Who Needs to Talk to Whom About What and How? Transformative Dialogue in Settings of Ethnopolitical Conflict

By Erik Cleven

Institute for the Study
Of Conflict Transformation, Inc.

Studying and promoting the understanding of conflict processes
and intervention from the transformative framework

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Since its founding in 1999, the Institute has become the nation's premier center of expertise on the transformative framework. Its work provides critically needed research, educational resources and training based on relational premises. It seeks to influence collective responses to diversity and differences in a way that can transform conflict from a negative, destructive, and sometimes violent event to a positive and constructive experience.

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Introduction

In 1999 I took part in a workshop in Norway which brought together Serbs and Albanians from Kosovo. The seminar took place at a time when tensions were high and NATO bombing of Serbia was imminent. The seminar was meant to bring people together from different sides of the conflict for dialogue in the hopes of increasing understanding and trust between members of the two groups. Everyone was prepared for the fact that the sessions could be tense, but what happened surprised me. The first two hours of the seminar were spent discussing what the facilitators should call Kosovo. Should they use the Albanian *Kosova* (with the stress on the last syllable) or the Serbian *Kosovo* or *Kosovo-Metohija*? I remember thinking at the time that this conversation was wasting precious time that could have been used to talk about the important issues, such as what people living in Kosovo needed and what the participants could do to meet those needs. I even thought that some of the participants in that seminar were "just being difficult," raising questions they knew were contentious to stall progress. In hindsight, I realize that we were talking about exactly what needed to be talked about. My discomfort was not based on what the participants needed to talk about, but rather on my ideas about conflict and conflict resolution and what I thought a successful conflict resolution workshop should look like.

The understanding of conflict which forms the basis for Transformative Mediation has since changed the way I work with conflict and facilitation. In this paper I will introduce this approach and show what the implications are for work in post-conflict settings. When the transformative approach is applied to work with people in ethnopolitical conflict settings I will refer to this work as *transformative dialogue*. This is to signify that it is based on the understanding of conflict which undergirds transformative mediation at the same time that it makes clear that when people work in settings of ethnopolitical conflict they do much more than mediate.

Transformative dialogue focuses on providing opportunities for people to have conversations about their situation with the words they want to use and the frameworks for understanding that they choose, so they can make decisions about their situation. In some cases these decisions may involve not wanting to continue contact with people from other identity groups. In others it may mean pursuing reconciliation or specific agreements about issues. In short, the transformative mediation framework asks who needs to speak to whom about what and how, without

[1] The title of this paper was inspired by a book chapter written by Joe Folger on A Transformative Orientation to Team Development Work. See Folger (2010). The author would like to thank Thomas Mustillo, Joseph Folger, Judith Saul, Baruch Bush and Vesna Matovic for comments and feedback on an early draft of the manuscript and for many enlightening discussions which has made this paper possible.

presupposing the answer to any of these questions. In situations where people have become disempowered and where communities have been destroyed by violence, transformative dialogue provides the space to support people in regaining strength, clarity and agency and the ability to connect with others in the way they choose.

In this paper I begin by describing what characterizes ethnopolitical conflicts and the divided communities they produce. I then provide a brief overview of some standard approaches to international conflict resolution and peacebuilding and how the transformative framework differs from these approaches. Finally, I show what transformative dialogue can look like in practice and discuss some issues that may be raised by this approach. Several boxes with specific illustrations of the topics covered in this paper are included.

Ethnopolitical conflicts and divided communities

Interstate wars are today a rare occurrence. Much of the political violence occurring in the world is the result of civil wars and violent ethnic conflict. Media reports on these conflicts give the impression that people of different ethnic groups have a hard time living side by side and that areas with ethnic heterogeneity are prone to violence because of this. In fact, ethnic cooperation is far more prevalent than ethnic violence (Fearon and Laitin 1996). Working in areas that have experienced ethnic violence one often hears people talk about how they did not think much in terms of ethnicity before the violence broke out. Only after violence does ethnicity become a source of deep social division. I remember talking to a young refugee from Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1994 about the violence that was taking place in his country. I asked him why people had started killing each other and he answered “I have no idea.” His astonishment at the killing in his country was a testimony to the fact that the killing was not rooted in deep and ancient hatreds and also showed the disconnect between relationships in his community and elite politics and cleavages.

