Berghof
Research Center
Forschungszentrum
for Constructive
für konstruktive
Conflict Management
Konfliktbearbeitung

The Role of Development Aid in Conflict Transformation: Facilitating Empowerment Processes and Community Building

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1. Introduction

This chapter will look into both the theoretical assumptions and expectations, as well as the practical experiences, of empowerment approaches within the field of development aid, with special regard to their potential for conflict transformation. The authors build upon the recent discourse in development policy that discusses the extent to which development cooperation can effectively contribute towards crisis prevention and conflict transformation.

The contemporary debate on the role of development aid as a contribution to conflict transformation focuses primarily on the relative strengths and weaknesses of three inter-related approaches:

- The *do-no-harm* approach developed by Anderson (1999), primarily aims to avoid doing more harm than good, and is vitally concerned with the unintended negative impacts of development aid, pointing out that these often tend to aggravate conflict rather than contribute to its resolution. This approach builds upon the experiences of a comprehensive field study conducted by the American NGO Collaborative for Development Action (CDA) in 13 conflict regions in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.
- The *local capacities for peace* approach (Anderson 1999; Heinrich 1999) seeks to identify potential entry points for conflict transformation through development aid, and recommends that external donor agencies should focus on supporting local capacities for peace. This concept implies that peace cannot be imposed from outside but must be achieved from within a society.
- The *discourse on peace and conflict impact assessment* (PCIA) (*see* the contribution of Mark Hoffman in this volume; Bush 1998; Ross & Rothman 1999) stresses the need for a thorough analysis of the conflict context. From this it develops a methodology for the assessment and evaluation of peace and conflict impact that offers a framework for peacebuilding.

This chapter will focus on the practical experience of traditional relief and development projects working on complex emergencies in the field of community development. As the authors explore the nexus between conflict transformation on the one hand and participatory and empowerment approaches on the other, they will critically assess the potential of common empowerment approaches within community building not only to avoid doing harm but also to make a substantive contribution to conflict transformation at the local level. The empirical base of the chapter lies within participatory research and in the experiences of bilateral and multilateral development cooperation in the war-torn areas of Sri Lanka.

Sections II and III will explore recent aspects of the conflict transformation discourse, paying particular attention to conclusions that might be drawn concerning the role of development aid in complex emergencies. Sections IV and V introduce some common participatory and empowerment approaches within the field of community development, delineating their theoretical objectives as well as their practical implementation. Section VI critically discusses possible spaces

of action, as well as constraints, dilemmas and ambivalences for the facilitation of empowerment processes through development aid within complex emergencies. The authors conclude with future prospects on the potentials, constraints and ambivalence of empowerment approaches and recommend a more political role for development aid in complex emergencies as it engages in more inclusive community building through processes of empowerment and recognition.

2. Track III Strategies and the Role of Development Cooperation

The current discussion of conflict interventions contains three principal discourses, each focusing on different levels and practices, building upon different theoretical discussions, understandings of conflict and each recommending different strategies for action (*see* the contribution of Cordula Reimann in this volume; Miall, Ramsbotham, Woodhouse 1999).

- The *conflict settlement* discourse deals with all strategies which are oriented to an outcome in the form of an agreement between the conflict parties which might enable them to end an armed conflict, but without necessarily addressing the underlying conflict causes. The typical area of practice here – Track I – is primarily reserved for the official and formal activities of diplomatic and governmental actors. It is thus not of particular relevance to this article on development aid.
- The *conflict resolution* discourse concerns itself with process-oriented activities that do aim to address the underlying causes of direct, cultural and structural violence. The area of practice – Track II – is typically represented by non-official and non-coercive activities by non-governmental parties. The instigators of such processes are usually either international and/or local conflict resolution NGOs, with special expertise in citizens diplomacy and civil mediation. They make use of vehicles such as problem-solving workshops, and are supported by academic institutions and civil society groups focused on conflict analysis.
- The *conflict transformation* discourse focuses on long-term peacebuilding efforts oriented to outcomes, processes and also structural changes. They aim at overcoming revealed forms of direct, cultural and structural violence, transforming unjust social relationships and promoting conditions that can help to create cooperative relationships. Here Track III actors, typically local grassroots organisations as well as local and international development agencies and NGOs, address themselves directly to those parties most affected by the effects of violent conflict. They engage in grassroots training, capacity building and empowerment, trauma therapy, human rights, development work and humanitarian assistance.

These three discourses and their intervention strategies are of course strongly interrelated. If they are to build domestic peace constituencies or strategic alliances between the different local, national and international actors, practitioners will need to link activities on all three levels, understanding the three strategies to be mutually integrative and complementary (*see* Reimann, ibid.).

It is the third discourse, on conflict transformation, that is most relevant for the context of development aid in complex emergencies. Further insight on the proper role that development aid should play in the context of proposed interventions designed to contribute to conflict transformation is provided by the Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD/DAC 1997). First, we must distinguish between the different phases and dynamics of conflict, each of which will necessitate different kind of interventions. DAC delineates four interrelated phases:

- situations of *submerged tensions*;
- situations of *rising tensions;*

- eruption phases of *open confrontation and violent conflict;*
- *fragile transitional and post-conflict* situations.

The situation on the ground, however, is usually far more complex (*see* Box 1). Often we experience abrupt shifts from one stage to the other and many countries are characterized by both peace and conflict simultaneously. It therefore seems more appropriate to refer to different conflict contexts or settings, rather than to stable situations which follow one another consecutively according to any sort of predictable logic. Under such conditions, donor agencies will need to be well equipped with appropriate instruments for observing indicators of increasing tension, so that they will be able to adjust flexibly to changing situations.

Box 1: Different conflict contexts or settings

In Sri Lanka, development intervention usually takes place in the war-torn areas in the Northeast, characterized by several different local scenarios. Here there are *uncleared* areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), *cleared* areas under the jurisdiction of the Sri Lankan army, and *semi-uncleared* areas (border areas) in which open conflict continues, especially at night. The situation can change abruptly, within a short time, from rising tension to violent conflict. In other parts of the country, development interventions are made in areas which can be defined as pre-conflict settings (situations of submerged tensions), such as the Estate Sector, with a potential escalation of the identity and labour conflict between Tamil estate workers and Singhalese plantation management. In the south of the country, development projects typically intervene in post-conflict areas. Here there has been no resolution of the root causes for the violent insurrections by the radical left wing party Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which were quashed by government forces.

As these conflict settings are inherently dynamic, the different types of interventions – emergency relief, rehabilitation and development operations – are often occurring simultaneously. It is precisely for this reason that many donor agencies have moved to introduce the concept of development-oriented emergency aid, linking relief with medium-term and long-term development efforts. Especially with a view to impacting on conflict transformation, these agencies now seek to take a more holistic approach towards mainstreaming peacebuilding within the traditional mandates of humanitarian assistance, poverty alleviation and sustainable development (*see* the contribution of Mark Hoffman in this volume).

