be more deeply-rooted than disputes.

Based on these definitions, environmental issues often fall into the category of conflicts rather than disputes. “Environmental conflicts manifest themselves as political, social, economic, ethnic, religious or territorial conflicts, or conflicts over resources or national interests ... They are traditional conflicts induced by environmental degradation” (Baechler, 1998, p. 1). Environmental degradation can manifest itself as overuse of renewable resources, pollution, or degradation of the living area.

Practitioners usually deal with environmental conflicts through three primary approaches: conflict resolution, conflict management, and conflict transformation. The conflict resolution approach is concerned with long-term conflict and seeks to find a solution that deals with the root causes of the conflict. A criticism of conflict resolution is that it implies that conflict is bad and therefore it should be ended (Lederach, 1995, p. 201; Burton, 1990, p. 5). Under the conflict management approach, conflict arises from existing differences of values, interests, and power among the parties involved. Resolving these types of conflicts is considered unrealistic. Therefore, the approach is to manage and contain them rather than deal with the real source of the problem. In the words of Bloomfield and Reilly (1998, p. 18):

Conflict management is the positive and constructive handling of difference and divergence. Rather than advocating methods for removing conflict, [it] addresses the more realistic question of managing conflict: how to deal with it in a constructive way, how to bring opposing sides together in a cooperative process, how to design a practical, achievable, cooperative system for the constructive management of difference.

The conflict transformation approach does not suggest the eradication or control of conflict; instead, it elaborates on the notion of conflict as a positive agent for social change (Reiman, 2004). In contrast to conflict resolution and conflict management approaches, conflict transformation reflects a better understanding of the nature of conflict itself. Conflict is seen as a natural occurrence between humans who are involved in relationships. Conflict

transforms the people, situations, and relationships that created the initial conflict (Lederach, 1995, p. 17). Conflict transformation in current peacebuilding practice seeks long-term peacebuilding efforts oriented to outcomes, processes, and structural changes. Its goal is to overcome conflict, transform unjust social relationships, and promote conditions that can help to create cooperative relationships. Conflict transformation, therefore, is a re-conceptualization of the field in an effort to increase its relevance to contemporary conflicts (Miall *et al.*, 1999, p. 21; Botes, 2003; Bigdon and Korf, 2004; Reimann, 2004). In this paper, the term *conflict resolution* is used as an umbrella phrase to address the field of study, and *conflict transformation* refers to one of the approaches used to deal with environmental and social conflict in developing countries.

### **A New Approach: Reversal of Realities**

To move towards a conflict transformation approach for environmental and social issues, there must be a rethinking of the field. Inspired by Lederach's (1995) definition of conflict transformation, Sharoni (1996) proposes a shift from the conventional approaches dealing with conflict to a new way of thinking in theory, practice, and research, which locates social change at the center of its political project. This shift in approach implies a new set of assumptions (including context-specificity of conflict theory and practice) and a bottom-up perspective to conflict research and practice.

In the international development arena, gender analysis, livelihood systems, and political ecology theories have contributed to our understanding of the complexity and diversity of the systems where conflict arises at the household, community, national, and international levels. These theories acknowledge the need to study conflict in light of its unique history and characteristics, stressing the assumption that conflict is a context-specific phenomenon. In this section, a brief review of the potential contributions to conflict theory is outlined.

Gender analysis literature in the 1980s and 1990s challenged the assumption that the household functioned as a single unit of production and consumption (Overholt *et al.*, 1985; Poats *et al.*, 1989). Before that time, research and development efforts were guided by the supposition that households are unified entities in which: a) all members agree, b) resources are pooled among members, and c) members' goals and needs are identical (Becker, 1965). The acknowledgment of differences between men and women's roles in society changed previous assumptions about the

homogeneity of the household and introduced the concept of “intra-household dynamics” (Poats *et al.*, 1989). Men and women’s roles at the household level are the result of a set of power relations derived from social arrangements and cultural rules. Young *et al.* (1990) introduced the social relations framework in which gender roles are a source of conflict as well as mutual benefit, and it examines the unequal access to resources for different members of the household. This framework emphasizes women’s heterogeneity and the social relations that exist within a community. Kabeer (1995, p. 62) cites Young (1981) in this regard, “the form that gender relations take in any historical situation is specific to that situation and has to be constructed inductively; it cannot be read off from other social relations nor from the gender relations of other societies”.