In his work on civil war Stathis Kalyvas (2006) documents similar stories. Ethnic tensions certainly exist in places that have not experienced violence, but serious polarization and animosity between people belonging to different ethnic groups is more a product of violence than a cause of it. Violence often takes place along ethnic lines but that is not because ethnicity itself is the cause of the violence. Both the process by which violence is mobilized, and the violence itself, makes ethnicity salient and results in extremely divided societies as violence breaks down relations between people and the trust that previously existed in communities. Violence produces animosities, resentment and grievances, not the other way around (Fearon and Laitin 2003). In divided societies the social relations that characterized communities before violence are changed. Neighborhoods can become segregated and interethnic interactions become rare. Many towns in Bosnia today have “two schools under one roof.” Children from different ethnic groups go to the same school building but in shifts, using different curricula and learning different versions of history. In some places interethnic interactions can even be dangerous because members of

people's own group police the new "boundaries" and make sure that segregation and separation continues. Many people are traumatized and searching for a way to understand the conflict and the violence in order to make sense of it. Unemployment, especially among youth, becomes prevalent as pre-war economic activities are disrupted. Ineffective political institutions create a situation where progress and change seem impossible and where civic engagement seems pointless. In short, communities that have experienced violence and war are *polarized and paralyzed.* What do people in these divided post-war communities need?

People in post-war communities basically need the same things that people in interpersonal conflict need. They need help in gaining clarity about their situation and their options, and opportunities to connect with others. Part of the reason for this is because they need a basis from which to make decisions about their future. This is true not just for individuals in interpersonal relationships, but also for people in the context of communities and the organizations that are important to those communities such as schools, municipal administrations, etc. People as well as organizations may need support to change the current pattern of interactions towards a greater level of pro-social interaction. Unlike interpersonal mediation, working with conflict in communities that have suffered political violence involves working with the social dimension to these conflicts. Below I will explore how the transformative framework can provide a way to do that. First, I will look briefly at some of the assumptions underlying many peacebuilding interventions in order to highlight how the transformative approach is different.

Designing social change?

In the early 2000s I designed a project which sought to contribute to peacebuilding in Chechnya and Russia. A series of three four day workshops were organized where teams of 4-5 people were recruited from four different towns in southern Russia and the North Caucasus to participate. The workshop included learning about conflict and communication skills, how to facilitate workshops, and how to create a plan to change something in their own community. The teams planned and ran their own workshops in their home towns and were given a small amount of money to manage to do so with the idea that they then would also learn about budgeting and reporting. All the local workshops were held and a large number of people received training, but very few concrete activities emerged from these huge efforts. Instead, people were concerned with planning and figuring out their personal futures.

Conflict Resolution and Post-conflict Peacebuilding

For several decades efforts have been made by non-governmental actors to work in areas of conflict, either with local communities or with representatives of national groups or organizations. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become a ubiquitous feature of conflict areas around the world. As the international community increasingly seeks to contribute to rebuilding war torn societies, funding has also become increasingly available for NGOs to contribute to this goal. Most of these efforts have been

centered on the conflict resolution workshop. Conflict resolution workshops sometimes focus on training participants to give them particular skills, other times on letting participants talk about or engage in conflict analysis in order to reach a deeper, and sometimes a common, understanding of their conflict. In some cases, the latter is referred to as dialogue rather than conflict resolution.

Kelman and Cohen (1976) describe one such model in which facilitators who are social scientists work with specific professional groups such as economists or educators in an academic process designed to produce outcomes that can be fed into the policy process. Third-parties here contribute theoretical inputs, and what the authors call content and process observations. The goals sought with such workshops include changes in the perceptions of the participants, ideas and proposals for resolution of the conflict, and potentially useful institutional arrangements. Other scholar-practitioners also focus on this kind of analytical problem solving approach (Mitchell 1996). John Burton put a focus on basic human needs, arguing that conflicts could be resolved, however intractable they seem, as long as solutions take into account all parties' basic human needs (e.g. Burton 1990). This idea has been one of the most influential in the development of conflict resolution and interventions often focus in some way or another on translating people's positions and interests to basic human needs in the hope that this will make agreement and progress more likely. In addition to this it is often assumed that if people can develop more tolerant attitudes, and stereotypes about the other group can be dispelled, then new violence will be less likely. Finally, such workshops also provide people with the skills to manage conflicts peacefully, again reducing the likelihood of violence.

