

“Frameworkers” and “Circlers” – Exploring Assumptions in Impact Assessment

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1. Introduction¹

This chapter was borne out of a need to bring together two contending constituencies and their arguments about why and how to identify impact in peacebuilding initiatives in practice. The two constituencies, which I call “frameworkers” and “circlers”, involve sets of people who blend across the lines of development and conflict transformation work and possess very different arguments about how to conceptualise and operationalise issues of impact and change in programme design, monitoring and evaluation. The differences matter in a practical sense for workers in international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) because their views often clash during programme design, monitoring and evaluation processes, and leave both sides dissatisfied. The groups also matter for conceptual reasons because they capture unspoken differences that hinder people’s ability to talk clearly about impact and change, what matters, how people “know what they know” about impact and change and, therefore, how they do their peacebuilding work. Unmasking the conceptual debates can improve our ability to speak about and achieve effectiveness and impact.

I receive diverse reactions to the arguments contained here. People who self-identify as circlers are often delighted to find an argument that recognises them. For example, when I raise the topic in a course I co-teach on peacebuilding monitoring, evaluation and learning there is a palpable sense of relief amongst some in the room who question linear causal logic and objective measures. Others, who are frameworker-orientated and work extensively in the field, tend to be open to the arguments below; they want frameworkers to be depicted positively but appreciate that different worldviews operate in the field and believe people need to be aware of differences and able to translate between them where possible. On infrequent occasions, academics steeped in positivist research have read the chapter and been appalled by the discussion regarding alternative worldviews, perceptions of reality and the questioning of causality; they find the suggestions disturbing and counter to their commitment to discover objective truths. Overall, these reactions reinforce for me the importance of identifying and discussing assumptions at work in peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation; they also suggest that there are further issues to be addressed and that I only begin to scratch the surface of the issues presented here.

In this chapter, I begin by outlining the two basic constituencies: frameworkers and circlers. I briefly review the current status of peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation, which continues

¹ This chapter is based on the paper “‘Frameworkers’ and ‘Circlers’: Bringing Together Contending Opinions of Peacebuilding Impact and Change”, presented at the 47th Annual Conference of the International Studies Association, San Diego, March 2006. It was first published in the context of the *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation, Online Version*, in 2007. This updated version additionally reflects some recent changes in peacebuilding evaluation. The issues explored here surfaced during work with colleagues from the Joan B. Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) while working on a monitoring and learning toolkit (Lederach et al. 2007). The toolkit was generously supported by a grant from the United States Institute of Peace. Some of the issues in the chapter were further crystallised during a peacebuilding learning event hosted by Cordaid, in The Hague, November 2005. I would also like to acknowledge and thank my colleagues Susan Hahn, Mark Rogers and the Berghof editing team for their enriching and constructive feedback.

to grow and evolve. This is followed by an analysis of a series of topics that are debated between frameworkers and circlers; some of these topics are debated openly and addressed by other works that examine peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation, and some lie below the surface or are not articulated as debates. The tensions provide insights into the underlying issues that need to be identified in order to be fruitfully addressed. Finally, I present some concrete examples of ways that peacebuilding or other social change orientated programmes have adopted to bridge the positions in practice and identify practices that can strengthen particular areas that are currently under-developed and can benefit programmes.

2. The Contenders: “Logical Frameworkers” and “Complex Circlers”

Before delving into the contending sides, it is important to clarify how the terms peacebuilding and conflict are used in this chapter. Peacebuilding refers to activities that are aimed at improving relationships and addressing root causes of conflict in order to prevent, reduce or recover from violent conflict (Lederach 1997; Fast/Neufeldt 2005). I use the term instead of “conflict sensitivity” (see Barbolet et al. 2005) or “do no harm” (Anderson 1999) in order to note that programmes or projects either have peacebuilding goals as their exclusive aim (such as improving tolerance through interreligious dialogue or culture of peace education in schools), or include peacebuilding components and objectives alongside other development objectives (such as improving relationships between conflicted communities as part of women’s self-help groups).