In the DAC Guidelines (OECD/DAC 1997, p9), the role of development aid in complex emergencies is defined as follows:

> *Development cooperation efforts should strive for an environment of structural stability as a basis for sustainable development. An environment of structural stability is one in which there are dynamic and representative social and political structures capable of managing change and resolving disputes without resort of violence. (...) over the long term, it can contribute to alleviating the root causes of conflict and help to develop institutions capable of managing and resolving disputes in a peaceful manner.*

Development interventions should be focused on improving the general economic and social climate in partner countries, supporting measures to improve the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state, as well as aiding the emergence of a strong civil society. The promotion of democratic structural stability as a basis for sustainable development is thus facilitated through the introduction of participatory and empowerment approaches into project work. The overall aim is the integration

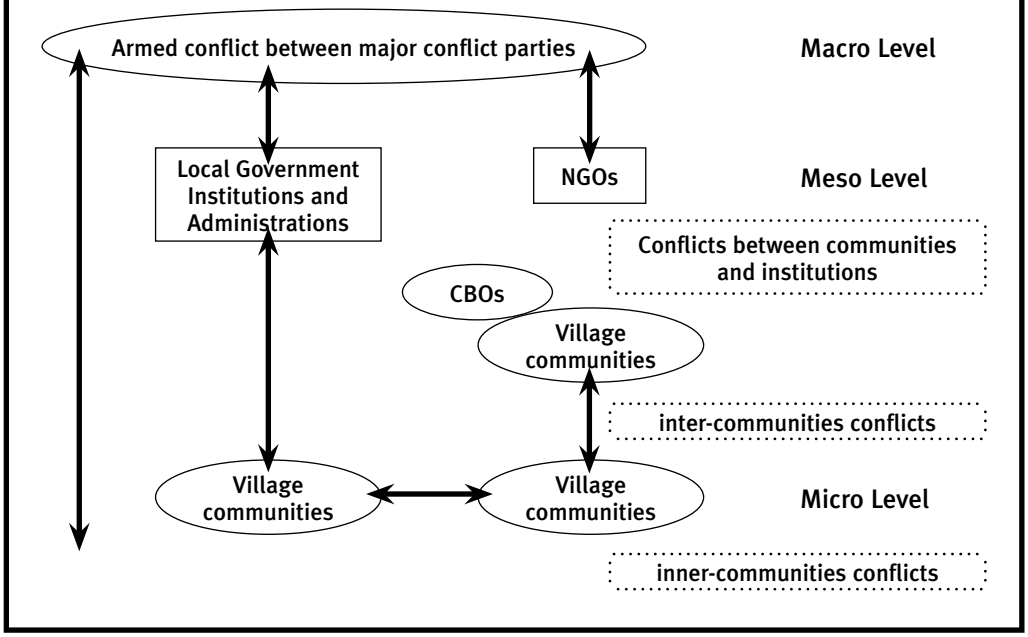
of various societal groups – especially those that have been marginalized or who act as a firewall against violence, such as women and youth – into the decision-making processes of local development planning and negotiation. These development interventions also aim to develop institutions and mechanisms which are essential to the accommodation of competing interests within the society, as well as to the peaceful management of socio-political disputes (ibid., p18). The DAC guidelines go on to say „Promoting democratization is seen as a complex, gradual, and participatory process whereby citizens, civil society, and the state create a set of norms, values, and institutions to mediate their relationship in a predictable, representative and fair manner" (ibid., p38).

This means that development aid will need to be aimed at different levels, including the community level with its community-based organisations and the meso-level of local government institutions and NGOs, while at the same time also considering the macro dimension of the conflict context for the overall strategy of intervention. It must actively promote participation in mainstream society, but also work to support NGOs, community-based organisations (CBOs) and local government institutions, helping them to become more capable and responsive to their constituencies. Figure 1 shows the different conflict dimensions of development intervention, highlighting the interrelationship of the macro-conflict and village communities.

The DAC Guidelines (ibid., p52) stress the ongoing need for long-term support of peacebuilding and reconciliation at the community level, as well as simultaneous and continuing efforts to strengthen the peacebuilding elements of good governance on the regional institutional level.

Before looking more closely at participatory and empowerment approaches commonly used for community building, the theoretical underpinnings of conflict transformation should be discussed in more detail, especially exploring the extent to which the logic of (local) empowerment is consistent with the logic of development agencies.

Figure 1: The Interrelationship of the Macro-Conflict and Village Communities



3. The Logic of (Local) Empowerment and the Logic of Development Agencies

The term conflict management is often used as an umbrella concept for all the outcome-oriented approaches, and the authors follow the same practice in this chapter. Conflict transformation, on the other hand, usually incorporates a shift from the logic of conflict management to a logic based on (local) empowerment. The theoretical assumptions of this shift have some implications for the role of development aid in complex emergencies. Particularly relevant is the question of the extent to which the assumed logic of (local) empowerment is consistent with the demonstrated logic of development agencies.

3.1 The Logic of Management

One useful framework for the analysis of conflict intervention is provided by Rothman and Friedman (2001). This approach distinguishes between different frames of conflict: resource conflicts, interest conflict and identity conflicts. The distinction follows the logic of the three different conflict discourses introduced above (conflict settlement, conflict resolution and conflict transformation). The point is not that there are three different types of conflicts, but rather that each conflict will evidence dimensions of all three frames. The most obvious dimensions in any conflict rather depends on how one understands and looks at them.

- The *frame of resource conflict* sees conflicts as a struggle over claims to scarce status, power and resources. Conflict is perceived to be a negative force, such as a threat or a disease. It is a natural consequence of competition among individuals and groups over material goods, economic benefits, property and power. Within this frame, the alternative to violence can only be the settling of the conflict through some sort of negotiation or bargaining process, which continues until the resources have been redistributed to the mutual satisfaction of all involved parties. The outcome is usually some sort of win/lose or compromise situation. It is problematic that, within this resource frame, underlying causes of the conflict remain and have not been dealt with, and deeper problems that are ignored may well later erupt.
- The *interest frame of conflict* rejects the notion of competitive resource framing. Although conflicts may be couched in terms of demands for resources, expressed bargaining positions are simply more or less concrete expressions of interests, which one can redefine as „needs, desires, and fears“ (Fisher and Ury 1981). The *alternative dispute resolution* school of thought has developed a process of interest-based bargaining, which focuses upon articulating what each party is truly and legitimately seeking and then employs creative methods for working together with opponents to maximize the degree to which the interests of both sides can be satisfied.
- The *identity conflict frame* has emerged largely from longstanding efforts to deal with intractable ethnic conflict, and it appeals for alternative approaches to the static power-politics model of international diplomacy (Rothman and Friedman 2001, p590). Here conflict is recognized as a natural outgrowth of each party‘s needs, desires, concerns, and fears.

The interest frame provides a more optimistic view of conflict. Engaging in such a discussion will usually help the conflicting parties to clarify their own interests and perceptions, as well as to better understand those of the other side. The main criticism of this frame is, that, although it appears to be more successful in its efforts to find mutually satisfactory agreements, interest-based

conflict resolution can often obscure the underlying nature of conflict. This kind of conflict resolution does focus on changing individual and collective action strategies, but leaves the underlying values and norms of each of the parties fundamentally unchanged.

Both the resource frame (conflict settlement discourse) and the interest frame (conflict resolution discourse) contain in them a certain logic of conflict management. In this analysis, we assume that any final resolution of the conflicts is unrealistic. The focus of the effort must therefore be on management and containment, and on trying to find constructive ways to bring opponents together, aiming to reach a compromise or win/win situation in which violence may then be laid aside (*see* the contribution of Hugh Miall in this volume). The more successful conflict resolution discourse focuses on re-framing positions and on identifying win/win situations, while still trying to manage the conflicts in this way. The logic of conflict management is a fundamentally pragmatic recipe for dealing with conflicts, not necessarily seeking out root causes of the conflict and the underlying values, norms and fears of the conflict parties.