John Paul Lederach has taken these ideas a step further. In his work the conflict resolution workshop is put in a larger context of what has been termed "peacebuilding." Lederach defines peacebuilding in the following way:

> Here, peacebuilding is understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict towards more sustainable, peaceful relationships. The term thus involves a wide range of activities and functions that both precede and follow formal peace accords. Metaphorically, peace is seen not merely as a stage in time or a condition. It is a dynamic social construct. Such a conceptualization requires a process of *building,* involving investment and materials, architectural design and coordination of labor, laying of a foundation, and detailed finish work, as well as continuing maintenance. (Lederach 1997:20; emphasis in original)

This approach goes much further than just conflict analysis, identification of basic human needs or changing attitudes at the individual level. Instead, key actors in society are brought together to talk about, envision and design strategies to contribute to the realization of a society characterized by reconciliation, peace and justice. Lederach makes an important contribution to thinking about working with conflict by talking about who needs to be part of the process of

peacebuilding. Instead of just thinking in interest-based terms, his approach carries with it a relational element. Middle level leaders, for example community leaders, NGO representatives, clergy, leaders of local political parties etc., are the most desirable participants for peacebuilding work. One reason for this is that middle level actors get little media attention and are therefore free to imagine a society where interethnic relations are healed and people live normal lives. Another reason is that the ideas they develop for reaching such a society can be effectively communicated to both grassroots communities and top national leaders because middle level actors have access to and are trusted by both. This part of Lederach's approach was inspired by the talks leading up to the 1993 Oslo Agreement where Israeli and Palestinian social scientists began talks which later were taken over by official and top level political leaders. Because of this dimension this approach is often referred to as *strategic* peacebuilding.

In addition to bringing a new dimension in thinking about who the parties are or ought to be, this approach also carries with it a conceptual framework which the facilitator uses to help parties develop strategies that they will then carry out in between workshops. The conceptual framework is heavily influenced by biblical tradition with an emphasis on reconciliation, justice and peace. In this elicitive approach the parties bring to the table their concerns and hopes, but only in the context set by the facilitator (Lederach 1995). By providing the conceptual framework and the blueprint for the process which people will work within, and by determining who the most strategic actors are, the third-party intervenor is an "architect" of social change. The intervenor in this sense brings important knowledge to the process which organizes the experiences of the participants in such a way that positive social change – social change according to the peacebuilding framework – becomes possible. The peacebuilding framework is not just about individual change, but moves between issues, relationships and systemic problems and how to change them.

Other approaches to working with ethnopolitical conflict focus on dialogue. These approaches are also relational in that they intend to facilitate relationship building as much as actual problem solving and allow for talk about deeper, and what are seen as more intractable, issues. Saunders' (1999) "sustained dialogue" is meant as an approach to working with racial and ethnic conflict. Nonetheless, what is common to all of these processes is the idea that third party intervenors bring in a framework and a defined set of outcomes that influences the process.

In the following I present an alternative approach based on the transformative understanding of conflict. While transformative dialogue is also relational, it differs both in normative and empirical terms from the peacebuilding framework. I will therefore not refer to transformative dialogue in areas of ethno-political conflict as post-conflict "peacebuilding." The reason for this is that facilitators of transformative dialogue are not trying to "build" peace. Instead they are providing a process where participants can use their own language and own frameworks of understanding in the ways that they want without having to conform to the language of international third-party intervenors.

The Transformative Framework

In 1994 the publication of *The Promise of Mediation* created waves in the mediation community in the United States and Canada. The authors of the book, Joe Folger and Robert (Baruch) Bush observed that while mediators claimed to be impartial and to let parties make the key decisions in the mediation process, much of what they did was unintentionally directive and put pressure on people to reach agreement. They called on mediators to embrace a practice which was more in line with their stated ideals and claimed that much more could be done to realize the full potential of mediation. The book laid out a new framework for understanding conflict and mediation which has since been adopted by many mediators and mediation centers in North America and in other parts of the world.[2] The challenge from Folger and Bush was primarily aimed at practitioners of interpersonal mediation and the practices which emanated from the principles in the transformative framework were mainly relevant to interpersonal conflict and mediation. Inspired by the transformative framework and mediators of interpersonal conflict, scholars and practitioners working with ethno-political conflicts and what has been referred to as "post-conflict peacebuilding" have sought to apply the framework to these situations as well. In 2007 a group of such scholars and practitioners, together with fellows of the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation, met in Rome to discuss wider applications of the framework. The result has been an ongoing discussion with further seminars and workshops to explore these possibilities with the conclusion that the framework can be applied equally well to third-party intervention in social and political conflicts as to interpersonal conflict.