The term conflict is used here to refer to the perception of mutually incompatible goals between groups of people (Mitchell 1981, 17). The types of conflicts in which international development NGOs are involved tend to be situated at the inter-group (and sometimes intra-group) level, in geographic areas within internationally recognised nation-states. One example is work with Muslim (Moro), Christian and indigenous Lumad communities in Mindanao, Philippines. Peacebuilding activities usually occur when people within communities or sub-regions are divided along ethnic, religious or political identity lines, and the conflicts typically involve a mix of social, political and economic issues.

As already noted, two basic constituencies can be identified for approaches to planning, monitoring and evaluation. They are framed here in oppositional terms in order to highlight the most conceptually troubling differences in opinions and approaches. Fortunately, people do not usually inhabit the polar ice caps of their arguments, a reality to which I return when examining illustrations of work that bridges the divisions in the concluding section of the chapter. It is worth noting that there is significant common ground between the two constituencies: both camps believe that peacebuilding and development work has the capacity to catalyse positive

changes and *impact* peoples' lives, livelihoods and inter-group conflicts. There is a common assumption that constructive change and impact are possible, and that we humans can be at least partial authors of that change.

The first constituency is a group of people I call “frameworkers”. For this group, peacebuilding programme design, as well as monitoring and evaluation systems, is based on linear, cause-effect thinking, or causal chains, and programmes or projects are explicitly laid out with their assumptions in logical frameworks – hence the name. Impact is examined with respect to the degree to which particular activities and their outputs contribute to larger or higher-order objectives and goals (for examples of logical frameworks see Stetson et al. 2004). Indicators for activities, outputs, results or objectives are to be “SMART”, meaning: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (Roche 1999). Logical frameworks are planning tools to help practitioners think through their interventions before they begin. Some of the underlying assumptions embedded within this approach are that we know and can measure impact and progress through objective variables and we can, to a reasonable degree, predict the impact of our programmes during the design stages. For most frameworkers there is also a desire to identify generalisable lessons and indicators that can hold up across a variety of contexts – although there is also an understanding that this is very difficult in conflict contexts (Schmelzle 2005).

The second constituency are “complex circlers”, or more simply “circlers”. This group of people approach peacebuilding using a more elliptical method, are relationship-focused and tend to desire to be flexible and responsive to each situation. Circlers argue that what they are often most interested in is un-measurable; they seek community-based, organic processes and view frameworks as too focused on achieving pre-set outcomes. They do not think that events in conflict environments can be predicted, because events are constructed by multiple, interlocking influences, which at any one moment might be thought of as a “cause” or an “effect” or both intertwined. Causality is therefore not necessarily linear or a “chained” series of events. Circlers are interested in the uniqueness of interventions and communities – they focus on the stories and lessons that emerge from specific cultural, geographic and temporal contexts and do not expect these to be generalisable. Assumptions within this approach include the belief that every situation is unique, lessons are not transferable, planning has limitations and that flexibility is always an asset.

In the work environment, these different approaches lead to unhelpful misunderstandings and criticisms. Circlers often suggest frameworkers are too rigid and western. They fear that the frameworker approach represents a strong bias of western modes of thought that is often inappropriate in the diverse and variegated community contexts in which they work. Frameworkers, on the other hand, suggest circlers are scattered and vague. They fear that circlers do not invest enough time or energy in planning nor thinking critically about what can be accomplished and therefore worry that overall impact and effectiveness are undermined.

3.

The Situation at Present: Increasing Demands for Effectiveness and Results

The field of peacebuilding has aged enough to be asked: “what differences are you making?” And, often a corollary question for donors, “why are we spending money on *these* activities?” This emphasis is particularly heavy in agencies that utilise logical frameworks for planning, and is part of a trend towards more business-orientated models of investment in the development community. A paper examining organisational learning in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) succinctly notes that: “donors, whilst increasingly requiring evidence of impact and learning, still use the delivery of outputs and financial probity as the bottom line measure for their ‘return on investment’” (Britton 2005, 5). Many sectors report results utilising sets of indicators and expect peacebuilding – a newer programmatic addition – to do the same.

Since 2000, the Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) project has taken peace practitioners to task for relying too heavily on the arguments against assessing impact, as well as for the supposition that good intentions were enough. Mary Anderson and Lara Olson (2003, 10) challenged:

“All of the good peace work being done should be adding up to more than it is. The potential of these multiple efforts is not fully realized. Practitioners know that, so long as people continue to suffer the consequences of unresolved conflicts, there is urgency for everyone to do better.