Schmink (1999) takes this analysis a step further and suggests the use of a “gendered political ecology” framework to analyze the complexity of these systems and highlight the importance of natural resource management. This framework allows an analysis of how, over time, political, socioeconomic, and ecological factors condition decisions regarding use and control of resources by different people. In the social sphere, decisions about natural and other types of resources are affected by policies, markets, demographic and institutional factors at the national and international level (Schmink, 1999, p. 3). This framework concurs with Vayrynen’s (1991), which claims that interests, issues, and actors change over time as a consequence of social, economic, and political dynamics of society; therefore, there is a distinct need for a theory that embraces the dynamic basis of conflict transformation.

At the community level, the evolution of thinking progressed from the view of the community as a homogeneous and harmonious unit of analysis to the realization that communities are complex and heterogeneous social systems. As our understanding of cultural, social, and ecological diversity increased, communities came to be viewed as having been formed by heterogeneous groups of people who live in the same geographic region and share access to local natural and economic resources. Social unity cannot be assumed *a priori*, since cultural diversity, common beliefs and institutions, economic status, and other social factors vary widely within and among communities (Schmink, 1999).

To elaborate on the assumption of a need for a bottom-up approach to conflict research and practice, we can also build on experience in the international development arena, where practitioners have moved towards a new paradigm in their practice to be able to respond more effectively to the diversity, complexity, and dynamism of livelihood systems and processes in which conflict develops. This new paradigm is what Chambers (1997) calls a

reversal of realities. This entails a movement from what he calls “a normal professionalism” (which deals with “things” and is top-bottom, blueprint in measurement, and seeks standardization) to a “new professionalism” (which deals with people and is bottom-up, focuses on learning process, and encourages judgment and diversity) (Chambers, 1997, pp. 189-190).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the methods and tools used by development practitioners began to shift from tools that extracted information from local people to tools that shared knowledge and empowered participants in the process. According to Chambers (1997), rapid rural appraisal and participatory rural appraisal emerged as a response to a changing development paradigm and was supported primarily by people working at the field level in partnership with government and non-government organizations, and international and national research centers. Contrary to past social science research that deposited knowledge in scholarly institutions of the north, participatory research can be used in the context of development to describe an empowerment process that enables local people to analyze their own situations, gain control, and participate in decision-making processes (Chambers, 1995, p. 30).

Participatory action research also originated with critiques of earlier research methods which cited the failure of conventional research to respond to the needs of local people in developing countries (Martin and Sherington, 1997). Participatory action research is distinguished by its use of participation tools and methods to meet a societal need (Herlihy and Knapp, 2003). Four basic themes define this type of research: empowerment of individuals, collaboration based on a participatory process, acquisition of knowledge, and social change (Fals-Borda, 1987).

Conflict transformation, as mentioned previously, should have at its core the principle of social change. Development theory holds poverty at the center of the development discourse. It assumes that the major reason for poverty is the oppression or exploitation of the poorest by the more powerful. Therefore, power relations must constitute an important part of the explanation of any lack of development in a society. Empowerment of the people becomes an imperative agenda for development. The term empowerment originates from the social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and the emancipation movement in Latin America, which was influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1972) (see Bigdon and Korf, 2004). Empowerment is central to the process of development; however, it must be located within a broader framework, where the goal of development is the cultural and political acceptance of universal human rights. The sustainable livelihood approaches of the 1990s—also called livelihood approaches—evolved on the

basis of participatory methods (Chambers, 1997; Scoones, 1998; Carney *et al.*, 1999). Livelihood systems include the analysis of production (farming) systems, and the sociocultural, political, and organizational environments in which the household is tightly knit (Chambers and Conway, 1992). The emphasis of sustainable livelihood approaches is on working with people, facilitating learning processes, helping them build upon their own strengths and acknowledge their own potential, while simultaneously assessing the effects of policies and institutions, external shocks, and trends. Sustainable livelihood approaches acknowledge the connections and interactions that happen at the micro level (household and/or communities) with the larger socioeconomic, cultural, and political contexts at the meso (local and regional organizations, private-sector associations) and macro (national and international organizations and policy) levels. Sustainable livelihood approaches help to reconcile a holistic perception of sustainable livelihood with the operational need for focused development interventions. With elements from this theoretical and practical review, the case study of the community of Robles and their social cartography process is presented as a tool for participatory planning and conflict transformation

### **The Community of Robles and their Social Cartography Process**

The community of Robles is located at the southwest corner of the Cauca Valley Department, Colombia. The majority of the people are descendants of African slaves who once served in large haciendas. At the beginning of the 1990s, the first grassroots organizations emerged in Robles in response to an urgent need to organize, plan, and develop proposals in the areas of health, education, food security, community safety, and environmental issues. One of the organizations that took the lead in this planning process was *Funecorobles*, a non-profit, Afro-Colombian grassroots, environmental non-governmental organization (NGO). Funecorobles' mission links the goals of biodiversity conservation with the empowerment of local communities through participatory planning. Their experience shows that in order to reach conservation objectives, communities must be involved in long-term learning processes that empower and drive them to action.

