



Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation

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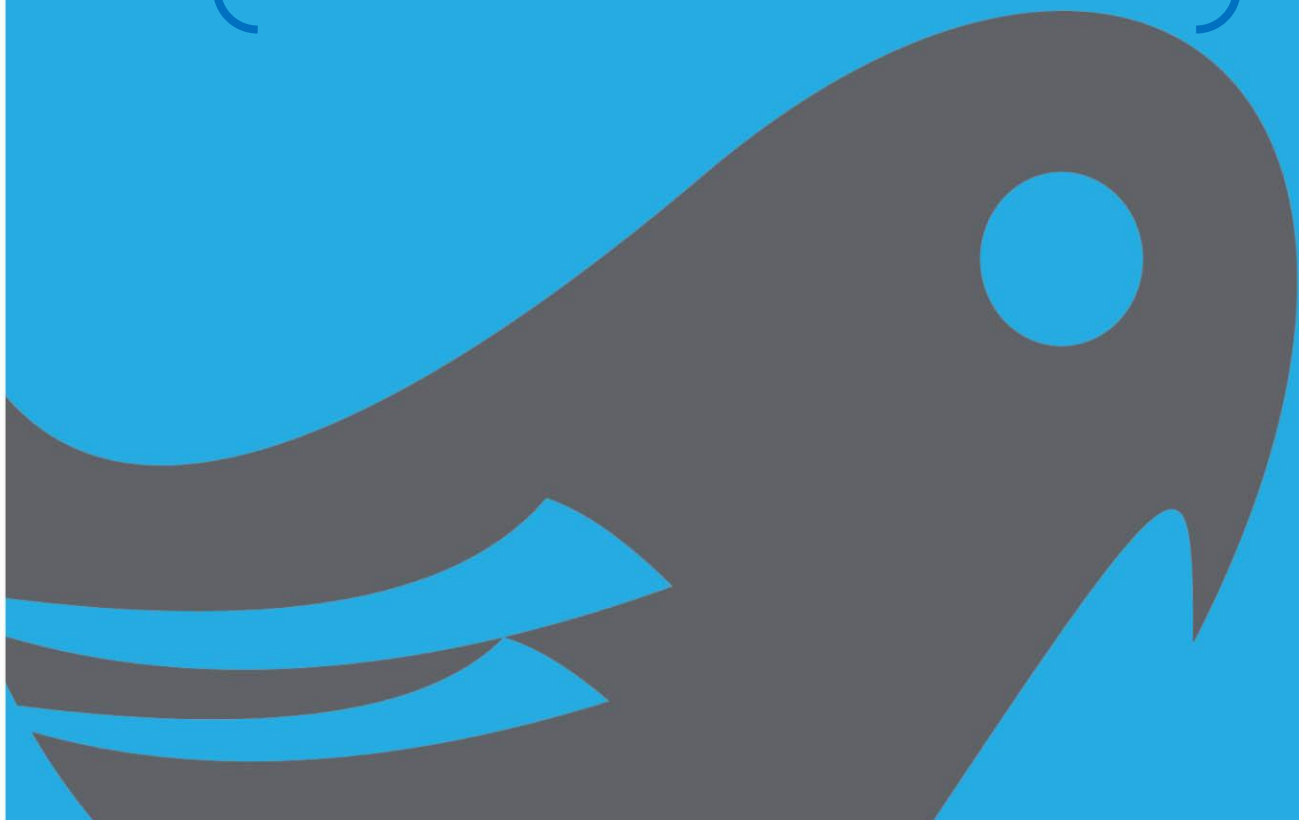
## A Tree and its Branches... The Eye of a Storm

Reflecting Nature in Project Design

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# A Tree and its Branches... The Eye of a Storm