So, in spite of the real limitations and constraints, the question of effectiveness is high on the agenda of peace practitioners. It is posed in several ways: How do we do what we do better, with more effect, with better effect? How do we know that the work we do for peace is worthwhile? What, in fact, are the results of our work for the people on whose behalf, or with whom, we work?”

The call for accountability to the people “on whose behalf or with whom” we work is one that resonated with both frameworkers and circlers – who want to be as effective as possible.

The calls to show effectiveness were heard. Considerable energy and attention in peacebuilding were devoted to the whole spectrum of planning, monitoring and evaluation of peacebuilding impact since 2000.

Early work focused on laying out the terrain in Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA). The Berghof Research Center hosted an initial series of debates and articles about PCIA issues on their website between 2000 and 2003. These articles and the ensuing scholar-practitioner dialogue were updated in 2005 and since revisited (see for example, Chigas/Woodrow 2009). Key issues raised included: ownership in evaluation processes, the level and quality of evaluation and assessment, micro-meso-macro linkage difficulties, whether or not to develop standard sets of indicators (although there is general agreement that indicators are useful) and a recognition of a lacking coherence of theories, hypotheses or assumptions in

peacebuilding (Schmelzle 2005, 5). There were reviews of early lessons, concerns and strategies by Cheyanne Church and Julie Shouldice (2003), and the *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* dedicated a full issue to the topic of evaluation in 2005.²

A series of different types of user-focused tools emerged shortly thereafter. In 2006, Social Impact (Sartorius/Carver 2006) assembled a large set of tools for monitoring and evaluating fragile states and peacebuilding programming. Also that year, Cheyanne Church and Mark Rogers (2006) completed *Designing for Results* for Search for Common Ground, which is a large introductory volume to design, monitoring and evaluation that discusses theories of change and advocates a learning orientation within conflict transformation practice. In 2007, Thania Paffenholz and Luc Reyckler (2005, 2007) completed a volume on evaluation and peace and conflict assessment; their approach was designed to link impact analysis to implementation processes by integrating a four-part analysis (needs, relevance, risks and effects) for conflict and peace assessment within standard aid planning or evaluation. That same year, colleagues and I finished a small book called *Reflective Peacebuilding*, which aims to assist NGO field workers and local civil society members in implementing a learning approach to monitoring and evaluation (Lederach et al. 2007).

More recently, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) produced for review new *Guidance on Evaluating Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities* (2008). This work integrates DAC evaluation criteria (relevance, efficiency, impact, effectiveness, sustainability and coherence) with a conflict sensitive approach and the challenges of peacebuilding contexts. The net result is a work that continues to uphold a business-model of development, but also emphasises the importance of articulating theories of change in peacebuilding work, and an awareness of ways in which conflict contexts affect projects. It also provides helpful suggestions for ways that an evaluation process can be sensitive and responsive to conflict while applying DAC criteria. Mary Anderson's organisation CDA worked with OECD-DAC on the new guidance, and the influence of findings from the RPP project case studies and subsequent work are evident (Anderson et al. 2004).

If we look at the general proliferation of work, we see that the newest developments generally use and suggest monitoring and evaluation procedures that fit the frameworker approach, with some specific caveats for conflict contexts. They are designed to help peacebuilders grapple with the challenges of monitoring and evaluation by utilising cause-effect logic and are accompanied by a focus on objective measures. While the original RPP efforts were circler-friendly with a focus on intensive case studies, the more recent work to field-test criteria of effectiveness involves a careful analysis of causal processes and utilises systems thinking to capture feedback loops within conflict systems that generally move more closely to frameworker thinking.

There is no shortage of significant challenges for frameworkers or circlers to address in determining impact, as well as to engage in good design, monitoring and evaluation for peacebuilding.

² As did *New Routes. A Journal of Peace Research and Action* in 2008. See also Cheyanne Scharbatke-Church in this volume.

