Field Diplomacy: A New Conflict Prevention Paradigm?

Luc Reychler

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Abstract

Excerpt

One of the most important challenges facing the global community in the next decade, is the prevention of destructive conflicts. Listening to the discourse in the United Nations and other governmental and non governmental organizations this may sound like kicking in wide open doors (Bauwens and Reychler, 1994). But the failure of conflict prevention and the high number of conflict zones, indicates that we still have a long way to go. A global survey of contemporary conflicts counts 22 high-intensity and 39 lowerintensity conflicts, and 40 serious disputes (PIOOM, 1995). In 1995 five groups were victims of genocides or politicides. The risks of future victimization of 47 communities in different parts of the world is assessed as high of very high (PIOOM, 1995). The growth of nationalist feelings at the end of the Cold War is only the beginning of more suffering. More conflicts are expected, with old and new causes, such as the unequal or unfair trade balances between North and South, unemployment in the North, the environmental pollution, religious extremism, mass immigration and the growing number of failed states. These problems could hurt people so much that they would be prepared to fight for them.

Keywords: *conflict prevention, field diplomacy, (re)construction and (re)conciliation*

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FIELD DIPLOMACY:

A NEW CONFLICT PREVENTION PARADIGM?

Luc Reychler

A World in Crisis

One of the most important challenges facing the global community in the next decade, is the prevention of destructive conflicts. Listening to the discourse in the United Nations and other governmental and non governmental organizations this may sound like kicking in wide open doors (Bauwens and Reychler, 1994). But the failure of conflict prevention and the high number of conflict zones, indicates that we still have a long way to go. A global survey of contemporary conflicts counts 22 high-intensity and 39 lower-intensity conflicts, and 40 serious disputes (PIOOM, 1995). In 1995 five groups were victims of genocides or politicides. The risks of future victimization of 47 communities in different parts of the world is assessed as high of very high (PIOOM, 1995). The growth of nationalist feelings at the end of the Cold War is only the beginning of more suffering. More conflicts are expected, with old and new causes, such as the unequal or unfair trade balances between North and South, unemployment in the North, the environmental pollution, religious extremism, mass immigration and the growing number of failed states. These problems could hurt people so much that they would be prepared to fight for them.

Most of today's efforts are of a reactive nature. Proactive conflict prevention refers to measures taken before the conflict has escalated; reactive conflict prevention to measures taken after the conflict has escalated). The aim of the latter is to contain and reduce the intensity, duration and geographic spill-over of the violence. When one has failed to prevent a conflict from crossing the threshold of violence it becomes much more difficult and costly to manage a conflict. Not only does one have to settle the dispute(s) which initiated the conflict, but in addition one needs to end fighting, and keep and rebuild the peace.

The costs of the destructiveness of war and of rebuilding peace are very high. It is practically impossible to find an accurate and complete accounting of those costs. A complete assessment of the costs should not only include the human and economic costs, but also the social, political, ecological, cultural, psychological and spiritual destruction. These eight dimensions of the destruction of war give us an idea of the size and complexity of peace rebuilding. Despite the fact that proactive conflict prevention is a more cost-effective way of handling conflicts, the international community has difficulty in getting rid of its propensity to respond to conflicts in a reactive manner. The fault for the latest violent spasm in Liberia rests mostly with the warlords. The international community refused adequate financing of a disarmament effort by the United Nations and the West African peace keeping force that has been in Liberia since 1990. All of this would cost more than $20 million. But in the past six years Washington has poured almost half a billion dollars of humanitarian aid into the country, not including the cost of the evacuation -- the third such operation since 1989 (Goldberg, 1996).

Preventive Diplomacy?

How does one account for the failure of conflict prevention? Several explanations can be put forth: lack of interest, absence of perceived vital interest at stake, propensity to react, traditional diplomacy, lack of consensus, cumbersome decision-making, inadequate infrastructure, lack of know-how (conflict transformation skill) and the complexity of the conflicts (Bauwens and Reychler, 1994). The three most important causes on this list are: (1) lack of foresight, (2) the absence of perceived vital interest at stake, and (3) the lack of conflict transformation skill.