At the core of the transformative framework is an understanding of what characterizes conflict and people's experience of it. From this it becomes clear both what people in conflict need and what the role of a mediator or third-party intervenor should be. Rather than seeing conflict as the result of people having incompatible goals, the transformative framework sees conflict as a crisis in human interaction. It is therefore fundamentally a relational approach to conflict rather than an interest-based one. When people are in conflict they experience weakness and self-absorption. Weakness manifests itself in confusion, lack of clarity, and inability to make decisions about the conflict and what parties want to do about it. Increasing self-absorption means people are unable to acknowledge the experiences of others or to understand why others might have done the things they have done. Together this can constitute a negative spiral which people may want the assistance of a mediator or third party to reverse.

In addition to this relational understanding of conflict, the transformative framework also embodies an overarching principle: to support, but never supplant, parties' efforts at deliberation and decision-making. This principle emerges out of the understanding of conflict presented

[2] A second edition of the book which was significantly reworked was published in 2004. See Folger and Bush (2004).

above. What parties need is not necessarily an agreement or a resolution, but clarity about their situation, a different quality of connection to others, and the strength to make decisions about their situation. Transformative mediation is therefore nondirective. The goal of the mediator is not to make an agreement more likely, but to follow the parties wherever they want to go – even if that means they decide to end the mediation without agreement or reconciliation. In fact, that may in some cases be what people decide they want after reaching more clarity about their situation. The mediator's practice here clearly flows from the principles of the transformative framework which in turn are based on a particular understanding of conflict.

Can this framework be applied to group level conflicts, even conflicts with an ethnic dimension in places which have experienced violence and/or war? This paper will not only argue that it can be applied, but that it is the best framework for helping people and communities that have experienced ethnic violence or civil war as they seek to rebuild their lives and determine what their communities will look like.

Why the transformative approach in ethno-political conflict?

So why is a transformative approach needed in the context of ethno-political conflict? Certainly the peacebuilding framework represents a well developed approach that takes into account the complexities of such conflicts. Is it not a framework which is both strategic and at the same time based on the participants' own experiences and visions of the future? There are several reasons why a different approach is needed. The first of these is normative, the latter two pragmatic.

There are important ethical concerns associated with conflict work. If we bring a framework for peacebuilding to a group of participants we have already made important decisions about how to view the conflict, how to talk about it and what we ultimately want to do about it without the involvement of the parties in these decisions. In fact, we are imposing these frameworks on the discussions, something which could result in topics that the participants deem to be important never being discussed, or forcing them to talk about things they do not want to talk about. Participants may not want reconciliation to be a goal of the talks. This point may be difficult for most people to accept. How can one oppose a process with so noble a goal as peace? Aren't peace, justice and reconciliation inherently worthy goals that all should want? The problem with this kind of thinking is that there is another goal which is even more important than the goals of peace and reconciliation: the goal of supporting but never supplanting the parties' efforts at deliberation and decision-making. This has to do with something very basic to human beings – autonomy and agency.

The ethical concerns in conflict work go further than this though. If third parties are bringing in frameworks of reconciliation and justice on which the peacebuilding work is based, it is sending a message that people should be working for peace and human rights. If people want to work for peace and human rights that is fine of course. But in many places, especially where there is

violence and ethnic division, working for these goals can be dangerous. Even in the United States working for justice, for example through the civil rights movement, has been a dangerous endeavor. Though we may applaud those who take the risks involved with this kind of work and who make sacrifices in the name of human rights and justice, we must be very careful about advocating for these sacrifices to be made if we ourselves are not taking the risks. Imagine doing mediation work in Afghanistan. I may personally believe (as I do!) that women should have the same rights as men and that women in Afghanistan should fight for equal rights the way women in many other countries have. But we know that in Afghanistan fighting for women's rights is associated with major risks. Women have acid thrown in their face, and are subjected to violence and mistreatment in an extremely male dominated society. If I facilitate a seminar in Afghanistan and push for participants to develop strategies for peace and justice I have circumvented the possibility for women to decide if they are ready to take the risks associated with such work.