The daunting list of concerns includes:³

1. *Time dimensions of change.* Change processes tend to be long and cyclical in nature, whereas programme or project interventions tend to be short in duration (1-2 years), and therefore "impact" may be negligible in the short-term, project life-cycle but build up over time.
2. *Complex social changes require complex interventions.* Most conflicts are multidimensional in nature and involve multiple actors. The settings are dynamic, fluid and often prone to violence. This means they are not easily controlled nor easily predicted, which limits the ability of anyone to foresee the types of changes they can achieve during a project's lifetime. Further, there are difficulties in determining exactly what can be attributed to one particular intervention in a complex environment – the "attribution issue".
3. *Measurement concerns.* There are a number of issues with respect to measurement. First, the data that is used to determine changes, such as "increased trust", often rely on self-reports of sensitive information, which can be highly unreliable. Second, many dimensions and the changes sought, such as trust, are highly contextualised and vary in terms of how they might be identified from one place to another. Third, there is a sense that quantitative indicators do not always capture the most important dimensions in programming; to use a purported Albert Einstein quote: "not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted". Finally, partial successes often make important contributions to processes, and we often are not very good at identifying these partial or mid-level points.
4. *Peacebuilding processes are sensitive.* Often impact is linked to the perceived authenticity of relationships. The roles and reputations that peacebuilders have are themselves difficult to measure and maintain (including issues such as integrity, impartiality and credibility) and external evaluators – if they are not careful – can threaten that relationship.
5. *Stakeholder perspectives differ.* Donors often use short-term time frames for financial reporting systems and financial accountability. Reporting, therefore, reflects outputs and activities, rather than some of the other important changes that programme personnel see in practice.
6. *Funding.* There is not always funding available for engaging in quality monitoring or evaluation. Recent efforts both address some of these difficulties and reinforce the challenges. As an example of the former, the OECD-DAC criteria highlight the need for coherence between peacebuilding efforts and other policy instruments, which to some degree addresses the issue of the need for complex interventions. This approach suggests there may be multiple interventions by different actors needed simultaneously and that these can be coordinated. An example of findings that reinforce the challenges of frameworker monitoring and evaluation comes from the recent CDA Listening Project – a sister project to the RPP. The Listening Project finds evidence that suggests that not only do stakeholder perspectives differ, but that the business model of development, with its emphasis on efficiency and results-based management, undermines relationships, leads to hasty planning, wasteful programme expenditures, short-term attention and conveys messages of disrespect to local communities (CDA 2008). Given the abundance of difficulties, perhaps it is not necessary to raise or highlight the nagging problems

³ Contributions to this list come from Culbertson 2005; Schmelzle 2005; Church/Shouldice 2002, 2003; Anderson/Olson 2003; Lederach 2005; Lederach et al. 2007 and personal experience.

between circlers and frameworkers as frameworkers are really just beginning to grasp and respond to the many difficulties. However, if we leave the tensions unarticulated and unaddressed they will continue to lead to unhelpful interactions within practice and we may actually undercut the potential to maximise success in our efforts.

One of the central circler concerns summarised by Beatrix Schmelzle (2005, 7), which builds on Kenneth Bush's critiques, suggests that important issues are largely being neglected:

“...by using methods or processes that are scientific, verbal, logical and linear, we have to be aware that we are opting for one system of meaning, power, and culture, and not another. By opening our set of methods or processes, we may contribute to shifting meaning, power and culture. PCIA [Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment] becomes ‘political’ in a different sense. Such openness, though, runs counter to calls for common frameworks, comparable results and strategic coherence.”

When we make the choice for adopting a full frameworker approach – which is where many funders and practitioners are headed – we need to be consciously aware that there are particular worldviews we are invoking and that we may lose something in the process. The question remains: what precisely may we be losing when we are only listening to frameworkers and not to circlers?⁴

4. Articulating Assumptions

Within the frameworker and circler constituencies there are a series of assumptions about how the world works and how we come to know things about our world, which have implications for what is seen as most important during intervention design, monitoring and evaluation. The assumptions are connected to an older debate about “epistemology” and “ontology” in research and philosophy. It is a debate that is rooted in beliefs about *how the world works* and the *nature of being*, known as one's ontology.⁵ It is also grounded in beliefs about *how we come to know things about the world*, or one's epistemology – which is connected to one's ontology because how we discover things about the world is related to our beliefs of how the world works.⁶ These debates suggest deeper tensions than are often raised by practical, action-orientated frameworkers and circlers. However, issues about reality, and how we come to know things about it, lurk behind the practical debates.