## Reflecting Nature in Project Design and Implementation

### **Introduction**

Development work all over the world is plagued by two main challenges, that of ensuring the sustainability of a project beyond the funding life span, and transferring ownership of a project from the implementing agency to the communities with whom the project is being carried out. While working in the area of peace building in Zimbabwe, the Centre for Conflict Management and Transformation (CCMT) has struggled with these same challenges. This paper describes the reflection and thinking that resulted in the organisation developing a new approach to its project design and implementation in response to the challenges of sustainability and ownership. This new approach saw CCMT offering conflict intervention services to communities and implementing community conflict interventions only in response to community requests. The learning that emerged from the work inspired CCMT to reflect not only on the organisation's own work but on project design and implementation for development work in general. The description of this approach, which CCMT has named 'The Eye', may seem rather idyllic, this is due to the fact that the paper does not dwell on the step by step details of project implementation, but seeks to capture the reflective thinking that inspired the approach.

### **Early work with Community Conflict Management Associations**

CCMT supported the formation and operation of ten urban Community Conflict Management Associations (CCMA's) over a period of six years. Each association was made

up of a group of between 15 – 25 volunteers who lived in an urban locality and were involved in various activities in their community. During the project life span, each group received incremental training and mentoring in mediation and dialogue facilitation from CCMT. The associations became a resource to their communities providing family mediations and later on convening dialogues on service provision issues that were causing conflicts within their neighbourhoods. Among these conflicts were those arising from erratic water and electricity supply, poor school administration standards and the poor state of roads. The dialogues convened by the associations brought together community stakeholders that were relevant to the issues; these included local authorities, parastatal representatives and school authorities.

The Conflict Management Associations enjoyed relative success, with each association breaking new ground through the constructive resolution of community conflicts. However, it became increasingly clear that sustainability beyond the funding life span would be difficult as not many activities took place without financial support from CCMT. Despite CCMT's attempts to get the associations to fundraise, stand on their own and continue the much needed work they were doing, the majority of the association members felt the need to be compensated for their time and costs incurred coordinating association activities. This expectation gave CCMT food for thought as this was not an unreasonable aspiration considering the economic hardships being experienced by the majority of Zimbabweans including the association members. It was very clear that the service being provided to the community by the associations was needed, but was it important enough for the



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groups to feel moved to do this work just for their community?

Several questions emerged. Firstly, what was the level of relevance of the project to the association members and the communities they worked with? The association members had to weigh up their own individual needs against community needs. Human nature dictates that before an individual embarks on a project, there must be something in it for him/her and that something, be it emotional or material, will serve as motivation. So how important was this conflict transformation work to the association members? What immediate emotional or material benefit could be derived from this work? The associations were dealing with community conflicts that arose around service delivery issues. Working through these issues contributed to the building of a better community that would be realised through the small but significant steps their work achieved. But realistically, this 'better community' was in the future and in order to be inspired by a vision of the future, one needed to see past the present reality, to be a visionary - a gift granted to few.

Further reflection revealed that it was unrealistic to expect that the association members could continue to provide their service to the community relying on resource support from a community reeling from economic hardship. The activities that the organisation had carried out with a generous donor budget would be difficult to replicate. And practically speaking, how sustainable was a structure that stood outside all other established community structures, how would it sustain itself? How wide was its sphere of influence and as an independent structure, how long would it take for the members to build up their sphere of influence? It became

apparent that too big a distance lay between the work that CCMT was doing with the associations and the benefit that the association members and their communities would derive from that work.

With these considerations in mind project ownership and sustainability seemed difficult to achieve. It became clear that the intangible vision of a better future would not be able to take the associations far beyond the project life span. For future work the organisation had to find a way to make the vision of a better community less of a vision and more of a tangible reality. The organisation's work needed to have a direct link to the result, and in thinking about this, a clue was found in nature.