Dialogue in local social networks

I spent several years working for a project which facilitated interethnic dialogue with participants from the former Yugoslavia. At first, the project recruited whoever it could. Usually, the strategy was to recruit one person from each major town in a region in order to achieve some geographic cover. The result was that participants often had a great personal experience at the seminar but when they returned home had trouble communicating to others what they had experienced. Some would even question why they were meeting with people from other identity groups. As the project evolved, the strategy became to work with people connected to a local institution like a school or municipal administration. Then when people returned home the conversations from the seminar were part of a shared experience that could sometimes lead to new understanding and new action in the community.

In United States, many African Americans decided to engage in a struggle for civil rights in the mid-1950s. They did not do so to the same extent in the 1920s or the 1930s. In the 1950s the time was right and African Americans were ready to take the risks involved with such a struggle and the decision to do so was made by those involved. Women in Afghanistan also need to decide whether and when the time is right to challenge the status quo. That is why the transformative framework is so important. It allows for the parties themselves to determine what they want to talk about, how they want to talk about it and ultimately what they want to do about it. If women are concerned to challenge the existing system then they can talk about that. If they are not, they can talk about something else. The facilitator follows the parties and supports them in these deliberations.[3] Another reason the transformative framework is important in working with people in ethno-political conflict settings is connected with sustainability. Even if we do give people what we

[3] For an extensive treatment of the relationship between mediation and social justice see Bush and Folger (forthcoming).

think are the most effective models to work from with a clear goal of peace and justice it will likely not be sustainable. One reason for this is that peacebuilding is premised on ideas about change which do not necessarily recognize how change usually occurs and does not take into account the social context that people live and function within in areas of conflict. The peacebuilding framework assumes that if you bring a group of 20-25 of the right people together to develop a strategy for peace, then these people will go out and talk to key people they are connected to, influence them in a positive way and thereby affect change. This approach ignores social movements, political parties and electoral systems – in short, power. It assumes that if the right people have good ideas these ideas will be adopted. Social movements like the civil rights movement in the United States are built over time and are the result of long deliberative processes. People were ready not just because the time was right, the time was right because people were ready and had made their own decisions about this. They were also using concepts and frameworks developed in their own cultural setting. For example, much of Martin Luther King Jr.'s rhetoric was aimed not at attacking the US constitution, but at claiming that only by including African Americans could its true meaning be realized. This was not a frame brought in from outside, but was developed organically by African Americans for African Americans (though as we know it was also challenged by African Americans). As a result participation and change were sustainable. It is no accident that the Oslo Accords were challenged by a Palestinian social movement and an Israeli electorate. One might say about the talks that "you had to be there," and they weren't.

In her book on *Peacebuilding in the Balkans: The View from the Ground Floor,* Paula Pickering describes the multifaceted reality that ordinary people in post-conflict situations live in. Using Bosnia and Herzegovina as an example there are transnational actors such as the UN, international organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) or the European Union (EU), and numerous NGOs. These transnational actors are usually promoting peace and reconciliation as well as reintegration of refugees in their original communities. In addition to these actors there is the nationalizing state trying to create a nation in the aftermath of the violence. While doing this they are contending with national minority activists (Croat, Serb and Muslim politicians often advocating for secession of territory and the creation of ethnically homogeneous countries) and local minority activists with the same goals working in local communities. In addition to this are members of local communities that currently live abroad, many of whom left the country as refugees. Pickering (2007) argues that people's response to international programs for reintegration and reconciliation have to be understood in this context. As she writes:

> …ordinary people influence the implementation of peacebuilding programs through their everyday reactions to these projects. The case of postwar reconstruction in Bosnia shows that the everyday reactions of common people to a central goal of reconstruction – reintegration into more or less diverse communities – are not simply determined by elites,

> institutions, interests, or resources from on high – quite the contrary. Instead, even the most cursory focus on everyday life reveals an obvious component often absent in the literature – that the responses of ordinary people are guided by their own particularistic understandings of self and of their social situation… Armed with these notions, people cope with one statebuilding project after another, all of which fail to gain their confidence and instead make them feel like lab rats in scientific experiments. The experience of reconstruction in Bosnia shows that internationally designed institutions often do not help popular efforts to reintegrate and rebuild normal lives. (Pickering 2007:3-4).