4 I approach the frameworker-circler tension from the perspective of having worked with both frameworkers and circlers and see both as useful and valid approaches that respond to particular needs. However, as frameworkers eclipse circlers, I fear we will lose a lot and therefore frame this chapter to explore what may be lost and what might be added to frameworkers to try to get “the best of both worlds”.

5 Ontology is formally defined as “a particular theory about the nature of being or kinds of things that have existence”. It is also used to refer to a particular branch of metaphysics that focuses on “the nature and relations of being” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary copyright 2005-2006, available at www.m-w.com/dictionary/ontology).

6 Epistemology refers to “the study or a theory of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary copyright 2005-2006, available at www.m-w.com/dictionary/epistemology).

Table 1 provides a brief comparison between the beliefs and assumptions that underlie the positivist and interpretive approaches to research and knowledge, which are akin to monitoring and evaluation for peacebuilders.

Table 1: Comparison of Positivist and Interpretive Approaches

Beliefs and Assumptions	Positivist Approach	Interpretive Approach
Nature of reality	Reality is single, tangible and objectively given	Realities are socially constructed, there can be multiple constructions and realities, they are accessed through shared meaning
Relationship of knower to the known	Knower and known are independent (dualism)	Knower and known are interactive and inseparable
Possibility of generalisation	Generalisations are possible, and are time- and context-free	Only time- and context-bound working hypotheses are possible
Possibility of causal linkages	There are real causes, that precede or are simultaneous with their effects	All entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects
Role of values	Inquiry is value-free	Inquiry is value-bound
Research methods usually used	Quantitative	Qualitative
Aim of knowledge	Increase predictive understandings of phenomena	Deep and insightful understanding of phenomena ⁷
Attitudes to field practice or action	Practice and research inquiry are separate enterprises	Research is a type of practice that affects the context and can be a deliberate intervention strategy (action research)

Source: adapted from Lincoln/Guba 1985.

When we look at this table, we can see that the frameworker approach aligns quite closely with a positivist epistemology, while the circler approach aligns closely with the interpretive epistemology. For example, positivists are looking for findings that can be generalised while interpretivists are looking for time-bound and localised findings. Positivists argue there are clear causes and consequences while interpretivists argue things are mutually shaped and it is not possible to distinguish cause from effect. Or, positivists believe that the researcher can ask questions and study phenomena without invoking their values, whereas interpretivists argue

⁷ This description comes from Schwandt (1999, 454) who suggests that qualitative methodologies tend to seek "... the truth of the best account possible. It is the truth that is disclosed by the better – the more perspicuous, the more coherent, the more insightful – of competing interpretations. If there is a kind of cognitive power to be had by doing qualitative inquiry, then it is the power of refining our ordinary understanding of our practices of teaching, healing, managing, learning and so forth, rather than any leap out of the lived reality of those practices".

that inquiry always involves values, such as selecting which questions to ask and which phenomena to study. We can see that these positivist-interpretive debates are easily translated into peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation terminology and debates: is it possible or useful to discover general yet meaningful indicators or programme interventions? Are external evaluators needed because they are “unbiased”? What is the best way to structure monitoring and evaluation processes for peacebuilding projects?

Table 1 is useful because it gives us some hooks upon which to hang articles of the frameworker and circler perspectives to sharpen our understanding of their differences. I should note that the debate is not entirely aligned; at times circlers will use frameworker phrases and suggest specific cause and effect relationships, or frameworkers will agree that certain issues like trust are very contextual in how they are manifested. Therefore, I will link the tensions between frameworkers and circlers to points of the above debate as they come into play in a peacebuilding work context and try not to over-stretch the analogy while nevertheless exploring real differences.