Inadequate foresight or warning systems have turned diplomacy into a chronic crisis management operation. Despite the recent efforts made by major intergovernmental organizations -- the UN, OSCE, NATO, the EC and WEU -- and by academic institutions to improve their diagnostic and prognostic tools, much more will have to be done to achieve a better insight into and foresight of conflict dynamics. A great deal of attention has been paid to early warning systems in worst-case developments of possible violent escalation. Practically nothing has been done to develop warning systems that can provide opportunities to intervene. The genocides in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Burundi, are to a great extent histories of missed opportunities. There is also an urgent need to develop a system for conflict impact assessment (CIAS). This is necessary because today's conflict prevention policies (1) look like compilations of unidimensional approaches and (2) do not account for the possible negative externalities of well-intentioned efforts. The peace keepers in Bosnia became an obstacle for effective peace reinforcement. The Khmer Rouge of Cambodia became parasites in the refugee camps in Thailand. The threat of a war crimes tribunal can under certain circumstances protract a violent conflict. Democratization pressures could be a blessing, but could also enhance centrifugal forces, and lead to anarchy and end up in a dictatorial system. The development of an effective system for conflict prevention will require a systematic assessment of the positive and/or negative impact of different measures on the conflict dynamics.

The second major cause of today's inadequate conflict prevention system is the *lack of perceived interests*. Africa is full of alarm bells and flashing lights. But as long as major countries or their international organizations do not perceive their vital interest at stake, proactive conflict prevention will remain a pipe dream. Moral or humanitarian concerns do not seem to guarantee effective conflict prevention measures. This leads to paradoxical results. Instead of more cost-effective proactive efforts, justified by enlightened self-interest, we see costly reactive measures, triggered by belated moral considerations. It will take great effort to convince the international community that in a complex interdependent world conflict prevention is of vital interest. Efforts need to be made (1) to help decision-makers to better assess the costs of alternative conflict strategies, and (2) to hold them accountable for the destruction of war. It would help if conflicts were embedded in a democratic environment, or if decision-makers had to justify their war activities before something like an International Accountability Office. Today it is practically impossible to get reliable information about the costs and benefits of violent conflicts. The available data tend to be partial, incomplete and not very trustworthy. It is high time to break down the taboos surrounding honest accounting. This would allow a more objective analysis of the huge costs of conflict prevention failures, and validate the thesis that proactive conflict prevention efforts are more cost-effective than the reactive ones.

The third major cause of the failure of conflict prevention is the *lack of conflict transformational skill*. For most of the serious problems in the world one finds research and training programs.

Medical doctors are required to study for seven years, layers and civil engineers five, economists and psychologist five, etc. Yet, for dealing with large-scale violence no comprehensive academic program is provided. Until recently international conflict management training was considered the exclusive domain of diplomats and soldiers. The training was provided in the military academy or on the job.

The conflicts handled were predominantly interstate conflicts. The traditional approaches to conflict proved to be of limited relevance for coping with the most dominant type of post WW II conflicts: the Low Intensity Conflict (van Creveld, 1991). Several characteristics of traditional diplomacy tend to inhibit an effective prevention of the escalation of ethnic or nationalist disputes. There is, for example, the tendency to draw a sharp distinction between civil wars, in which no external power is supposed to interfere, and international wars which are the concern of all states. Civil war will only pose a threat when it spills over the boundaries or when major powers become involved. Then the "right" approach is to isolate or quarantine the war zone. This is the logic of 'Real politik'. Preference is given to the *raison d'état* or to national interest; the sovereignty of the people comes second. Traditional diplomacy also tends to be elitist and to reduce conflict prevention to the employment of the familiar methods of peace making (negotiation including promises and threats) and/or peace making and enforcement. The handling of the new types of conflicts requires a more sophisticated analysis of conflict dynamics and a better acquaintance with the available battery of conflict prevention instruments.

