

WHAT DOES CONFLICT RESOLUTION MEANT? CAN IT BE RESOLVED?

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This piece of writing attempts to distinguish between the different concepts that deal with handling conflict----conflict resolution, conflict management, and conflict prevention thereby briefly presents arguments by different scholars in subject as to whether or not conflict is really resolved or not.

The United States Institute of Peace (2011:17) defines conflict resolution as efforts to address the underlying causes of a conflict by finding common interests and overarching goals. Conflict resolution includes fostering positive attitudes and generating trust through reconciliation initiatives, and building or strengthening the institutions and processes through which the parties interact peacefully.

Conflict resolution is an attempt to deal with the root causes of conflict and eliminating them by altering and restructuring the institutions, forces and systems that perpetuate such conflicts. Conflict resolution is a broad term which implies that the deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed, and resolved. This implies that behavior is no longer violent, attitudes are no longer hostile, and the structure of the conflict has been changed (Khannas and Kueck Gert. eds., 2003; Jeong, 2000). Resolution prevents the reappearance of future conflict by fulfilling the needs of all parties. Notably, conflict seen as inherent in the social system can be eliminated only through structural changes. ‘Conflict resolution has been a central part of the work towards building peace, promoting development and consolidating regional cooperation and democratic efforts/processes’ (Jeong, 2000).

Making a sharp distinction between conflict resolution and conflict management, Osaghae states that, the notion of resolution implies a once and for all treatment of conflicts, while management implies that conflicts cannot be disposed of in one fell swoop. As to him, while resolution suggests that conflicts can be dealt with in a rational comprehensive way, management presupposes that they are best approached from the incrementalist’s stand point. Obviously, says Osaghae, the management approach is more discerning of the dynamic nature of ethnic conflicts and conflict situations: the fact that conflicts are usually complex and that the “resolution” of one conflict could result in emerging another, the actors and issues in conflict are forever changing form and character, and that supposedly different conflicts (ethnic, religious or class conflict) are linked in important ways. Moreover, the management approach presents a more continuous strategy for dealing with conflicts and the hope is that if disagreements at the level of basic competitions can be minimized, then the scope for conflicts will be reduced (Osaghae, 1996:173). Conflict management also supports the longer-term development of societal systems and institutions that enhance good governance,

rule of law, security, economic sustainability, and social well-being, which helps prevent future conflicts (USIP, 2011:17).

Conflict prevention, on the other hand, is aimed at controlling the escalation or re-escalation of violent conflict (Jeong, 2000:168). Preventing and resolving conflict before it ends into violence is far less costly, both in human and financial terms, than reacting to it once it has occurred. Action to address the fundamental causes of conflict include strengthening good governance, improving the condition of human rights, economic and social development, demolition of armaments and developing a culture of peace (Susan, 2008). Conflict prevention can also be described as actions, policies, procedures or institutions undertaken particularly in vulnerable places and times so as to avoid the threat or use of armed forces and related forms of coercion by state or groups. Conflict prevention can take place in two conditions: 1) when there is no violent conflict in recent years, but significant signals of violence; and 2) when there has been a recent violent but peace is being restored, conflict prevention in this case aims to avoid a relapse of violence (Lund, 1997).

According to the Organization for economic cooperation and Development (OECD), a decade ago, conflict prevention was referred only to actions undertaken in the short term to reduce manifest tensions and to prevent the outbreak of violence. But these days it includes long and short term activities and responses. It addresses built in capacities of societies to deal with conflicting interests without resort to violence. It also extends to the management of conflicts with destabilizing potentials. Such work helps in delegitimizing the belief that violence is an inevitable or acceptable way of resolving conflicts, making nonviolent options known and more attractive, addressing structural and immediate causes and reducing vulnerability to triggers. The goal is not to prevent all conflict. Some conflict is normal, unavoidable and often leads to bring about positive change (OECD, 2008: 16).

Despite the availability of different method by which conflicts are handled and the performance of extremely elaborated rituals to mark conflict resolution, some scholars argue that conflicts are not often resolved. Colson (1995:80) criticized the assumption that conflicts are resolved and led to harmony. As to him some societies focus upon the issue at stake rather than the social relationship of the disputants in dealing with conflicts. They often resort to law for they simply seek remedies for their ills rather than to restore lasting peace and harmony. Thus, for Colson, though followed by rituals, negotiation and adjudication “have much less success in convincing contenders that they are in the wrong and they do little or nothing to heal ruptured social relationships or abate anger and contempt.” Bell (1992, in Alexander, 1997) repudiated the idea that a ritual resolves social tension and conflict. She argues that a ritual simply offers a temporary solution. Kopytoff (1980 in Colson, 1995:69) also presents that anthropologists wrongly attribute a great healing power to rituals, where as the actors do not. For the participants, rituals are not what they purport to be. Similarly, Bartels (1984:35) argues that rites are expressions of the ideal moral behavior, which people often fail short of (Dejene, 2007:13).

Observing the fact that conflict erupted and ‘resolved’ twice in the 1990s in Gedeo-Guji localities of south Ethiopia, and the recurrent prevalence of tension and suspicion among the groups in the area, one of my informants in the area expressed the view that there was not as such a genuine conflict resolution. The practice of *gondoro* (traditional ritual to ending blood enmity), and the oath of ancestors (to protect each other and not to kill one another among

the Gedeo and Guji), the establishment of joint peace and security committees between the two peoples in different adjacent *kebeles* (lowest level administration), districts, and *zones* (sub regional administrations) would not guarantee lasting peace and mutual confidence among the groups. What now exists is a relative peace. The people didn't go back to the kind of relationship they had before the 1990s bloodshed.