5. Frameworker versus Circler: What the Tensions Tell Us

As noted above, the frameworker approach is gaining dominance amongst many NGOs. There are some very positive aspects of the frameworker approach, which contribute to its popularity. With it, we feel like we gain an assurance that we can identify and track progress – we get numbers and can measure frequencies and magnitudes. There is an optimism that is built into the belief that when we identify objective measures, this will lead to universal patterns and lessons to improve our work in the future not only in one locale, but in many locales – an optimism that, just as we grow crops or markets, we can grow more peace. Logical frameworks are also a planning tool that can be used to articulate indicators for baseline data collection. The framework approach, if used well, pushes us to think through our actions and programming during the planning phase; to explore and articulate why we do what we do, and what we hope to gain by it. If programmes are not meeting their objectives, managers need to identify problems during monitoring and adjust accordingly to improve practices; managers need to say what is wrong and identify ways to respond more appropriately. This is often referred to as “are we doing things right?” Which is followed by the larger question: “are we doing the right things?” – this latter question is intended to be asked iteratively and raised both during strategic planning as well as final evaluations. The frameworker approach helps development agencies plan, check and make sure they are accountable for their operations, which are important functions.

The question must be asked: what do we lose by only adopting the ascendant frameworker approach? Or, to reframe, what issues are circlers raising that are critically important and not

adequately addressed in the current frameworker approach? And, if there are significant or critical issues, are there ways to bring the two together in practice in environments where frameworks are part of regular operations? In order to explore these questions, it is important to identify and then probe the areas of significant tension between circlers and frameworkers.

Circlers in NGOs often instinctively react against logical frameworks. For example, I have heard people argue that logical frameworks are unable to account for the type of change that peacebuilding practitioners are looking for, or that they cannot fit the worldviews of local communities, or that people are worried that the framework will blindly force them into one course of action and they will not be able to respond to changing situations on the ground. Somewhat more formal warnings have come in the form of arguments around issues of power, complexity, change and the ability of people to respond to moments of serendipity (see Bush 2005; Earle 2002; Lederach 2005). While these issues have been raised in various ways in peacebuilding, let me suggest that they have not been pulled together in a way that helps frameworkers fully engage with the debate or identify particular suggestions for practice that can improve or replace the framework approach adequately. We also need to weed out arguments that are made in the name of circler approaches, but really often demonstrate inadequate reflection about the nature of change processes in peacebuilding or a lack of painstaking thinking on how to address the many challenges that confront practitioners.

I have encountered at least four critical tensions where the circler approach challenges and potentially enriches the frameworker approach, which have related epistemological components. The four issues are:

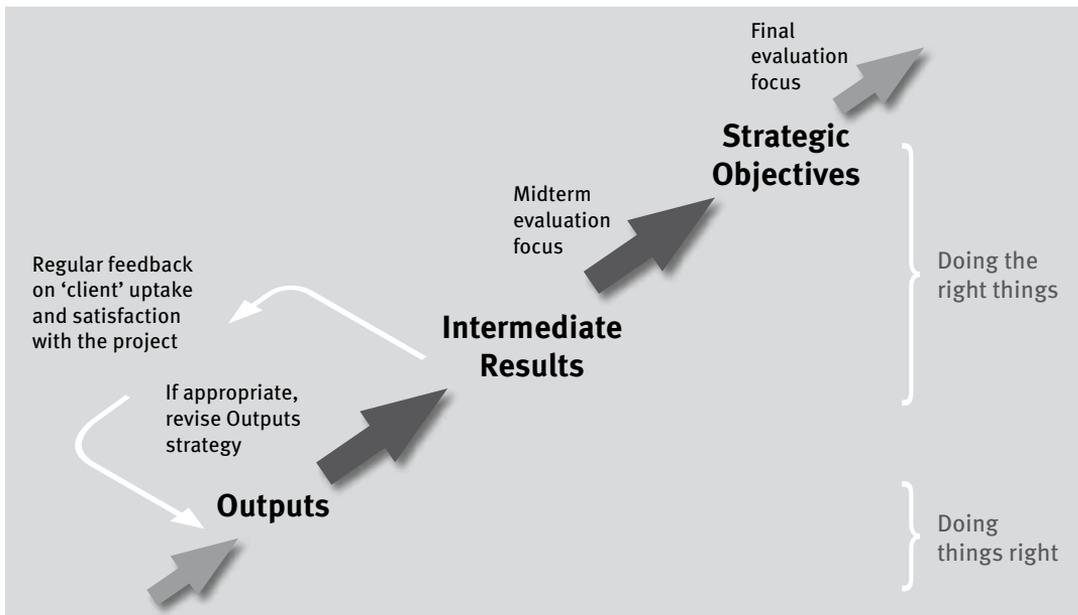
1. *Creativity in action*, which relates to our ability to be responsive and context-relevant in peacebuilding practice and is rooted in epistemological concerns of causal linkages and prediction versus understanding (the fourth and seventh categories in the "beliefs and assumptions" column in *Table 1*, above);
2. *Purpose of determining peacebuilding impact*, which relates to epistemological concerns of findings being generalisable (and replicable) versus the localised and time-bound nature of working hypotheses in peacebuilding (the third category in *Table 1*);
3. *Power dimensions and impacts on relationships* in peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation work, which is connected to the relationship between the "knower and known" as well as differing opinions of the role of values in monitoring and evaluation processes (the second and fifth categories in *Table 1*);
4. *Content and nature of the phenomena* we interact with in peacebuilding work, which is rooted in our understandings of the nature of reality itself, and how we come to know things about that reality (the first category in *Table 1*).