3.2 The Logic of (Local) Empowerment

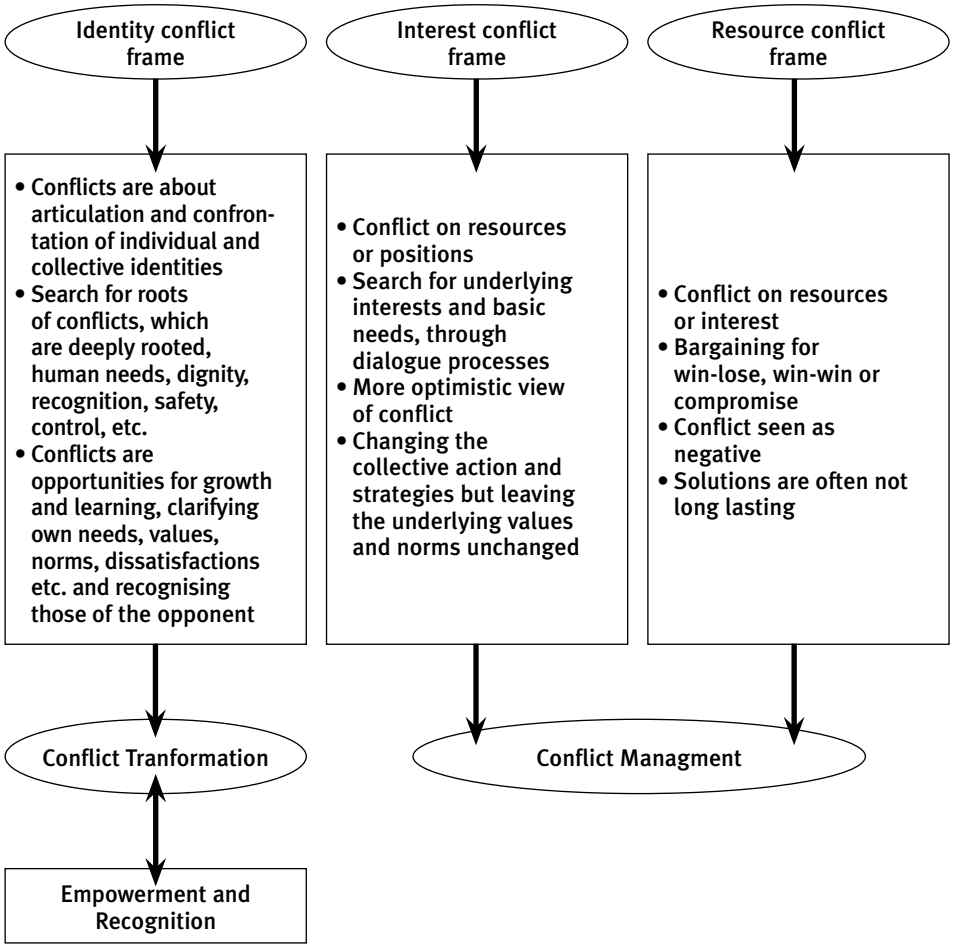
Rothman and Friedman's third frame, that of *identity* (critical for any conflict transformation discourse) involves a paradigm shift away from the logic of conflict management towards a logic of (local) empowerment. This model recognizes that the most intractable conflicts are really about the articulation and confrontation of individual and collective *identities*. Such conflicts find their source in threats to or the frustration of deeply rooted human needs such as dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy (Azar 1990; Burton 1990). Analysts working within the identity frame do not see conflicts as problems to be resolved, or even managed. Rather, they argue that they offer opportunities for growth, adaptation and learning (Lederach 1995). Conflicts can lead all parties to clarify for themselves their needs and values, and can thus help them to better understand just what causes them dissatisfaction and satisfaction (Baruch Bush and Folger 1994).

Conflict engagement must therefore involve reflexive dialogue, in which parties to the conflict speak openly about their needs and values in the presence of their adversaries, well before any kind of negotiation can be expected to succeed. *Recognition* and *empowerment* are key processes. Through the recognition of others' articulation and assertion of self, conflict thus provides an opportunity for mutual transformation and empowerment (ibid.). From the perspective of the identity frame, the goal of intervention is not just to reach agreements or solutions. Rather, the process of engagement in conflict is seen as an opportunity for challenging the status quo (including the parties themselves), building on local capacities for peace in the process (Rothman & Friedman 2001, p592).

The logic of (local) empowerment puts the emphasis on bottom-up strategies which aim at nothing less than the support for or even generation of local struggles for social justice and hence for radical, structural change. Conflict transformation thus builds upon the theoretical framework of non-violent action, and sees conflict as a non-violent struggle for social justice. Non-violent struggle, expressed through demonstrations, strikes or non-cooperation is a concrete manifestation of peoples' power to bring about social and structural change.

Protracted violent conflicts in the conflict transformation discourse are therefore perceived as the natural consequence of unequal and repressive social and political structures. „Dealing effectively with it (violent conflict), therefore, will call for the *empowerment and recognition* of marginalized groups in the form of non-violent struggle. Only in this way will it be possible to deal with issues of immediate concern at the local level, or to put the appropriate pressure on Track I (and Track II) actors,

Figure 2: Empowerment and Recognition
in the light of different Conflict Frames and Discourses



to end the violence and enter into good-faith negotiations“ (Reimann in this volume). Track III strategies put the civilian population, so far largely excluded from the discussion, and its potential for non-violent struggle at centre-stage. It thus becomes a key player in the local peace process.

What is convincing about the conflict transformation approach is its outcome, process and change orientation:

- The ultimate aim of conflict transformation is to achieve a settlement on substantive issues raised by the underlying needs and fears of the conflict parties (*outcome orientation*). This has two direct implications:
- First, *process orientation*, which means that the intervenors will need to materially change mutually negative conflict attitudes and values among the parties in order to enable cooperation and communication between them;
- Second, *change orientation*, which recognizes the political imperative to create a new infrastructure for empowerment and recognition of underprivileged groups, thus fostering and enabling true social justice beyond the concerns of the parties directly involved in conflict (ibid.).

The conflict transformation approach, depending as it does on a logic of (local) empowerment, can be seen as an open-ended, long-term, multi-track and dynamic process, one

which thereby significantly widens the scope of actors involved. Since they understand that the satisfaction of basic needs on the personal and relational levels will not be sufficient to truly transform the conflict, practitioners must also work on the larger goal of achieving equal access to resources and assembling the infrastructure that will make it possible to address larger structural inequalities, with the aim of longer-term social reconstruction and reconciliation (ibid.).

Rothman and Friedman (2001, p593) point out that the resource frame and interest frames of conflict continue to dominate the thinking of many practitioners and researchers, and that this conventional wisdom continues to limit new thinking and the development of more innovative approaches. In general, the experts continue to favour strategies of conflict avoidance or reduction, instead of actively working with the underlying causes of conflicts, and digging down to better understand underlying norms, values, concerns, and fears. The identity frame reminds us that successful conflict interventions will need to first create opportunities and spaces for communication and dialogue, and then facilitate processes of mutual recognition and empowerment.

Figure 2 illustrates this nexus between the conflict frames and strategies towards empowerment. While empowerment and recognition are of course both means and ends of conflict transformation, conflict management does not necessarily focus on the empowerment of conflict parties.

3.3 The Logic of Development Agencies

The DAC Guidelines for Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation have delineated the role of development aid in facilitating more fully participatory and empowerment processes. In the concept paper of German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), the principal strategies for conflict prevention and conflict management are a) creation of structural stability and b) promotion of conflict-transforming competences of the relevant groups and institutions (GTZ 2001). The latter calls for participatory processes which will stimulate empowerment of certain groups or capacity-building for institutions. Development-oriented emergency aid interventions should thus usually be executed by professionals trained in participatory and empowerment approaches, such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) or social mobilization, (*see* following section).

It would certainly seem that the requirements of the conflict transformation strategy can be well met by development aid, unless the rhetoric of development policy is different from the practical experience of implementation. However we will argue that the logic of development agencies – and especially of bi-lateral donors – fits far better with the logic of conflict management than it does with the logic of (local) empowerment. Under the pressure of budget allocation and fund disbursement schedules, donor agencies will naturally tend to become more oriented towards outcome than process and change. Empowerment will therefore be often understood only instrumentally, causing project managers to integrate people into the implementation of projects, without granting them essential decision-making power in important questions such as budget allocation. Conflicts at the community or intra-community level which impede the implementation of projects will mainly be seen as obstacles or delaying factors, problems which need to be eliminated as quickly as possible.