There is of course a substantial support for the views of the above informant. One can see from Weyesa Megera's study on the 2006 conflict between Borana and Guji-Oromo (Southern Ethiopia), that after the conflict is reportedly 'resolved', there is still conflict in the area. Accordingly, Weyesa concludes his study with the following statements:

Indeed various efforts have been made beginning from the outbreak of the conflict in an attempt to manage it. These efforts involved both the traditional and the government institutions. The attempts basically involved organizing conferences both before and after the conflict occurred and interventions from concerned bodies. The most important of the efforts made is the serious of conferences at Allona which finally passed at resolution consisting of eleven elements one of which reads: 'if one kills a person, he/she will pay thirty cows in addition to being presented before the court and whoever steals a cow pays five cows.' After the 'resolution' is made it seems that there is a relative peace in the area even though there are still some incidence of violence and looting... (Weyesa, 2011:80).

The publication of the United States' Institute of Peace (2011:17) seems in favor of the above assertion. The writing states as follows: "...conflicts are a normal part of human interaction and are rarely completely resolved or eliminated, but they can be managed by such measures as negotiation, mediation, conciliation, and arbitration."

In line with the above arguments, the pluralist society theory (often referred as pessimistic view) maintains the view that there is no solution to ethnic conflict, or it is not possible to bring about inter-ethnic peace and harmony. The pluralist theorists argue that, there is incompatibility of interests among different ethnic groups in a given state. Consequently, a multi ethnic state is fated to conflict and fall down if external forces do not interfere to save it (Ryan, 1995). Pluralist theory supposes that wherever there is ethnic division, there is a conflict of interest, and wherever there is conflict among ethnic identities, there will be a collapse of such a society into different states (Hssien, 2004:21). Schellenberg too argues that 'neither peaceful nor violent mechanisms of conflict resolution can always completely resolve issues. As to him, even though decisions are made and agreements are arrived at, the parties often complain and feel that it has been unjustly treated' (Schellenberg, 1996:122).

Against the pluralist theory, the consociationists (often called optimistic theory) believe that it is possible to preserve peace and stability among multi-ethnic states where various ethnic groups live in harmony. According to this perspective, inter-ethnic problems could be resolved internally under a democratic political environment. In a condition where by governments/policy makers avoid discriminatory course of action, one could hope to see conflicts resolved genuinely (Hussien, 2004). Hussien is of the view that there is no relationship between the degree of ethnic diversity and ethnic conflict. The mere existence of ethnic diversity in a country could not be cause for ethnic conflict. He says, ethnic conflict is rather basically the outcome of, among others, discriminatory government policies which

favor some ethnic groups while marginalizing others. Apart from this, compromise and accommodation as pattern of inter-ethnic relations can contribute to mitigate and resolve ethnic conflict through a peaceful means (ibid).

Peter Wallensteen also strongly argues that conflicts are solvable. He says this is not necessarily an idealistic or optimistic position. Rather it is a realistic proposition. Most actors in conflicts will find themselves in need of negotiations at one time or another. Even if a conflict results in war and destruction, there may have been other options and alternative paths for the conflict. There are frequent statements on the inevitability of conflict, violence and war. Indeed, finding solutions may often be difficult. This difficulty not only arises out of political constraints, but can also be due to a lack of insight or imagination. There are also views of the desirability and even necessity of violence and war. Unbearable conditions or impossible threats may make such opinions understandable. Too often, however, the results of war negate the very hope for a better future that may initially have motivated the war. Few wars follow the paths anticipated by the actors. Short wars may avoid such pitfalls, but who is to guarantee that a war will be short? Many wars have started from this premise. Afterwards, it will be asked: were all avenues used to find a peaceful solution prior to the initiation of war? Only after this can be convincingly proven do the arguments of inevitability and desirability approach validity. Thus, the determined search for a solution is not only a moral question; it is also a rational one. As to Wallensteen this is the sole way in which a free society will be prepared to accept the strains of war. Indeed, if conflicts are exposed to such early challenges, solutions may actually be found, even in unexpected situations. Thus, conflicts are solvable and there are many and varied experiences of such solution (Wallensteen, 2002: 13)

In conclusion, though the existence of various ethnic groups in a country could not explain the intensity of conflict, once conflict occurred in such diverse countries (particularly along ethnic lines), it is difficult or challenging to handle it. The former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia are recent and living examples in this case. Though arguable, several researchers still agree that 'under conducive political circumstance where the root causes of conflict are identified and addressed properly, it is possible to resolve a social conflict, which, of course, includes ethnic ones' (Rugumamu, 2000; Gouden, 2000; Vanhanen, 1999 in Hussien, 2004). Conflict resolution is not necessarily identical with peace. There is considerable overlap, however, as most notions of peace are based on the *absence or ending of war*. Though we dare not say conflict is resolved if it does not include an end to armed war/struggle, it is not sufficient that it *only* contains the ending of fighting. Conflict resolution is more than the limited definition of peace. It is more than the absence of war. The broader understandings of what peace includes the presence of cooperation, justice and integration (Wallensteen, 2002:10).The important thing one needs to note is, conflict resolution entails tolerance, respect for other's culture and way of life, appreciation of differences, willingness to admit blunder and commitment to learn from past experiences, and readiness to give and take i.e., not a 'zero-sum-game', where the gain of some becomes or felt to be the loss of others.

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