According to the *Agenda for Peace* of Boutros-Ghali (1992), it requires not only skills in peace making and peace keeping, but also in peace (re)building. As the newest addition to the diplomatic vocabulary, peace building tends to be loosely defined. Peace building refers to the creation of an objective and subjective context which enhances a constructive transformation of conflicts and leads to a sustainable peace. A sustainable peace is a legitimate peace, supported by the people involved. Such a peace is built on the concept of conflict transformation, underscoring the goal of moving a given population from the status of extreme vulnerability and dependency to that of self-sufficiency and well being. In the more specific terms of conflict progression, transformation is the movement from latent conflict to confrontation to negotiation to the peaceful relationships of a secure community (Lederach, 1994a).

Peace building requires two sets of efforts relating to: (re)construction and (re)conciliation . The most visible efforts are the structural measures which are meant to improve the conditions of life, to reduce discrimination and to provide ways and means for settling disputes. A great deal of the peace agreements include structural measures of a political, economic, legal, educational, military and humanitarian nature. All of this translates into efforts to organize and supervise elections, to rebuild the economy, to strengthen the legal system and stop impunity, to rebuild the educational infrastructure, to resettle refugees and to implement an effective arms control system.

Less visible, but as crucial, are the (re)conciliation efforts. These efforts intend to create a new moral-political climate in which people are committed to the restoration of ruptured relation-ships and to the construction of a new future. This implies not only reconciliation with the present (a peace agreement settling particular disputes), but also reconciliation with the past (healing psycho-historical wounds can take a great deal of time), and reconciliation with the

future. A reconciliation with the past, present and the future is necessary for achieving a sustainable peace. Another essential part of the new moral political climate is the (re)conciliation of contradictory but, in fact, interdependent values and forces (such as the search for truth, peace, justice, welfare, and mercy), which will help the conflicting groups to heal the wounds of the past and to envision a common interdependent future. Truth involves the longing for acknowledgment of wrong and painful loss and experiences; it seeks a better understanding of the causes of the violence, and to avoid misperception and misunderstanding. Mercy articulates a benign attitude, a disposition to show kindness or compassion; a need for acceptance, letting go, a new start. Peace underscores the need for security and harmonious relationships devoid of violence or oppression. Welfare reflects the longing for adequate material or financial resources, for prosperity and well-being. Justice represents the need for fairness through the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments. These and other values are played out as political concepts with their own constituencies. In several post-conflict situations we find a fierce competition between the proponents of a 'War Crimes Tribunal', a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission', and 'amnesty'. Reconciliation creates the possibility and the social space where all those values or needs are validated, rather than a framework that suggests that some must win out over the others (Lederach, 1994b).

The Rise of Unofficial Diplomacy

The diplomatic overload and the growing complexity of the international environment has led to an increasing involvement of "outsiders" in relations within and between countries. At a conference organized by the Communications Institute of the Academy for Educational Development at Bellagio, in 1973, there developed a consensus that the role of non-officials in international peace making had been far too neglected and that their importance would increase (Berman and Johnson, 1977). Since then we have seen a near exponential growth of peace activities rendered by non-governmental actors. The peace services range from enhancing communication, improving mutual understanding, disapproving violence, mediation, reconciliation, to interpositionary peace keeping. Non-governmental actors have developed a whole series of practical tools for peace making, peace keeping and peace building.

One of the better known tools of the peace making approach is the problem-solving workshop, which brings together representatives of conflicting parties for direct interaction in an unofficial, private context, with a panel of social scientists acting as facilitators (Kelman, 1991). Workshops are designed to encourage an analytic approach to joint problem solving of a conflict that will be conducive to the emergence of creative "win-win" outcomes satisfying the basic needs of both parties. Other methods of peace making can be found under such headings as unofficial diplomacy, Track II diplomacy, parallel diplomacy and multi-track diplomacy.