Each of these four areas of tension, along with the concerns that circlers raise, are explored below, and suggestions are made for addressing the tensions in practice.

5.1 Creativity in Action

One of the concerns that circlers identify is a concern that logical frameworks, and extensive planning, limit the ability of peace workers to be flexible, dynamic and, most importantly, creative in practice. John Paul Lederach, for example, is a strong supporter of the link between art and peacebuilding and the art of social change (e.g. Lederach 2005). There are two related concerns embedded here. One is that the apparently rigid structure and reporting requirements of projects that accompany logical frameworks will constrict and inhibit creative and responsive programmatic change. The second concern is that the linear logic embedded in logframes, together with the predictive nature of logframe construction, will hinder creative responses and engagement.

Diagram 1: Feedback Loops in Logical Frameworks



Source: Stetson et al. 2004.

The former issue – the fear and concern that logical frameworks will cause rigidity – suggests in part a more superficial tension rather than a deeper worldview difference. Where circlers see rigidity, frameworkers see adaptability within the monitoring systems that accompany logical frameworks once fully operational when the information from these systems is utilised properly. Feedback loops, such as that contained in *Diagram 1*, are intended as opportunities to adjust and alter programming and indicators based on situation and context-based information during monitoring. Frameworkers agree that rigidity is bad for programming and support responsive adaptation, as long as the changes are also accompanied by analysis and explanation – which also represents accountability to donors and the grass-roots community. This practice is

suggested to be part of good project or programme management. Frameworkers would also therefore suggest that while the process of developing logical frameworks involves some prediction of outcomes, indicators and programme elements can be changed and adapted if there are good reasons for the change.

The second, more difficult, issue embedded in the argument relates to the linear causality and its associated link with prediction that is captured in logical frameworks. Frameworkers are developed based on if-then logic: if we do X, then Y will happen. The causes precede or occur simultaneously to their effects, which can be objectively determined (a point discussed further below in *section 5.4*). Circlers are concerned that reality does not match this neat division and often argue that there is too much going on to know what we can identify as cause and effect in our programming. This argument is often taken to mean that circlers do not want to do the hard thinking about what might happen as a result of their work. This is sometimes the case; however, it is also the case that there are differences in how frameworkers and circlers see the world that more closely align to the positivist-interpretivist debate. Circlers see an intertwined world, where it is impossible to separate causes from effects and where events and people are under constant change and mutual influence. There is also, often, a third related argument here about worldviews and a suggestion that many worldviews do not see the world in terms of linear causality. However, I will address this issue further below as it relates to power and also to our general perception of the nature of reality (see *section 5.3* and *5.4*).

The tension between views of linear causality and constant mutual influence is significant. Philosophers have long debated the nature of the world and knowledge and still have not reached one simple conclusion with respect to causality, as the interpretivist and positivist debate above indicates. One can see the debate played out within university faculties and on the pages of academic journals. Peacebuilders could engage in these very detailed and extensive debates. However, the frameworkers and circlers I work with tend to be very pragmatic and overwhelmed with many tasks and demands on their time.