Any effort to find an acceptable compromise between competing groups through conflict management is therefore much more likely to employ the logic of development agencies. They will fall short of the logic of a long-term facilitation of difficult empowerment and recognition processes, in that they fail to search for underlying roots of conflicts, which explore the values, norms and fears of the groups involved. As in-depth impact evaluation of projects is often neglected, donor agencies will all too often follow a simple implementation path, without giving particular emphasis to the

question of the sustainable impact of the projects.

Project management and staff will often be caught in an endless process of analysing the local problems and immediately constructing short-term solutions, without spending much time talking to the local population and listening to their opinion. There is a very real danger that donor agencies will in the end impose solutions instead of creating spaces for local capacity building and decision-making.

In the worst cases, donor agencies will organize themselves internally in a very hierarchical and un-democratic manner, failing to integrate local field staff in important decision-making processes. With this kind of structure, it is rather questionable whether these agencies will be able to stimulate democratic processes and empowerment of groups, given that they have proved themselves unable to incorporate even basic democratic rules into their own internal procedures.

Let us look now at the theoretical conception and practical implementation of common participatory and empowerment approaches of development aid, so that we will then be able to assess critically their potential for contributing to conflict transformation.

4. Empowerment in the Light of Different Discourses

What exactly does *empowerment* mean in the context of the development-oriented discourse? What definitions are commonly in use and, more importantly, how can empowerment processes be successfully operationalised into practical action? Let us look once again at the ways in which empowerment is defined in the conflict transformation discourse, especially as compared with the development aid discussion. What can development cooperation learn from notions of empowerment as developed in the mediation discourse that might help further its own activities and actions in complex political emergencies?

In the *conflict transformation discourse*, the root causes of violent conflicts are seen to arise from unsatisfied human needs, as well as from unequal and repressive social and political structures which result in the deep dissatisfaction of marginalized groups. Empowerment must therefore first address unequal power relations, aiming to balance them with the intention to achieve greater social justice.

Barach Bush and Folger (1994, pp85-87) define empowerment within the transformative conflict mediation discourse as follows:

> *A party is empowered by gaining new awareness and understanding of (1) its goals (including underlying values, norms, fears), (2) its options, (3) its skills, (4) its resources, and (5) its decision-making, and is able to utilise these new insights in mediation and negotiation.*

Empowerment is first of all a process of supported self-reflection for improved action. It is not limited to the context of current mediation, but also enables the party to engage productively in future negotiations and conflict settlements. In transformative mediation, the complementary element to empowerment is recognition. In unmediated conflicts, parties are often primarily focused on self-protection and are therefore often on the defensive. They are thus largely unable to look beyond their own interests. Parties achieve recognition in mediation when they manage to expand their perspective to include an appreciation for another‘s situation.

This emphasis on the interrelatedness of empowerment and recognition implies a process of dialogue and active listening to what the opponent is saying. The recognition of interests, needs, fears and values of an opponent is a process, one which at the same time helps to clarify one‘s own interests, needs and values, leading to empowerment through recognition. For the other, being

recognized contributes to a general feeling of being valued, and this is often the first step towards a tenable compromise. It is precisely this aspect of recognition that is all too often missing within the development-oriented empowerment discourse.

The *development-oriented* discourse assumes for its empowerment approaches that the major reason for poverty is the oppression or exploitation of the poorest by the more powerful. This implies that power relations must constitute an important part of the explanation of any lack of development in a society. The term empowerment in fact, originates from the social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, such as, for example, the black power movement in the United States and the emancipation movement in Latin America influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1972).

At the third World Conference on Women in 1985 in Nairobi, the Womens' Network DAWN also introduced the term into their discourse on development and women's politics (Sen & Grown 1988). Dawn's definition of empowerment examines the relation between power and development within the existing development paradigm, and criticizes existing power relations between gender, race, class and nations, excoriating control and power which is based on discrimination and the repression of individuals and groups. Empowerment is understood to be a vision and a process of individual autonomy and transformation of a society towards more just and equal relations. As the empowerment process takes hold, the oppressed develop their own power to change the society. It is this individual process of awareness building, as well as the collective process of the empowerment of oppressed groups as a whole, which leads to overall social transformation.

It is clear that this definition of empowerment bears significant potential for revolution, as it refuses to accept existing power structures and calls for substantial change. It is natural that those NGOs which have their roots in social movements will operate from this understanding of empowerment processes in development. Their work is primarily political, and focuses on the raising of awareness in the most vulnerable groups, as well as on public demonstrations and campaigns for the rights of the oppressed. Today, although the term empowerment has become quite fashionable within the development discourse and is now a constituent part of the rhetoric of most bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, it has for the most part been denuded of its revolutionary content, and is used in a purely instrumental fashion, viz. as a means to improve the sustainability of project impacts and to reduce project costs.

All in all, however, the term empowerment remains vague. The key question is still the ways and the extent to which the empowerment approach is actually put into practice in the context of the provision of development aid. At first sight, it seems that empowerment is often understood as little more than some sort of process of building the capacities of marginalized groups. We would point instead to the need to distinguish clearly empowerment on the one hand and capacity building on the other.

Capacity building, under our definition, refers to the transfer of knowledge to individuals or groups with the intention of enabling them to carry out certain activities. It includes raising awareness, training and other forms of human resource development. Capacity building is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for empowerment. Empowerment, which always occurs in the context of the local social system, implies an increase in the relative power and ability of disadvantaged groups in their specific socio-political environment. Empowerment strategies must therefore address the needs of both the individuals and the groups that are to be empowered, as well as the larger strategic groups which dominate and determine the governance structure and institutional arrangements. Effective empowerment of vulnerable disadvantaged groups will thus be a natural outcome of both the capacity building of the disadvantaged, and the reform of

oppressive rules and practices.

The concept of recognition, so familiar in mediation and alternative dispute resolution, is also essential to the success of empowerment strategies in community development. Intra-community and inter-community resource allocation and dispute resolution will always go beyond simply solving the issue, requiring that all parties involved be recognized as fully-fledged negotiating partners. This will often call for the services of a neutral and skilled person to facilitate the process. The development discourse has further emphasised that empowerment is always a process embedded in a larger and more complex societal system, so that it is not sufficient to strengthen individuals or groups without at the same time also encouraging the development of conducive institutional arrangements and governance structures.

In the following section, we assess some participatory development approaches that are currently being applied in development cooperation, especially with regard to their potential for empowering disadvantaged groups in less developed countries. Section 6 will then discuss implementation, examining the potential and constraints of participatory development approaches for any effort to contribute to meaningful conflict transformation.

5. Participation and Empowerment Approaches within the Context of Community Development

The terms participation and empowerment have now become orthodox in mainstream development cooperation; virtually all major bilateral and multilateral development agencies have adopted this rhetoric. The danger is, of course, that the term participation has by now been reduced to a slogan or label used only to attract donor funding. We must therefore define the terms carefully, looking especially at how they are best used in the context of community development.

Robert Chambers (1995, p30), one of the leading scholars advocating participatory approaches, has identified three ways in which participation can be used in the context of development cooperation:

- as a cosmetic label to embellish virtually any proposal, mainly to satisfy donor agencies;
- as a co-opting practice for mobilizing labour and reducing costs: communities contribute ‚their' labour in ‚our' project;
- to describe an empowerment process which enables local people to analyse their own situation, to take command, to gain confidence and to make their own decisions.

We distinguish between two different schools of thought. Some view participation principally as a means or instrument to improve project sustainability. The expectation is that, by encouraging involvement of the target groups in their own development activities and through their direct contribution to project costs, people will take ownership and thus themselves sustain the development process and maintain any assets which are created. Others argue that participation should be an end in itself: that the processes of participation should lead to an increase in decision-making power on the local level. Here empowerment, and not the physical project outcomes, becomes the major objective of participatory approaches.