### **A tree and its branches – Locating a community's energy**

Looking at nature you will notice that as some trees grow they prune themselves. The branches that are lowest and no longer receive much sunlight have all food and moisture cut off from them until they dry up and fall off the tree. This phenomenon resembles the workings of human society in many ways. In much the same way, routines and practices that no longer serve any useful purpose to an individual or community are starved of attention and energy until they die and fall away like the pruned branches of a tree. The self pruning tree holds an important lesson for development work in general and peace building work in particular. If the tree represents the community as a whole, then the branches represent the different aspects that constitute the community. These aspects could include, for example, institutions like schools and clinics, or certain religious and cultural practices, even behaviours, values or ideologies. These branches exist because the



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community chooses to put energy into them to keep them alive. This energy may be positive, where for example, a school is functioning well and therefore contributes positively to the lives of community members because their children are well educated. The same school, if not functioning well, may inspire negative energy in the form of unresolved conflict between parents and its administration.

When community members are unwilling or unable to take ownership of projects, it is likely that the group or community has chosen not to put precious 'food' and energy into the project or activity. In peace building projects, one possible reason for this may be the way in which projects are designed. The standard approach in designing peace building projects is to identify a conflict area, then go on to identify a specific target group that is affected by or responsible for the conflict. A 'laboratory' is then created in the form of a workshop, a seminar, an awareness raising campaign or a football match, to which this group is invited. The issues affecting the target group or their community are imported into this laboratory and worked on by applying various peace building theories and concepts to case studies from the community. The participants are presented with information, skills, knowledge and sometimes, through exchange visits, exposed to "people from the other side". Within this space, attitudes change, skills are acquired and knowledge is gained. The expectation is that the participants will leave the 'laboratory', take the new skills and use them to change their community and lives for the better. This assumption made up the cornerstone on which CCMT's project with the associations was founded. As illustrated in the diagram below, the project path followed a clear linear progression.



## Theory of Change

What will have taken place in the laboratory is that a new branch will have been grafted onto the tree, but once the participants leave, it is difficult for them to keep the new branch alive by putting into practice the new skills and knowledge. They are expected to go back to their community and implement the lessons learnt in the laboratory to real life, but there are no flipcharts, metaplan cards or multi coloured markers, only old behavioural patterns and dysfunctional relationships. Real life takes over and understandably, old habits that have been years in the making overwhelm the new skills that have been passed on in a typical four day workshop. Because of the metaphorical distance between the laboratories that are set up and a tangible change happening in the lives of the target group or their community, the benefit of keeping the new branch alive is not immediately apparent to participants and other than the facilitator's word, there exists no tangible result from this experiment.

To eliminate this distance, a different approach could be used in the design of peace building projects. Where instead of grafting new branches to the tree, we locate where the community's energy is by finding and working on the branches that already exist; in other words we work with those aspects of community life that the community is already putting energy into. This means that if an organisation is working in the area of conflict transformation, it would identify where conflicts are taking place within the



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community, for example conflicts amongst the leadership, or over land boundaries or access to grazing land or water. Communities will have many branches that they are already growing on their tree which they keep alive by feeding positive or negative energy. As an organisation carrying out peace building work, it is likely that our interest will be in the branches that are receiving negative energy generated by, among other things, unresolved conflicts. To identify these issues one *asks* the community which branch they feel they need help tending. In giving assistance, the organisation works on that specific conflict as opposed to organising a workshop on conflict management or leadership after which the leaders are expected to go back into their communities and resolve their conflicts. Targeting the leadership in this way amounts to lifting the identified conflict out of the community context and working on it in a laboratory. It is likely that the conflict which the leadership is experiencing involves a variety of actors within the community who are influencing it and will be crucial to its resolution. However, they will be in a different mind frame when it comes to dealing with the issue because they would not have been exposed to the training the leadership has been through. It therefore becomes very important that the organisation's work takes place on the specific conflict right where it is happening. The work is placed in the community's reality where the energy is flowing.

### **In the eye of the storm – Working directly on conflict issues**

Cyclones, hurricanes and tornadoes are intense storms that can cause devastating destruction where they occur. These types of storms occur as a wind current spiralling around an area of low pressure. The wind

speeds are very high but the centre or eye of the storm is characterized by calm weather. Deciding to work directly on a conflict right where it is happening can be likened to moving into the path of such a storm. The community energy that will be flowing will contain all the characteristics of a natural storm, its unpredictability, its anger and its destructive power. Once in the path of the storm, there is the need to create a still centre around which the energy moves; a safe space within the storm where the peace building work can happen. This safe space becomes the eye within the community's storm where learning, skills and knowledge acquisition take place within a real conflict situation.