A great deal of creativity is also found with respect to keeping the peace (Schirch, 1995). Four different methods for separating the parties in a conflict are distinguished: buffer zones, peace zones, interpositionary peace keeping, and intercessionary peace keeping. Buffer zones are demilitarized and unpatrolled areas. Peace zones are civilian-occupied spaces where, by agreement, no fighting takes place. In the Philippines, civilians successfully created peace zones as demilitarized spaces for alternative development and consensus building in several

communities (Gaston Ortegas Peace Institute, 1995). Interpositionary peace keeping is based on the idea of trained teams placing themselves physically between groups engaged in violent conflict, in an impartial stance toward all parties. There are several examples of civilian interpositioning. The first project of the Peace Brigades International (PBI) was in Nicaragua along the border with Honduras in 1981. A PBI team, later joined by Witnesses For Peace (WFP) volunteers, was interpositioned between Nicaraguan civilians and contras based in Honduras. This human shield was deployed to prohibit the imminent invasion by US and contra forces and to monitor events in the area. While interpositioning maintains equal distance between hostile parties, many civilian peace keeping groups use intercessionary peace keeping which maintains unequal distance between the parties. Intercessionary peacekeepers hope to deter violence by accompanying certain individuals or groups in danger or by being a presence in a threatened community. In addition to the clearly dissociative aspects of peace keeping, there are also other activities conducted by peace keepers, such as observing/documenting/monitoring, alerting the international community, showing solidarity, and facilitating communication.

Finally, a great deal of the peace efforts of NGOs are peace building activities. They address structural violence and prevent destructive conflicts from occurring or recurring. Boutros-Ghali (1992) identifies peace building as attempts to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict. Peace building refers to efforts to strengthen and support democratization and electoral processes, economic development projects, humanitarian relief efforts, the legal system, the educational infrastructure, and the implementation of arms control measures.

Unofficial or Track II diplomacy distinguishes itself from the traditional diplomacy not only by the way civilian diplomats intervene in conflicts or the tools they use, but also by the conceptual and normative approach of conflicts. The diplomatic thinking of traditional diplomats and Track II diplomats differs in several ways.

A first difference relates to their respective worldview. The international landscape of the traditional diplomats is a Hobbesian environment in which nation-states struggle for power and pursue their national interests. It is perceived as a very competitive and potentially insecure place. Their main interlocutors are key political and military leaders in the conflict. They are persons who either represent themselves, and/or the highest representative leaders of the governments and opposition movements in an internal struggle. Track II diplomats, on the other hand, pay much more attention to the civilian space in international relations. They search for common ground and look for the development of win-win relations.

Differences are also found in their analytic style. Traditional diplomacy defines peace as the absence of war and as the result of particular distributions of power (hegemonic, bipolar, multipolar) and arms control. Track II diplomats assume that one cannot resolve conflicts and thus make peace unless the root causes of the conflicts are identified and dealt with. The implication of this is that for conflicts to be resolved, one must look beyond surface issues and address the substantive and emotional issues as well as the parties' needs and interests that are at the root of the conflicts (Assefa, 1993).

A third set of differences between traditional and Track II diplomats concerns their *preferred world order*. Both the traditional and Track II diplomats want peace. For the traditional diplomats this means the absence of military violence; for the Track II diplomats it implies equally the absence of structural, psychological and cultural violence. For Track II diplomats a sustainable peace has to be a legitimate peace.

Finally, there are also differences in their strategic approach. Official diplomacy makes use of conventional diplomatic, legal, military and economic instruments. They tend to approach peace from the top down and assume a trickle-down effect. Track II diplomats, on the other hand, stress the importance of building peace from the bottom up. They assume that one cannot impose an external or elitist peace formula on a conflict; that the conflict belongs to the society in which it is taking place and the resolution has to come from within that society (Voutira and Brown, 1995).

Field Diplomacy: A New Paradigm for Conflict Prevention?

One of the most recent developments in the area of non-governmental diplomacy is field diplomacy. A couple of years ago, this term was coined by R. Moreels, past president of the Médicins Sans Frontières in Belgium. While working as a surgeon in conflict zones, he became aware of the near absence of official and unofficial peacemakers in the field, where peace services were also urgently needed (Moreels and Reychler, 1995). Field diplomacy is not considered an alternative to traditional diplomacy, but as a necessary complement.