Funecorobles adopted the social cartography methodology as a participatory tool to work with the entire community of Robles in their long-term planning process. Social cartography was not an unfamiliar methodology to many of the people in the community as it was being used along the Pacific Coast region of Colombia as part of the process of territorialization. This

process occurred in “social-carto-graphic” forums after representative community councils filed territorial claims (Offen, 2003). The implications of this are elaborated by Offen (2003, p. 17):

Law 70 creates black territories in Pacific Colombia by defining the notion of a “black community” that can become invested with territorial rights. The law does this, essentially, by elaborating a “black ethnicity”, something constituted by culture [traditional production systems], history [*palenques* and self-liberation], and geography [rural riverine and Pacific]”.

Although, Robles was not part of this process, its outcome directly affected the way all Afro-Colombian communities later engaged in a process to reclaim their territories.

As result of the territorialization process, the territory was recognized not only as a piece of land but also as a cultural space where men, women, and nature live together with diverse ethnic groups, knowledge, and practices that engage in constant exchange. The territory encompasses not only the landscape, mountains, rivers, valleys, human settlements, bridges, roads, and plantations, but also the space inhabited by memory, history, and the experience of the people (Restrepo, 2005; Andrade and Santamaria, 1997). The individuals, households, communities, and environmental and social landscape of a territory become a complex net of relationships in a system that must be understood by everyone in order to achieve social change.

Like the territorialization processes, other development interventions took place in Colombia in which social cartography was adapted, used, modified, and improved. This methodology emerged as a result of dialogue and experience among a group of people from different disciplines who recognized the potential to develop a tool for social transformation through the use of cartographic maps (Restrepo and Velasco, 1998; Restrepo *et al.*, 1999; Mora-Paez and Jaramillo, 2004). Several characteristics of this methodology made it a good fit for the challenges faced by Funecorobles. First, it is a straightforward methodology: it uses a visual and graphic method of representation, which lends itself to group work. Second, it is an alternative form of communication when working with communities with high rates of illiteracy, disparity of power relations, and distrust among groups participating in a process. Third, fundamental to social cartography is the recognition that whoever inhabits the territory is one who knows it and the belief that it is possible to initiate a planning process based on such knowledge.

### **Social Cartography Methodology**

The first workshops in Robles started with a process of participatory assessment. There is no blueprint for the use of this methodology that can be applied regardless of context; nevertheless, there are general procedures that guide the mapping activities. The process includes three phases: (1) diagnosis, (2) construction of maps, and (3) interpretation of the information collected on the maps (Fundaminga, 2002; Andrade and Santamaria, 1997; Habegger and Mancila, 2006).

During the diagnosis phase, the group that facilitates the mapping process meets with community representatives to review the purpose and objectives of the mapping activity. At this point, information is gathered through interviews, focus groups, observations, and transect walks, and cartographic maps of the correct scale are made available. The facilitation team elaborates guides for the mapping activities. These guides consist of a set of questions relevant to the goals of the mapping activity. Workshop logistics are prepared, thus ensuring all members of the community are represented in the process.

The second phase includes the actual construction of maps. Maps can be drawn using different materials, the criteria being that the participants find the materials easy to work with. Such materials range from simple flipcharts or graphing paper and markers, up to scale maps and the use of GIS (global information system) or GPS (global positioning system) – it all depends on the purpose of the mapping exercise and the accuracy required. Maps can be two-dimensional or three-dimensional models. The maps should be elaborated on the floor or on tables where participants can surround it. Placing the maps this way benefits horizontal dialog. Participants are divided into groups with a maximum 8 to 10 people working on the maps. In each group, one person is selected to document the process that takes place while all members draw the maps.

The complexities of the systems analyzed require the use of several maps to decipher the territory. The first set of maps includes people and nature, infrastructure, cultural and social relations, and conflict maps. The people and nature map shows production activities and resources. It reflects the general landscape of the territory showing the zones used for subsistence activities, such as hunting, fishing, farming, gathering fruits, and building materials. In the infrastructure map, productive, reproductive, and service infrastructures are highlighted, including housing, public services, schools, health posts, villages, roads, and trails. The third map reflects cultural and social networks as well as areas of cultural and spiritual importance, local markets, sites for cultural practices, and mystic sites, among others. The fourth map highlights conflicts, risks, vulnerabilities, and potentialities. This map notes conflicts at different levels, from within the household to local,

regional, societal, and global scales. Conflict maps can focus on problems between communities, populations, and states, the conflict between community and enterprises or trans-nationals with interests in the community area due to resources (water, land, air), or based on the strategic geographic location. They can focus on environmental conflict associated with the risk of deforestation, erosion, flooding, or climate change.