She gives examples of people in Bosnia who made the decision to stay in multiethnic communities and others who decided to leave. What people need in these situations is to clarify "their understandings of self" and their "social situation" in the new situation they are in.

The third reason the transformative framework is necessary is that it takes the relational aspect of the peacebuilding framework much further and integrates it with the idea of party deliberation and decision making. One could summarize the transformative approach by saying that it asks the question *"Who needs to talk to whom about what and how?"* In most NGO work today these questions are answered mostly by the third party intervenors and based on their goals and those of the donors supporting their work. The peacebuilding framework gives guidelines for both the who, the what and the how. The transformative approach leaves these questions to be answered by the parties themselves.

One result of asking the question of who needs to talk to whom is that people are likely to suggest people they are connected to on a daily basis. If working in a school setting people will likely suggest teachers, parents, school administrators and pupils. If working in a local municipal administration then suggestions are likely to be other colleagues, partners or recipients of services. This means that people are interacting and deliberating with people in their own social networks. As a result, transformation can take place not just at the individual level, but also at the community level.

What is transformation in the ethno-political context?

In interpersonal conflict, transformative mediators talk about transformation when parties move from a state of weakness and self-absorption to a state of strength and connection to others. This often entails gaining more clarity about one's self and others, finding one's voice in the interaction with others and seeing one's conflict in a new light. It can, but does not need to, involve resolution or agreement. In the context of ethno-political conflict people often experience transformation as they discover new facts and information, see things from a new point of view, gain agency and efficacy for their lives and have the chance to connect with others they would not normally connect with. Often the transformation can be on a personal rather than a community level. If youth who do not know one another prior to a workshop on conflict

resolution are recruited from different contexts, then the transformation that takes place remains on the personal level. This scenario is a bit like being "abducted by aliens." You are lifted out of your social context to interact with people you do not know and then put back in your community afterwards. When you return home you try to tell people about your experience, but it is difficult to explain what you experienced. It is a "you had to be there" situation.

If on the other hand, people who interact on a daily basis go through a transformative process, then upon returning home they will be able to talk more about the experience with those around them which they then will share with others. In this sense the transformation becomes a community transformation, not just a personal one. The implication of such transformation is an increase in pro-social interaction. This does not necessarily entail reconciliation. In some cases new patterns of interaction occur across ethnic divides. In other cases, people can retain nationalist attitudes vis-à-vis the other side, but nonetheless change their interaction in positive ways. One of my former colleagues tells the story of a man who went through an interethnic dialogue process. The man was a local nationalist leader among his ethnic group. When interethnic riots broke out, he went out in front of a group of his own people and persuaded them not to commit acts of violence against the other group. He later stated that not only would he not have done that had he not participated in the dialogue process, he would also not even have thought of it. He was not an advocate for reconciliation, but his relationship to members of his own group and members of the other ethnic group had changed. He still had conflict with members of the other group, but the nature of that conflict had changed.

The strength of participant driven processes

Recently I facilitated a workshop exploring the use of transformative mediation in community conflicts. One participant was planning to travel to Mexico with a church group to do peace work in an area affected by drug violence. The participant was concerned about not having a plan for what to do with the community in advance. After talking about the situation and how to know what was the "right" thing to do as a third party intervener, she left feeling that her "lack" of a plan was an essential part of the work. Instead of coming in with a ready-made project, she would now meet with many different people and groups to figure out who would need to talk to whom about what and how.