The paradigm underlying the praxis of field diplomacy has been developed by people with peace making experience in conflict zones. Field diplomacy is characterized by a credible presence in the field, a serious commitment to conflict transformation, a multi-level approach, elicitive engagement, a broad time perspective, attention to the deeper layers of the conflict, preference for an integrative conflict-prevention policy, and the recognition of the inter-dependency between seemingly different conflicts

1. A credible presence in the field

A first characteristic of field diplomacy is the requirement of a credible presence in the field. Field diplomats assume that one has to be in the conflict zone to get a better insight into the dynamics of the conflict and to facilitate the transformation of the conflict more effectively. This contrasts clearly with the official and parallel diplomatic activities which mostly operate within the capitals or from abroad. The building of a trust bank or a network of people who can rely on each other is essential to elicit measures to prevent a destructive transformation of the conflict. Building trust takes a great deal of time and effort. When a conflict erupts it too late.

2. Serious commitment

A second attribute of field diplomacy is a serious commitment to constructive transformation of the conflict. Using a metaphor, a conflict should be adopted. As in the case of a child, one cannot adopt it for a week or a month; it is a long-term commitment. The efforts need to be credible. Conflict prevention and reconciliation are likely to involve a long-term and difficult journey. Peace making can be a very stressful and risky activity. An appropriate motivation and adequate backup is necessary to keep a peace team productive.

3. Multi-level engagement

A sustainable peace is a legitimate peace that needs to be supported by the people. Therefore not only the highest, but also the middle and grass-root levels of the conflicting groups need to be involved in the peace making, peace keeping and peace building. Not only the elites, but also the people must be stake holders in the peace process. In the middle range are persons who are highly respected and/or occupy formal positions of leadership in sectors like education, business, agriculture or health. Their position is not necessarily connected to or controlled by the formal governmental or major oppositional movement authority or structures (Lederach, 1994a). They are located in a position where they are likely to be known by and know the top leadership, yet they are connected to both the top and the grassroots levels. Their position is not based on political or military power, nor are they indicating ambition for such power. They tend to have important pre-existing relationships with counterparts that cut across the lines of conflict within the setting. Finally, they are more numerous than the top level actors and have connections through networking to many significant people across the physical and human divides of the conflict. They are ideal actors to be involved in problem solving workshops, in training for conflict resolution, peace commissions and insider-partial teams. The grassroots leadership is situated at the base of the society. In settings of protracted conflict and war this base is characterized by a survival mentality; people are involved in a day by day effort to find ways of meeting the basic needs of food, water, shelter and safety. This grassroots leadership is faced with the overwhelming task of dealing with the crisis at a day to day level. Leaders here include people who are involved in local communities, indigenous NGOs carrying out relief tasks for the local populations, health officials, and refugee camp leaders. These are people who have a thorough understanding of the suffering and fear under which the majority of the population may live, who understand intimately the politics of a given locale, and know on a face to face basis the local leaders of the government and opposition movement (Lederach, 1994a). They could be involved in local peace commissions, grassroots training, the elimination of mental barriers and prejudices, and psycho-social work in post-war trauma healing.

4. Elicitive approach

The fourth characteristic of field diplomacy is its elicitive approach. This approach contrasts with the prescriptive approach which underscores the centrality of the trainer's models and knowledge. The elicitive approach is process-oriented and gives people a chance to participate in the way the conflict is handled. Both approaches empower people, but do so in a different way. The prescriptive approach empowers participants in as much as they learn and master new ways, techniques, and strategies for coping with conflict. The elicitive approach pursues empowerment

as validating and building from resources that are present in the setting (Lederach, 1994b). This approach requires on the part of the field diplomat listening, learning, and an understanding of the culture(s) within which the conflict is embedded. The aim is to catalyze an indigenous self-sustaining peace process. This does not exclude criticizing aspects of the conflict culture which are inhibiting a constructive transformation of the conflict. But it takes local will to make outside help work. A most important tasks is to identify and to empower indigenous field diplomats or community mediators and local peace initiatives.