Together, the maps represent the livelihood system of a particular community, which includes the production systems and the sociocultural, political, and organizational environments in which individuals, households, and communities are embedded. Conflict maps are therefore conceptualized and analyzed in the context of broader livelihood systems in which participants find their geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural space. The construction of conflict maps with the social cartography process acknowledges that conflicts occurring mainly in local contexts may extend to national and global levels due to their particular legal relevance or to efforts by local actors to influence broader decision-making processes (Schmink, 1999).

All of the maps mentioned thus far are then analyzed with a time perspective; that is, each map is drawn illustrating the past, present, and future of each set of systems. The incorporation of a time dimension facilitates the analysis of the dynamic basis of conflict transformation. Historical maps, or maps of the past, emphasize rescuing the collective memory of the participants. They can provide insight on the transformation of systems, highlighting changes that have occurred in the community, and they can identify cyclical phenomena. This activity allows participants to recognize their territory and share its memory. Present maps help participants look at the present situation facing their community. The four maps explained above are usually drawn in the present, since this is the immediate reality in which participants operate. By comparing them with the historical map, the evolution of the community is revealed. Future maps, also known as “maps of dreams”, reflect how participants would like their community to look in the future. During this activity, participants dream, believe in utopias once again, and work toward a shared vision. This chronological view provides the basis for the social cartography process. The mapping process reaffirms the sense of belonging to a territory and identifies the underlying interest in finding solutions to its problems (Andrade and Santamaria, 1997).

The third phase starts with the groups reporting the process that took place in each group and highlighting the most important parts, including disagreements on points of view, conceptualization of relationships, and the

logistics of the process. This phase includes debates and social creativity workshops (Habegger and Mancila, 2006).

A key characteristic of this mapping process is that it is recognized as a learning process. Community members gain knowledge through the mapping exercise about their own reality. The participation of representatives of all community groups and others who are representing stakeholders outside the community enables a vertical dialog. However, it is important to assess the type of participation of different stakeholders, since that participation can range from simply being informed, to obtaining different types of benefits, to empowerment through full involvement in the process of decision-making and management (Schmink, 1999, p. 3).

Returning to the process initiated in the community of Robles, the drawing of the first maps constituted the basis for their planning process. The collective analysis of the information recorded on the maps helped guide the elaboration of proposals and programs in different areas. Most importantly, the community claimed ownership of the process and in the following years, the maps constructed in the 1990s have been the departure point for subsequent development strategies. The inclusion of all community groups since the beginning of this process is evident. The majority of the people in Robles view the mapping process as the point of reference for a major community activity. Some of the results of this participatory process as presented by the community include:

- the reconstruction of their territory, its history and its culture
- the empowerment of different groups within the community (women, elderly, children, young adults, teachers, community leaders)
- increased visibility of the roles of women in production, reproduction, and community sphere
- increased local acknowledgement of activities executed by local NGOs
- increased participation by the community members in local initiatives.

Community organizations and other groups involved in the process have gained regional and national recognition as they projected some of their activities to regional and national development agendas. Community members have become more open to change and transformation processes. Democratization of knowledge and information has taken place at all levels. Further, community members feel they share a knowledge base constructed collectively and based on each other's recollection of history and past events, which they have integrated into the reality of their daily lives. Knowledge about their territory and resources translates into power to express and defend their rights at the national and international levels. In recent years, social cartography workshops have included an initial approximation to working

with geographical information technologies like GIS and GPS. These technologies offer the community advantages to advance the territorialization process.

As any other methodology social cartography has its limitations and disadvantages. One of them is that, because of the complexity of the information the methodology delivers, its interpretation is difficult for people who did not participate of the exercise. The maps are considered cultural and symbolic products, therefore, they have to be interpreted according to the socio-cultural context in which they have been created (Di Gessa, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

Social cartography as a participatory tool and framework for conflict transformation works with many of the assumptions mentioned in the literature by conflict resolution scholars. The social cartography process is context specific. The mapping activity helps participants understand the complex interactions between context, structure, actors, and goals of the community members and other outside stakeholders. The methodology provides maps of past, present and future that respond to the dynamic nature of conflicts. This participatory bottom-up approach has at its core the promise of social justice, an innate characteristic of this process that was developed parallel to the territorialization struggle in Colombia.

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