Caroline Moser (1993, p101) also points to this difference between participation as a means for an increase of efficiency and cost sharing and participation as an end in itself towards empowerment:

> *Where participation is a means, it generally becomes a form of mobilization to get things done. This can equally be state-directed, top-down mobilization, sometimes enforced,*

to achieve specific objectives, or bottom-up „voluntary" community-based mobilization to obtain a large share of resources. Where participation is identified as an end in itself, the objective is not a fixed, quantified development goal, but a process, the outcome of which is an increasingly ‚meaningful' participation in the development process.

The critical question is how the approach is put into practice. Who participates in which activities, in which manner and why? Such participation can take various forms as is indicated in the following typology for the ranking of different levels of intensity of participation (adapted from Pretty et al. 1995):

- Passive participation as recipients (relief);
- Extractive participation through information giving (e.g. in surveys);
- Participation by consultation (getting informed about ongoing or planned activities);
- Participation for material incentives (providing resources in return for incentives);
- Functional participation (forming groups to meet predetermined objectives);
- Interactive participation (joint analysis with external support for collective action);
- Self-mobilization (initiatives are taken independent of external institutions).

Community development projects often seek to achieve empowerment through a well-balanced combination of input and process. On the one hand, the project provides incentives, material and funds for local collective action. On the other hand, local institutions and organisations are strengthened through the capacity building of staff. In practice, empowerment in community development is largely aimed at gaining the active participation of target groups in planning and implementing donor-funded village projects.

The facilitation of joint planning and decision-making and local management of project implementation also aim to stimulate a process of social learning. Community development makes use of a variety of instruments in this effort. We find two of *particular interest – participatory rural appraisal* (PRA) (*see* Box 2) and *social mobilization* (*see* Box 3) – both commonly propagated in the South Asian context and partly seen as complementary, partly as antagonistic to one another.

The advocates of the social mobilization approach often question the PRA approach on the grounds that it is social engineering which focuses on tools rather than on long-term processes. They suggest that true empowerment of disadvantaged groups demands a longer-term approach, one that goes beyond a one-week village workshop. PRA scholars emphasise, on the other hand, that a PRA village workshop can only be one small step in a long-term process of engagement involving negotiation, bargaining, dialogue and conflict resolution (Shah & Shah 1995). It is a necessary but not a sufficient instrument for the empowerment of vulnerable groups.

Box 2: Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) a term which commonly refers to a family of approaches, methods and behaviours that enables people to express and analyse the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan themselves what action to take, and to monitor and evaluate the results. The term is confusing and utilised under a variety of synonyms, such as Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), Participatory Needs Assessment (PNA) etc. The key elements of PRA are the methods used and the behaviour and attitudes of those who facilitate it.

Methods:

PRA employs methods to enable people to express and share information, and to stimulate discussion and analysis. Visual techniques enhance creativity, cross-checking information and encourage exchange of views. Using a combination of PRA tools enables the construction of a more comprehensive picture of the complexity and diversity of village life.

Common tools are:
- mapping;
- flow diagrams;
- seasonal calendars;
- matrices and grids;
- village transect walk.

The tools are applied during group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

Facilitation:

Facilitators support the local population, helping them to do the analysis, investigation, and finally planning on their own. Information is shared between villagers and outsiders (planners, field workers) and among villagers themselves. PRA is often carried out in the form of village workshops: external facilitators join villagers for a few days to jointly carry out a PRA.

Behaviour and Attitudes:

The change in attitudes and roles of external facilitators and project planners is even more important than the methods. Chambers talks about ‚handing over the stick' from outsiders to insiders, i.e. the villagers themselves. PRA facilitators should act as convenors and catalysts, but without dominating the process. They must show respect, take time, be open and self-critical. They need to gain confidence that local people are capable of carrying out their own analysis.

(Sources: Institute for Development Studies 1995; Chambers 1994a, 1995; Chambers & Guijt 1995)

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is best understood as a ‚philosophy of development planning' or ‚family of approaches', that enables people to express and analyse the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan for themselves what actions to take, and then to monitor and evaluate the results. Usually, the identification of development problems and basic needs in a given area and the subsequent planning of projects would start with a workshop at the specific location. In that exercise, a PRA team of several members and one moderator would facilitate a process of joint analysis and learning, using different tools such as flow diagrams and village transect walks in order to construct a comprehensive picture of the complexity and diversity of village life.

The local population must always take ownership of such a process, analysing their own reality and planning their own priority projects. PRA therefore will always make every effort to involve all the relevant social groups (women, youth, village leaders etc.), especially those that have been marginalized or neglected. The outcome of the PRA is not only the detailed development plan with its list of priority projects, but rather the process of joint learning itself, one which hopefully will also enable the local population to take on the responsibility for the development of their own village/environment.

Understood in this way, PRA indeed seems to be an eminently suitable way to stimulate an empowerment process at the local level. In reality, however, it is often implemented fairly mechanically, as PRA tools are used in the village purely in an effort to collect information, without much emphasis on the stimulation of any kind of process in which villagers actively take part in and are granted decision-making power for follow-up. All too often, researchers borrow PRA tools and use them only to collect data and information from the local level, without feeding back any results to the villagers. It is therefore not surprising that, in many rural areas, local residents become suspicious as soon as they see a PRA team entering their village. They are simply unwilling to spend any more time working with tools with no visible payback for them

(Korf 2000a).

The term is also used to mean the strengthening of local organisational capacities, human resources and civic institutions, which then in turn reinforce the coping mechanisms of conflict-affected communities, leading the way towards participatory development (Sachithanandam 1996, p867). A social mobilizer, who can be either a person employed by the NGO or a selected village representative, acts as a facilitator (catalyst), stimulating group formation for collective action. In the South Asian context, social mobilization has become quite fashionable, and is now widely used by government institutions, bilateral donor agencies, as well as NGOs. It is understood differently by its various users, but often its employment is quite apolitical and practical. People are mobilized for group formation primarily in order to get projects implemented in a more efficient manner, without spending too much time on awareness creating and self-organisation.

Box 3: Social Mobilization

Social mobilization is a process of empowerment of vulnerable groups (e.g. the poorest, women, youth, lower castes, ethnic groups, war-affected, refugees etc.) and combines

- awareness creation;
- self-organisation; and
- action;

to improve the social and economic conditions of marginalized, poor people. Peopleform small groups and are made aware of their potential and of the resources available to them, e.g. existing governmental, non-governmental and private services.

Social mobilization therefore involves two dimensions:

- changing the individual, psychological self-perception of vulnerable groups;
- changing the social and economic conditions of the overall situation of exclusion and marginalisation.

Social mobilization is a long-term process:

Many NGO‘s in the South promote empowerment through the employment of trained village volunteers (change agents, or social mobilizers) who live and work in their village or area of origin. Other organisations have trained staff, who work as facilitators or social mobilizers on the community level. These volunteers or social mobilizers encourage poor villagers to form savings and credit groups as a primary cell for further development. Social mobilization focuses on a group-based approach. Over time, the small groups develop into larger ones with more formal structures (community-based organisations), thus strengthening local self-help capacities for collective action and for bargaining with service providers (government departments, NGOs, private businesses).

Social mobilization works through consciousness raising:

The poor are brought into a position where they become able to analyse just why they are poor and which conditions are triggering their poverty and to then identify possible solutions which can enable them to escape from the poverty trap by their own means.

In the discourse of conflict transformation in protracted conflicts, social mobilization brings in another dimension when it comes to human rights for minority groups. Marginalized groups (e.g. ethnic groups, women, low castes) are made aware of their rights to recognise and develop their identity, and consequently participate actively in the political process.