In this sense transformative dialogue in ethnopolitical conflict settings can be compared to Amartya Sen's (1999) re-conceptualization of development. Instead of focusing primarily on income or material development, Sen (1999: 53) points to the importance of freedom both as "the main object and the primary means of development." As a result, people themselves must play an active role in deciding what the character of development should be. He writes "[i]f a traditional way of life has to be sacrificed to escape grinding poverty…then it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what should be chosen" (Sen 1999: 31). This means for Sen (1999: 32) that "the liberty of all to participate in deciding what traditions to observe cannot be ruled out by the national or local "guardians"…nor by cultural "experts" (domestic or foreign)" In fact, the kind of

process and conversations transformative dialogue can offer are one concrete way that people can play a role in their own development and the future of their communities.

Who needs to speak to whom about what and how? Transformative mediation in an ethno-political context.

So what does an intervention based on the transformative framework look like and what would a transformative mediator working in the context of ethnopolitical conflict actually do? When talking about mediation the focus is often on what happens "in the room." In other words, there is not much attention given to what a community mediation center does to educate, promote and offer their services before parties enter the room with a mediator. Mediators have to pay attention to these things if they want to ensure that there are people who will accept their offer of mediation. If no one knows what mediation is or what it can do for them, then no one will seek out mediation. In the United States mediation centers have to focus on educating the public about what mediation is in order to recruit clients. In addition to this, all mediation centers have intake processes which involve working with parties prior to the "actual mediation," or that part of the process which is usually talked about in conflict resolution workshops. It is important to remember that whether or not the intake process results in a mediated conversation and whether or not that conversation results in agreement between the parties, the intake process itself is a process that can be beneficial for parties because it can help clarify their situation and even at that stage parties are making decisions for themselves. In ethnopolitical conflict settings as well, a lot of the work takes place prior to a facilitated seminar "in the room," and just like the intake process during mediation, these conversations can be valuable whether or not they lead to further conversations.

One of the most important elements of conflict work is establishing a presence. It may be that organizations doing conflict work have been asked by some individuals or groups to establish this presence, or it may be that the organizations have decided to seek out locations where communities are left polarized and paralyzed after violent conflict. Facilitators must then build relationships with people in the community from both sides of the divide. These relationships provide an opportunity to tell people about what you can offer them and why they might want to be involved in mediation or dialogue. However, facilitators of transformative dialogue also respect people's choices and accept no for an answer if people are not interested in being involved. The latter does not preclude cultivating further contact with people and letting them know that dialogue is still an offer. But it also entails not contradicting people, reassuring them or guaranteeing any particular outcome. Transparency and respect are critical. This process is critical to building the necessary trust for people to be willing to accept the offer of dialogue. Even at this stage the relationship between the mediator and members of the local community can be transformative for the latter if the facilitator focuses on listening and reflecting rather than advising, persuading or advocating.

During this part of the work the mediator likely will speak to many different members of the community. In the process, she will also develop the terms of the intervention process in conversation with potential participants. If there are people that are interested in the dialogue process then another important part of these conversations is identifying the parties. In the context of interpersonal mediation it is usually easier to identify the parties because the parties themselves usually seek out mediation and already know who they are.[4] In a community that has suffered from political conflict and violence the question that needs to be answered is "Who needs to speak to whom about what and how?" The answer to this can begin to take shape as a mediator talks to many different members of a community. Through these individual meetings the mediator gets a sense of what the community needs. In some cases it may be that the community needs something different than what the mediator can offer. In that case you let go of the process and accept that there is no further role for you in this time and place. In most interethnic work done in conflict areas today, NGO representatives will determine who is invited to seminars or meetings, the process that will be followed once parties are in the room and the framework from which the conversations will take place. In the context of transformative dialogue, facilitators follow the parties in determining all of these questions. The process and who the participants in the process are unfold organically. The process may consist of a number of different meetings or seminars. Once a group of people have agreed to meet with each other the mediator runs the meeting much as a transformative mediation session. After participants have had a chance to introduce themselves to one another the mediator might ask what things the participants want to talk about. From there the conversation unfolds and goes in the direction the participants take it with the mediator or facilitator supporting the participants through reflections, summaries and process questions. The facilitator does not translate what participants are saying into any other language whether it is I-messages or statements involving feelings and needs. The facilitator supports the parties in expressing themselves as they need and want to at that given moment.