5. Broad time perspective

A fifth aspect of the conflict paradigm of field diplomats is that peace building is perceived in a broader time perspective, both forward and backward. A sustainable peace requires a (re)conciliation of the present, the past and the future. A peace agreement, settling "here and now" disputes, is not enough. Equally important is a (re)conciliation that encompasses both the past and the future. Historical wounds left unhealed tend to mortgage future cooperation. A joint expectation of the mutual benefits of cooperation will not only help living with the past, but also enable the creation of a sustainable peace. The development of a new conflict-resolving culture in which competing values such as peace, truth, mercy, welfare and justice, are reconciled, is part and parcel of the reconciliation process.

6. Attention to deep conflict

A sixth element of the conflict paradigm of field diplomacy is attention to the deeper layers of the conflict. The atmosphere in a conflict situation may seem hard, tough and pragmatic and so in one sense it is; campaigns are planned with ruthlessness and precision. But, writes Adam Curle (1990), when we consider the underlying layer of motives, apprehensions and -- often -- ideology, we enter the realm of chaotic emotional unreason. War engenders a mental environment of desperation in which fear, resentment, jealousy and rage predominate. Consequently, building peace requires not only attention to the hard layers of the conflict (the political-diplomatic, military, legal, economic, ecological), but also to the softer layers of the "deep conflict." A publicly signed peace agreement doesn't guarantee a sustainable peace. Peace also requires reconciliation at the psychological and emotional levels. Also very important is the spiritual level. At this level peace building means transforming despair into hope, hate into love, nihilism into meaningfulness, condemnation into forgiveness, and alienation into relationship. In the social sciences those levels of the conflict tend to be neglected.

7. An integrative conflict prevention policy

A seventh characteristic of the work of field diplomats is that they do not consider their activities as an alternative to the peace efforts of the parallel official diplomacy. Instead they plead for a better coordination of governmental and non-governmental activities. Today's conflict prevention policy is low on coordination and coherence. There is the beginning of a coordination between governmental and non-governmental activities, but there is a long way to go. Most

conflict prevention packages are not only incomplete, but also basically compilations of unidimensional measures. Reconstruction gets more attention than reconciliation. Not enough attention is given to the interdependence of such measures as the organization of elections, peace keeping, humanitarian aid, economic reconstruction, legal reinforcement, and the rebuilding of the educational system. This is not a plea for developing a master plan controlled by a peace authority, but for a more comprehensive and creative approach in which the different components are validated and integrated into a more holistic search for peace.

8. Recognition of conflict interdependence

Finally, field diplomats recognize the complex interdependence between seemingly different conflicts. Problematic in the transformation of conflicts is not only the artificial legal distinction between internal and external conflicts, but also the propensity to conceptually isolate or quarantine closely interwoven conflicts. There is, for example, a linkage between internal and international democracy, but in the North the promotion of the first has become part and parcel of foreign policy; the latter however remains a taboo. Most of the conflicts in the Two Thirds World cannot be reduced to pure internal conflicts. They are or were at one time or another influenced by conflicts at a regional or global level. So, for example, a peace policy in Rwanda or Burundi implies not only efforts for dealing with the conflicts within the boundaries, but equally peace efforts at the sub-regional, the Euro-African, and at the global level.

The Future of Field Diplomacy

During the Summer of 1995 a seminar was held in Harrisburg, Virginia about the philosophy and praxis of conflict prevention and conciliation. Most of the participants had a rich experience with peace making in the field: in Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and Nicaragua. There was a consensus that the prevailing theories for coping with conflicts were not doing the job and that there was a need for another way of thinking about conflict transformation. Field diplomacy, as described in this paper, is a new paradigm distilled from the experience of people providing peace services in the field. It is more than a set of techniques with respect to communication, mediation and conciliation; it is a new philosophy. A more effective development and organization of field diplomacy will require a great effort from all who want to get rid of destructive conflicts in the world. Systematic analysis and evaluation of peace services now provided in the field are urgently needed. While in the last few years there has been a growing interest in field diplomacy, there is also a great deal of resistance and skepticism. Some question whether this new approach is not too idealistic. The answer is yes, it is just as idealistic as the idea of a European Union was in the 1930s. The steady development of civil society in each world region through the growth of transnational nongovernment al organizations and grassroots organizations at the same time that traditional state institutions are weakening, provides a context for the increasing effectiveness of field diplomacy in regional peace building in the twenty-first century.

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