The context of development aid often makes use of both the PRA and social mobilization

approaches. Here social mobilization is understood as the general project approach for getting people involved in planning and implementation and in assuming ownership of the development process of their village, using PRA tools for analysis and project identification. The social mobilizer, usually project staff, facilitate group discussion in order to identify priority projects, focusing on certain vulnerable groups and to identify group leaders who can then be trained by the social mobilizer in leadership or management skills in order to better carry out their duties.

The formulated objective is still the empowerment of the people. The difficulty in practical implementation of this objective is that, all too often, the social mobilizers themselves become ‚heroes on the ground' by organising too much on their own, instead of leaving the ownership to the target groups and just supporting them in their efforts. While this might be more efficient in furthering the outcome of the project, we must also realize that it does undermine any meaningful larger process of local empowerment. As discussed above, the reasons for this bias towards a stronger outcome orientation rather than a process orientation are fundamentally to be found in the management logic of development agencies, although they are sometimes also a result of particular difficulties faced within the project context:

- Stringent fund disbursement schedules require projects to be executed under tight deadlines, and to present visible and quantifiable results within a short period. Such time pressure can be counterproductive for any effort to induce self-help processes on the local level. The impact of empowerment processes is difficult to measure in quantitative terms. How can we reasonably expect a project to demonstrate or prove its success along this dimension?
- Initiating processes of empowerment and societal learning within a community requires highly developed facilitation, communication and negotiation skills. Many development agencies find it difficult to recruit suitable personnel with the relevant knowledge and also the attitudes and behaviour which would be conducive to the encouragement of local initiative.
- Development agencies often put a lot of effort into participatory appraisals (in particular using PRA methods), but are much less clear about what should happen afterwards. When it comes to implementing projects, they then face administrative and capacity constraints, and often cannot follow up the processes they started in the communities. In many countries, villagers feel over-assessed by agencies, and are disappointed when few activities are actually implemented afterwards. Initial enthusiasm during intensive appraisal processes can then easily deteriorate into frustration, which is clearly detrimental to any effort at true empowerment.

Box 4: Project Example – The Integrated Food Security Programme Trincomalee (IFSP) of German Development Cooperation (GTZ)

The Integrated Food Security Programme Trincomalee (IFSP) is currently at work in the Eastern part of Sri Lanka, and pursues a dual project intervention strategy: while community projects generate assets which are useful for the whole community (and often benefit the middle-class and elite more than the vulnerable), the project also implements poverty projects especially geared for these vulnerable groups only (Bauer et al 1999). The project thus offers something to the leaders while at the same time creating bargaining space for specific support to the poorest or most disadvantaged households and individuals within the community.

The project seeks to be as transparent as possible, involving village leaders and the whole community in the identification of vulnerable groups. Since selection always implies that some will inevitably be left out, this is a very delicate task. The project's strategy is to involve village leaders in the whole process, and also to appeal to their sense of social

responsibility for the poor. The project therefore cooperates on the one hand with existing community-based organisations, which are largely dominated by the village elite, as well as with informal action groups, where the vulnerable are better represented.

The project takes a pragmatic approach to empowerment. This „purposive social mobilization" approach (Bigdon & Engel 2000) regards community mobilization as the centrepiece of the project cycle of village activities, starting with the identification of needs and leading up to the planning and implementation of action. Communities are strengthened ‚on the job', i.e. project implementation and community mobilization go hand in hand as an incremental local capacity building process (Korf 2000b). We must realize that this approach abandons any more ambitious concepts of empowering the disadvantaged *against* the existing establishment.

Another challenge for participatory development concepts in the context of development cooperation is achieving a mass impact. Many projects have reached significant results and successes in small ‚project islands' of selected villages or communities, usually as a result of very intensive local interventions. The difficulty lies in expanding such an approach so that it can sensibly be applied to a larger number of villages, and possibly be integrated into the routine procedures of government departments. Here participatory development concepts usually face significant constraints (Bauer & Hoffmann 1997; Blackburn & Holland 1998; Chambers 1994c). Government procedures are rigid in budgeting and timing of projects. Participatory processes and empowerment are, however, unpredictable and sometimes very slow. They can hardly be pressed into formalised procedures without seriously harming the development of self-reliant processes of institution building and collective action.

Regardless of these constraints, it is still essential to keep up the effort for participatory approaches to stimulate local development, not only for efficiency and cost-cutting reasons, but also to overcome dependency and to stimulate self-help and empowerment processes among marginalized groups. Especially in situations of complex emergency, empowerment processes and recognition are the only way to bring about democratisation and to achieve a more inclusive, pluralistic and tolerant society, which is able to resolve its conflicts with non-violent means, as stressed by the DAC Guidelines (OECD/DAC 1997, p39):

> *Participation strengthens civil society and the economy by empowering individuals, communities, and organisations to negotiate with institutions and bureaucracies, thus allowing civil society to influence public policy and to provide a check on the power of government. Participation also aids in dealing with conflicting interests in a peaceful manner. It follows that the creation of a climate and the capacity for constructive interaction between civil society and government is a critical component for long-term peacebuilding.*

Section 6 will therefore look more closely at the spaces for action by development aid to facilitate empowerment processes in situations of complex emergency.

6. Spaces for Action

The major aim of this section is to examine just how far development agencies can intervene effectively in situations of complex emergency, contributing towards the empowerment of particular groups and the development of local communities and promoting inclusive citizenship. The question is

the extent to which there are spaces for action within the context of situations of complex emergency?

Clearly, the objective of most development intervention is structural change: the transformation of unjust social relationships and the promotion of conditions that are most likely to create cooperative relationships. Within the more traditional mandates of most forms of humanitarian assistance, poverty alleviation and sustainable development, these considerations will mean that it is essential that any development interventions:

- Firstly, identify the unjust social relationships (who is marginalized or discriminated against in the local context, how, why and by whom?). In most situations of complex emergency, it is especially important to base these conclusions on a sound analysis of the conflict context, with special regard to its micro- and macro-dimensions as well as on a properly executed needs assessment of marginalized groups. As the ground situation can change very quickly, the local context must be monitored continuously.
- Secondly, formulate a strategy for effective transformation of unjust structures. Here intervenors need to make their own normative assumptions about justice very clear, so that they will be able to act in an accountable and transparent manner, providing a basis for cooperative relationships with local partners.
- Thirdly, develop a plan of action for the promotion of conditions that can create the necessary cooperative relationships, especially among the conflicting parties, but also more generally at any level of project intervention, e.g. the community.

Usually, violent macro-conflicts in a situation of complex emergency will exhibit specific dimensions on which development projects will have no, or at most very limited, influence. These can include the presence of armed personnel, battles on the ground or the general security situation. Project leaders simply have to work within the given circumstances, even if their activities are significantly inhibited by war.

But aid agencies can also affect the context of the intervention. Klem (2001) has introduced a framework for analysis from the perspective of do no harm, that distinguishes between the impact of donor agencies on the *agency component* and on the *structural component* of war. By *agency component*, Klem means the agents that can be held responsible for the war, such as insurgents, the Government, the Armed Forces etc. Without intending to, donor agencies might easily, by their interventions, find themselves strengthening the socio-cultural, economic or political position of one or other warring party.

But both the root and the dynamic causes of most wars also have a *structural component*, such as, for example, the relations between different ethnic communities on the local level, which often make the crucial difference between war and peace. Through their interventions and distribution of resources, donor agencies can have either a positive or negative impact on these structures, widening or narrowing the scope for peaceful relationships at the local level. Box 5 shows some possible negative impacts of project interventions on such structural relations.

Box 5: Negative Impacts of Project Interventions on Structural Relations – Examples from the Northeast of Sri Lanka

In the Northeast of Sri Lanka, development intervention at the community level might easily exacerbate conflicts between ethnic groups living in the same village (e.g. Tamils and Muslims), if only by selecting one group as a target for support.

Project interventions, by channelling resources mainly in Sinhalese areas, can incite attacks of the LTTE on Sinhalese farmer settlements.