In transformative dialogue this microfocus is maintained throughout the process. By microfocus I mean that the facilitator is focused on whatever is happening in the interaction between the parties "here and now." If the parties change the subject suddenly, then the facilitator follows them and supports them. However, from time to time the facilitator also "checks in" with the parties to see if they are happy with the way the conversation is going. The facilitator mediates whatever the parties are talking about at any given moment. Transformative mediation and dialogue involves a microfocus whether the mediation is an interpersonal mediation or a dialogue taking place in the context of ethnopolitical conflict. In the latter case the microfocus is maintained in the room in much the same way that it is in an interpersonal mediation involving two parties. It is also maintained by focusing on a particular neighborhood, organization,

[4] Even in interpersonal mediation however, conversations with initial parties may lead people to identify other people who should be involved as parties.

institution or local community. Doing transformative dialogue in Kosovo would not involve trying to think about the whole country or territory at once and bringing people from all over the country together. Instead it would involve focusing on a local institution in a local community or even just a neighborhood. If during the conversations participants decided to focus on "big questions" such as the international status of Kosovo then the facilitator would follow them in that. And the people having that conversation would be the ones the process had determined wanted to have that conversation through the series of individual meetings and conversations leading up to the seminar.

Further issues

Several criticisms might be made of the transformative approach. Some might argue that it is not culturally sensitive and represents an American approach to conflict. If this criticism were true then it would certainly be true of any approach to conflict work. However, the transformative approach is as culturally sensitive as one can get in the context of third-party intervention. Because the facilitators do not bring along any pre-conceived framework for peacebuilding or a set of concepts or terms that participants must use as a starting point for their discussions, but instead allow participants to talk about what they want to in the terms that they want to use, it is as culturally sensitive as possible. One might still argue that some cultures do not have a tradition of mediation or dialogue. Instead there may be a tradition of elders or clan leaders who have responsibility for conflict resolution. These traditions are often more like arbitration than mediation. The transformative approach recognizes this and leaves the choice of whether to participate in mediation or dialogue to the parties themselves. Transformative mediators and facilitators never persuade or pressure people to take part in a process they do not want to be a part of.

Another criticism that might be made is that the transformative approach does not take into account power imbalances between people. Don't we need to work with these power imbalances if people are really to interact with one another in a meaningful way? Power imbalances can involve many different things. It could refer to the difference in authority between a school administrator and a teacher in an educational context, or it can refer to the different context people of different racial or ethnic groups live in. One group may experience systematic discrimination in their daily life while others experience privilege and relative ease. Most practitioners who advocate working for social justice and peace would want to address these issues. Several things can be said about working with power imbalances. First, trying to change such imbalances is fraught with the same ethical dilemmas as discussed above in persuading people to take risks in changing systemic conditions in their society. Challenging existing power structures is not our job as facilitators. Our job is to help people get clarity about their situation and what they want (or don't want) to do about it. Second, in most cases mediators cannot alter these power imbalances anyway. I spent several years working with Russian and Chechen civil society actors. The context was characterized by Chechens living in a small territory in the vastly

larger Russian Federation where none of those participating had any chance of altering that fact. Instead, participants had to figure out what they wanted to do *within that context and reality*. As third-party intervenors the best thing we can do, and indeed our main task, is not to try to change power imbalances; but to work on the quality of interaction between people who hold different amounts of power.

So what about democracy and human rights?

Where does this leave us with regard to democratization and work for human rights around the world? What about the democratic revolutions we are currently witnessing in the Middle East? Isn't democracy a good thing? Why shouldn't we be working for democratization as a goal? Transformative facilitators are not against democratization, and human or civil rights. This essay is not arguing that people should not pursue democracy or greater justice in their societies. What it is arguing is that the decisions to do so must be taken by people themselves, not by third party interveners, just as the risks involved in fighting for democracy and human rights must also be taken by people themselves. Third party interveners do not take the risks involved nor do they fight the struggle for democracy. If you have a friend who is struggling in their marriage, then as a friend you do not tell that person whether they should stay in the marriage or get divorced. What you can do is be a listener who supports the person in their struggle as they seek clarity and strength to make the right decision for themself and their partner. In the same way, transformative mediators and facilitators work with people to help them have the conversations they need to have as they seek clarity about their situation and what they want to do about it. The best thing we can hope to do for individuals or communities of people is to support them in these conversations. This is the role of the facilitator and in it lies the promise of mediation and the promise of transformative dialogue.

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