The process that happens in this space, within the eye, is an inclusive one and all the parties relevant to the conflict are themselves present or select representatives to take part in the process, whatever form that process takes be it a training, or dialogue or mediation. The purpose of the process is to work directly on the conflict as identified by the community. Using the earlier example of the leadership conflict over land boundaries, the process of resolving such a case could bring together district authorities, government officials, ordinary community members affected by the dispute and technical experts. The process would identify the piece of land in dispute and seek to understand where the dispute lies. In this way the participants bring their real selves with their needs, attitudes and views into the space and as they work on trying to resolve the conflict they are also working on these individual attitudes and views, changing what they feel may need to change according to the reality of their context. As they work on this real life situation, relationships change and perceptions shift. As the attitudes and outlook of individuals participating within the process

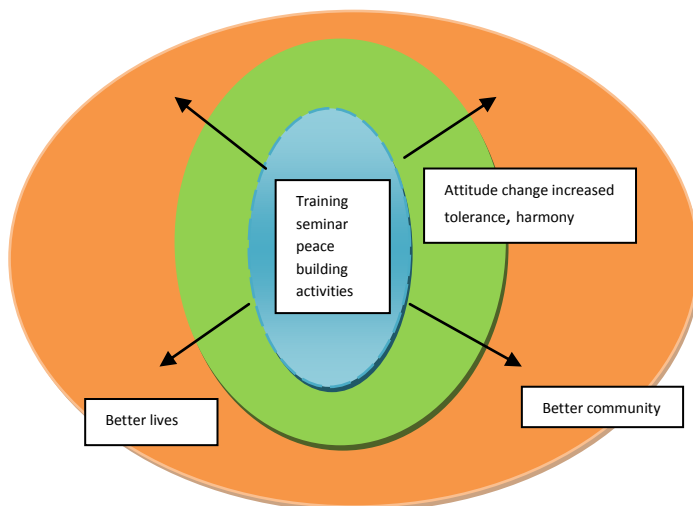


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change, their shifting perspectives simultaneously influence the essence of the energy that will be moving around the issue. So, little by little, as the process develops, not only are the participants being transformed but the specific conflict situation is being resolved and its resolution gives rise to an immediate gain for the community at large. These tangible benefits could be in the form of the implementation of development projects like the building of a school or clinic which may not have happened as a result of the dispute.

The process that takes place within the eye of the storm has an immediate benefit and there is no longer any distance between the work and its results, as is shown in the diagram below illustrating the approach.

## The Eye



'The Eye' approach begins by locating the community's energy and working with an existing branch that is already being 'fed' by the community. The fact that it existed before the project began is a guarantee that it is relevant to the community. The new knowledge, skills and improved relationships will be used to feed an existing branch which

embodies a relevant aspect of the community's lives. After seeing the fruit of their work growing on this branch, the community will be inspired to use the acquired skills to work on other branches that need similar attention, not necessarily by replicating the organisation's approach but by doing things differently because they have changed those attitudes and behaviours that they feel no longer serve them well.

## **Implementing the approach**

The approach of working with existing community issues has been one that CCMT has used in interventions that have been carried out in the Midlands Province since 2009. The organisation, in an effort to ensure that the service they are offering the community is relevant, responds to requests made by the community for CCMT's services.

In Midlands, the work began with a research into conflict issues that were occurring in three districts. The findings of the research were compiled and presented to district leaders. The district leaders confirmed the findings of the research and requested CCMT to assist them with specific conflict issues that they felt they would need assistance with. It could be said that the organisation had, through the research, identified existing branches on the tree. The communities were clear that they felt that some of the identified conflicts were too sensitive for the organisation to deal with. This was understandable as the approach the organisation was using was new and in the political environment prevailing in Zimbabwe at that time trust between the organisation and the district authorities needed to be built.