Project interventions can create conflicts at the household level when they encourage groups of women to take up income-generating activities, projects which were until then predominantly the domain of men.

Project interventions must also often deal with community-based conflicts with roots in the particular security or war situation, such as, for example, conflicts that can arise between villagers and residents of nearby refugee camps. At first these social conflict are usually non-violent, but always with a potential for violent escalation. The project therefore needs to address them effectively, facilitating conditions that create spaces for dialogue, cooperative relationships and mechanisms for non-violent conflict management. It must recognize that often these conflicts are perceived as simple disagreements over resources, while the critical aspects of identity and recognition are usually neglected.

But what scope of action and spaces for manoeuvre do donor agencies have in facilitating empowerment processes within complex emergencies? What can they realistically do without creating a negative backlash from the agency and structural components of the violent conflict?

The key concern of development agencies is the delivery of support services and advice, as well as finding effective ways to interact with the actors in the local conflict arena without doing any harm (Anderson 1999) and perhaps even managing to contribute to conflict transformation on a local scale. But are empowerment processes within the context of community development conducive to conflict transformation and, thereby, to strengthen local capacities for peace? If the approach based on local capacities for peace is correct in claiming that the first task of a society in conflict is the re-learning of non-violent conflict mitigation mechanisms and the re-establishment of related institutional arrangements, then participatory approaches to community development might indeed be able to support such processes by rebuilding local groups and self-help institutions. In their efforts to facilitate participatory and empowerment processes at the community level in situations of complex emergency, relief and development oriented donor agencies will seek especially to:

- encourage the creation of platforms for discussions (e.g. during the PRA-workshop);
- initiate or strengthen community-based organisations;
- promote the creation of democratic procedures (e.g. through the forming of committees for CBO-management);
- promote the integration of particular interest groups within the village development process (e.g. through the encouragement of women‘s groups, youth groups etc.).

Considering the impact that the experience of protracted war has had on all affected, it is clear that the introduction of participatory and empowerment approaches to situations of conflict is never going to be easy. Actors in conflict areas have usually been long deprived of any kind of decision-making, even in trivial matters which directly affect their daily lives. In particular refugees and internally displaced persons will have long become dependent on relief and thus reduced to passive recipients of welfare.

Under this sort of dependency syndrome, people are increasingly unable to make any kind of decision concerning their own lives. They live in refugee camps which often set strict rules, and subsist on the basis of relief from humanitarian agencies which establish stringent conditions. Warlords and those who hold the monopoly of violence in the area impose their decisions and their regime on the population. Reintegrating people into development processes at the local level can thus provide an essential impetus for the reestablishment of institutional arrangements of civil society and popular participation at the community level.

Sachithanandam (1996, p206) describes a particular situation in which peoples‘ participation in such a process was encouraged by means of a micro-credit and savings project, in which democratic procedures were effectively integrated into newly-founded community-based savings organisations. Here an elected executive committee was made responsible for all major decisions concerning

financial matters, projects and beneficiaries. Under the procedural rules of the committee, different democratic mechanisms, such as regular feed-back, structured supervision and rotating leadership were developed step by step, thus helping to overcome intra-organisational conflicts.

Women were particularly encouraged to participate actively in the committee. In general, the intervenors found that this building of a community-based saving organisation, with adequate checks and balances on power relations between the various functional bodies, and with the use of elected committees indeed ensured that the participation of the local population increased tremendously, bringing about a real sense of ownership amongst the members of the organisation.

Still, any such process of consciousness-raising will require enormous material and human resources over a long period of time, with outcomes that are often not sustainable, if only due to changing ground conditions, especially as regards security, which can force people to leave their homes from one day to the next. It is therefore more than questionable whether such efforts are worthwhile: all too often, they can rather seem like the futile building of sand castles. Some authors would argue, however, that such initiatives are still valuable, if only because they teach people how to build up their own community-based democratic institutions, together with a committed leadership, and also help them to acquire useful managerial skills and knowledge of community and governance structures. Even if they are destroyed, these institutions can usually be rebuilt after tense situations have been defused.

There are also other examples which clearly illustrate the unintentional impacts of local empowerment processes and institutional building at the community level. Klem (2001) describes a savings project of the Dutch NGO, ZOA, working in an uncleared (LTTE-controlled) area of Trincomalee District. While this project was initially intended to empower the most vulnerable war-affected poor by means of a savings and revolving fund mechanism, it later served to bring to light the considerable influence and power of the LTTE on the newly-founded village savings organisation. As time went on, funds were diverted to development projects other than those earmarked by the saving committees, decisions imposed retroactively by the LTTE and effectively superseding the participatory decision-making process of the saving groups. The facilitating donor agency, uncomfortable in the unintended role of indirectly strengthening the LTTE (agency component) when it had really sought to facilitate the empowerment of local groups and structures, faced a real dilemma. Its only alternative, aborting the savings arrangement, was not a reasonable solution, as that would have left the war-affected groups dis-empowered and vulnerable.

Another unintended consequence that Klem cites is the fact that the threats of armed groups, such as the Army or the LTTE, often have more influence on the social structures between communities than can any kind of project intervention. One example of this, from a refugee camp in Trincomalee, was a case in which camp inmates, supported by local communities, demonstrated at army headquarters in an effort to get the dead bodies of their relatives released, after they were shot by the army under suspicion of affiliation with the LTTE. The army reacted by threatening the local population, decreeing that any young man seen on the street after 6.00 p.m. would be shot. Intimidated by this threat, the local community withdrew its support for the refugee camp inmates. Social relations between these two groups deteriorated as a result, and open hostility erupted after the village community had trouble with the army, difficulties for which they blamed the refugee inmates. All of this does raise the question as to whether empowerment processes are even possible in threatening situations or in the context of hierarchical and authoritarian power structures. It would seem that, rather than becoming empowered, the local population will instead come to feel dis-empowered as their room for action is narrowed.

Indeed, in an environment of violence, attempted empowerment processes with local populations can amount to playing with fire. Goodhand & Lewer (1999) have observed in the context of the war-torn area of Sri Lanka that local leaders, and especially social entrepreneurs, are often intimidated by violence, and are very much afraid of being killed or injured. They will therefore be very careful not to expose themselves as local leaders and to become too noticeable, realising that such exposure can make them more vulnerable to militant groups. Thus conflict parties will always be carefully watching to see who initiates which processes in their particular sphere of influence.

The experience of war-torn Sri Lanka shows that development agencies must be very careful to balance the interests of the different parties to the conflict, while at the same time still pursuing their own objectives, such as poverty alleviation, food security or self-help promotion. This will often involve a bargaining process with those groups who possess the means of power and the monopoly of violence in particular areas.

Nevertheless, agencies should also be clear on their exit strategy: To what extent are they prepared to compromise? At what point must they face the fact that they are doing more harm than good, and in effect legitimising and stabilizing particular groups in power? Intervenors must always be conscious of which groups are supported by their efforts and which are left out. They may well find that, in the particular environment of complex political emergencies, it might be necessary to abandon a needs-oriented approach (supporting the poorest regardless of ethnicity) in favour of a more ethnically balanced strategy (Bauer, Bigdon & Korf 2000).

In consideration of the dilemmas that project interventions regularly face when working in situations of complex emergency, Klem (2001) recommends a strategy of „educated pragmatism". Basically, this means taking a feasible position on a case by case basis (pragmatic), while at the same time taking the relevance and complexity of the issues into account (educated). What is important here is that donor agencies must become aware of the dilemmas that they face and carefully decide where to accept compromises and where to stick to formulated core values.

Since conflict situations are invariably unpredictable in nature, projects must also take a flexible (Sachithanandam would call it „unstructured") approach, allowing them to respond to varying immediate needs of the target groups under changing conditions (Sachithanandam, 1996, p206). This can of course be difficult to combine with the management logic of donor agencies.

The ultimate aim of community development work should be the strengthening of institutional arrangements for bargaining, as well as negotiating appropriate and inclusive solutions for collective action, scenarios which also provide opportunities for vulnerable groups to voice their (legitimate) interests. It is also critical that intervenors correctly assess which institutions are strengthened by their actions at the expense of others. Building new structures of community-based organisation can, for instance, weaken other institutions at the village level, such as traditional authorities or official institutions of local governance. Intervenors must carefully consider the role of these bodies within the overall conflict situation. Do they offer potential capacities for peace? Could they be reformed to become more inclusive, e.g. offering space for disadvantaged groups as well?

Also important is the role of the facilitators or social mobilizers. In the ongoing effort to support empowerment processes, a facilitator will sometimes need to act as a mediator, carefully considering the different interest groups in the village. This will also mean that he or she will need to balance inequalities in capabilities of communicating and negotiating in public forums, and to support the efforts of vulnerable groups to defend their cause, always keeping a neutral stance and maintaining the support and confidence of all parties.

This element of trust and acceptance by all the different stakeholders is essential for community facilitators. Most national staff members will come to situations of complex political

emergency with some sort of link to one side or the other in the conflict. This might be due to their affiliation with one ethnic group or social class, or to the membership in a particular political party. In nepotistic regimes and in many civil wars, conflict parties or powerful stakeholders will often interfere with community processes and establish their own representatives and interests at the local level. The power of facilitators will therefore be limited, as they will be afraid to challenge those actors in the bargaining process with specific contacts to political patrons or warlords. The conflict management skills required from facilitators are substantial. They dare not be underestimated, and must be strengthened through regular training and supervision.

Having discussed the key aspects of the nexus between participation, empowerment and conflict transformation, as well as exploring some of the conceptual and practical problems of participatory and empowerment approaches in the context of community development work, we should now attempt a preliminary assessment of the potentials and limitations of these approaches, with particular regard to their role in the context of conflict transformation and local peacebuilding. Such an assessment does not claim to be comprehensive, nor should it be regarded as a blueprint for fieldwork. The points considered in Box 6 are mainly based on experiences of development cooperation in the war zone of Sri Lanka and reflect the particular contextual factors of that complex political emergency.

Ambivalence

Empowerment of some can lead to disempowerment of others (gender, class, ethnicity, caste). Who is then the loser and who is the winner of donor interventions?

- Power asymmetries within donor agencies (expatriate versus local staff) are usually counter-productive to any joint effort to induce and sustain local empowerment processes.
- Participation can support conflict resolution, but can also induce new conflicts or exacerbate existing tension.
- Technical cooperation agencies often regard themselves as apolitical service institutions. They may well be wary of following a participatory approach, as this might involve them in local and regional power struggles, thus exceeding their mandate.
- Every actor in a socio-political system is, to some extent, partial. Development agencies often work through counterpart institutions: to which party in a conflict are they most closely affiliated? Do certain social or ethnic groups dominate an organisation? By choosing to work with some and neglecting others, they can easily be labelled good and bad among the local institutions (Schlichte 2000).

7. Conclusion: Development Agencies as Political Actors in Complex Emergencies

In this chapter, we have discussed the extent to which development agencies can reasonably function as political actors, intervening in situations of complex emergency and contributing towards the empowerment of certain groups and the development of local communities through promotion of inclusive citizenship.

We have reviewed the theoretical foundations of common participatory and empowerment approaches within the context of development projects, and also explored the problem of the fit between the traditional management logic of donor agencies and the requirements of (local) empowerment as stressed by the conflict transformation discourse. The practical implementation of the participatory and empowerment approaches – such as PRA or social mobilization – illustrate the

instrumental understanding of these originally emancipatory approaches in many situations. Understood this way, empowerment is often reduced to the mere integration of people into the planning and implementation of donor projects.

Within situations of complex emergency, intervenors must carefully assess the scope for participatory and empowerment approaches. We illustrated potentials and constraints, success stories, stories of avoiding doing harm and common dilemmas of donor interventions within situations of complex emergency. Especially with these dilemmas in mind, we still want to stress how important it is for donor agencies focussing on conflict transformation to consciously promote empowerment processes and the rebuilding of local democratic institutions, primarily through a strategy of educated pragmatism.

Box 6: Participatory and Empowerment Approaches with Regard to their Impact on Local Conflict Transformation.

Potentials	Constraints
Participatory methods support transparency in decision-making at the community level.	Bargaining processes for project resources or recognition at the community level carry the inherent danger of stimulating new conflicts or of increasing conflict potentials (do harm).
Participatory village workshops (PRA) can provide platforms from which different strategic and social groups can voice their positions. Thus community development can support local bargaining and negotiation processes.	Local field staff and community facilitators can be part of the problem: as part of the societal system they are biased (or are perceived by others as being so) towards specific social, ethnic or political groups and movements.
Participation can contribute to the (re-) establishment of local institutional arrangements and social capital as an asset for building local capacities for peace.	Transparency in negotiation processes is not easy to promote in all cultural settings.
Participatory processes establish a culture of talking as opposed to a culture of violence or patronage.	Authoritarian or hierarchical systems can discourage communicative processes.
Empowerment processes can strengthen vulnerable groups and create a common identity as a basis for voicing own interests and needs (advocacy).	Interference in cultural traditions, on the other hand, can easily be perceived as a colonial imposition of westernised ideas.
Community development through participatory processes can create or (re-) establish links between different levels of the governance system (poor and rich, service providers and communities, different administrative levels).	In many countries, patronage systems provide social security to vulnerable people: the poor depend on support from the local leaders in times of distress. Empowerment might loosen these bonds without providing proper alternatives.
Social mobilizers, as agency staff, can act as external observers. This can help to stabilize ground conditions at the community level and reduce the incidence of human rights violations in situations of protracted conflict.	How do losers of the bargaining process react? Those who feel that they did not get their fair share can threaten to involve one of the conflict parties or political patrons.
	Vested interests of conflict entrepreneurs can counteract initiatives for collective action and empowerment. Conflict parties in a civil war might not be interested in having empowered villagers or may attempt to impose decisions on the village groups, thus undermining their autonomy.

„Democratisation enables the population to articulate its needs and interests and to protect the rights and interests of marginalized groups, and the most vulnerable“ (OECD/DAC 1997, p30). „Donor assistance in this area should be used as part of a wider promotion of just and sustainable development, providing vulnerable and disadvantaged groups with knowledge about their human and legal rights, as well as the rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship“ (ibid., p40).

Empowerment approaches of donor interventions should incorporate many more aspects of recognition to support the development of a truly inclusive citizenship. Such processes of recognition will need to be facilitated beyond the borders of the village community. Donor projects will need to find ways to link the project interventions at the local level with the meso-level of local government institutions and NGOs, always considering the significance of the conflict context for the overall strategy of intervention. Facilitating dialogue forums and promoting cooperative networks at the regional level can also help to stimulate processes of empowerment and recognition, which, in turn, can serve as an entry point for the transformation of some of the principal causes of the macro-conflict.

But a number of open issues remain and finding answers to these questions will require a more detailed analysis of best practices of donor policies within situations of complex emergency, focussing especially on the community as well as the regional and national perspectives of intervention:

- How can donor agencies transcend the limitations of their administrative procedures, achieving more flexibility in their efforts to adopt a logic of (local) empowerment?
- What are best practices for facilitating processes of empowerment and recognition at the community and regional levels in the context of development aid in situations of complex emergency?
- How can agencies then build up the capacities for an educated pragmatism, learning from donor experiences of dealing with the dilemmas faced in situations of complex emergency?

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Various issues of the journal *PLA Notes* (earlier: RRA Notes), which publishes firsthand field experience with PLA. *PLA Notes* is edited by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), London.