Once the existing conflicts had been identified, the organisation went on to carry out consultations with the stakeholders to the





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different conflicts as a preliminary action towards bringing the relevant community actors together into a dialogue space, the safe space within the eye of the storm. In this way the organisation would be working with a tangible issue that was already receiving community attention and energy. What the organisation's intervention was designed to do was to try and change the attention and energy being given to the conflict issue from being negative to being positive.

During the intervention process, which may have consisted of any variety of activities including training, exchange visits or dialogue platforms, attitudes changed, new skills and knowledge were learnt as the community members worked towards the resolution of their existing problems. As they went through this process they were evaluating the old practices against the new and as they did so they changed what they felt needed changing in their behaviour and attitudes and kept what they felt was still helpful. In this way parts of the existing branch were being pruned and new shoots began to grow on that same branch.

As the community worked through their conflict issue using both the old and new ways of doing things, they saw positive results as their lives improved or certain aspects of their community began to function better as a result of their direct efforts. These tangible results were then what inspired the community to work on other issues in their community because they saw that the branch they had worked on had begun to bear healthy fruit that they could see, touch and smell.

An example of such an intervention by CCMT is the New Gato community story, where a community worked to resolve a conflict

between the school administration and parents over the non-payment of school fees. CCMT facilitated a dialogue process that brought together all parties to the conflict and after several dialogue meetings, the conflict was resolved. After its resolution, the community went on to deal with other community issues on their own using the skills, attitudes and behaviours they had acquired during the process of resolving the conflict over school fees.

CCMT learnt through the New Gato case and other similar interventions that sustaining a project does not necessarily constitute replicating processes that would have been carried out by the organisation or that it is about keeping a project running in the same way as was done during the funding cycle. It is about a community taking what they need from the process and using it in a way that sustains the positive aspects of their lives or more precisely creating positive experiences for their community as a result of using certain skills and knowledge that they have seen can benefit them. Where a direct link exists between the work of the organisation and the tangible benefit for the community, motivation exists for the community to take their new attitudes forward without continued support and external funding.

### **Conclusion**

The area of peace building is an area where practitioners have convinced themselves that the benefits of an intervention can only be seen after many years and only after a critical mass of like minded people has been reached and communities having been transformed. This will continue to be true where interventions are carried out in 'laboratories', a distance from where the conflict exists. A particular target group within a community is



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trained here, so that they can resolve something that is over there. There is need to begin to situate peace building work within the conflict issue itself and not outside of it. To pass on the skills and knowledge through the experience of transforming real conflicts so that communities can immediately reap the rewards of changed attitudes and behaviours.

Peace building organisations should not see their workshops, seminars and dialogues as products that are an end in themselves, because what takes place in these activities is not enough to inspire the community to sustain the project or the work beyond an organisation's intervention. What will inspire sustainability is not the activity that is carried out by the organisation but the tangible result that comes out of that activity. The functioning school, improved service delivery or fairer regulations are the fruits that will inspire a community to continue using their new knowledge and skills.

CCMT's work with the associations succeeded in keeping up the momentum beyond the workshops by supporting the work of the associations within their communities. However, this sustained support fell short of what was required to sustain the work with the dialogue platforms without the organisation's support. Six of the ten associations are still functional and working in various ways in their communities, some providing mediation services and others linking in with other NGO initiatives taking place in their communities. Individuals within the associations remain an invaluable resource to CCMT as they assist the organisation respond to requests in other communities. However none of the associations has the financial capacity to convene dialogues and carry out the activities

that the organisation had envisioned they would after the project life span.

What CCMT has learnt from this experience is that in order for conflict transformation work to be owned and sustained by communities beyond the project or intervention, the work must be situated within issues that are real and relevant to the communities. CCMT is confident that in this way branch by branch any community can eventually transform itself.