Therefore, rather than engage in intensive ontological debates, I would like to propose the following: given the diverse locales and worldviews that exist, as well as the need for practitioners to be accountable and responsive to the range of communities within which they operate and other stakeholders, we need to ensure that different worldviews find space in planning, monitoring and evaluation processes. Both approaches may be right and operate simultaneously.

One way to open the planning, monitoring and evaluation process to diverging worldviews, which is beginning to be used frequently, is using theories of change as a touchstone for identifying how and why things work in programming. It appears that this approach allows circlers to think outside of linear cause-effect boxes and utilise their own language while frameworkers hear and see the potential for linear causality in developing theories of change. Theories of change are becoming an increasingly popular tool in peacebuilding (see Church/Rogers 2006; Lederach et al. 2007). A locally generated theory of change will reflect local knowledge and understandings of how things work. For example, if locals see the spiritual world or ancestors, or what seem to be random events, influencing outcomes, these elements can be captured more easily in a narrative about how change happens than in a logical framework.

Over time, theories of change can be used as a tool to guide reflections on impact in monitoring and evaluation and to review whether or not things appear to be happening as one thought they would, and if so, why, or if not, why not. This approach reflects a monitoring-as-learning and evaluation-as-learning approach (Lederach et al. 2007). Frameworkers can look to *test* theories of change, while circlers can look to reflect on practice and better *understand* what is going on and what they are learning in the process about how to impact change. Scholar-practitioners such as John Paul Lederach or Chris Mitchell have suggested keeping notebooks or diaries of hunches, ideas or hypotheses to assist in the reflection process. Both frameworkers and circlers can use this type of reflection to identify impacts and learn how to improve programming as well as understand the context further.

For example, in Catholic Relief Services' Southeast, East Asia and Pacific Region, peacebuilding programmes have been experimenting in using theories of change to accompany their logical frameworks as a complementary way to explore changes in peacebuilding programmes. This experimentation has occurred within a learning alliance with colleagues at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies (see Lederach et al. 2007; CRS SEAPRO 2004). The CRS programme in Mindanao, Philippines, has established a narrative theory of change that they reflect on outside of the specific indicators they are tracking for the activities and outputs denoted in their logical framework. The two are related, but there is a dimension in their theory of change – spiritual change – that goes beyond their logical framework. While this system is in its early phase of development and still closely tied to a framework, it suggests that we can enhance frameworker processes by utilising more creative approaches, which allow for more diverse worldviews. It is interesting to note that the US Agency for International Development's Office of Conflict Mitigation and Management is now collecting theories of change and requiring that applications for funds include their theories of change. It remains to be seen whether the theory of change approach really does encourage creativity and multiple views of reality over longer periods of time in practice. However, in my own experience, it has potential and has been heartily embraced by both frameworkers and circlers.

5.2

The Purpose of Determining Peacebuilding Impact

The second point of tension, which circlers bring into contrast with frameworkers, centres on the purpose of determining peacebuilding impact. Circlers are concerned that while they may impact one context, and they may learn lessons about how to do good peacebuilding work in that context, their lessons are really only applicable to that one context at that point in time and may not relate to other contexts or even other time periods in that same location. Frameworkers, on the other hand, hope that the actions that produce impacts in one location, or lessons about those actions, will also be applicable or “transferable” to other locations and contexts. This tension is linked to the debate over generalisability and replication versus deep understanding in the positivist-interpretivist debate.

Perhaps the most significant implication that this tension holds for current practice is with respect to the search for global indicators as a way to assess impact. The circler viewpoint suggests that this global search will not produce meaningful information. Circlers argue that insights and knowledge are rooted in specific contexts rather than generalised indicators, which they suggest become so abstract as to be meaningless. Frameworkers disagree. Currently, there are significant efforts afoot, particularly by donor agencies, to identify indicators that will be meaningful across time and place, such as the child mortality indicators that are used in health programming. The circler asks the frameworker if this is the best use of time, particularly when the nature of social change is extremely complex and there are multiple, simultaneously-held and valid worldviews (discussed further in *section 5.4*).

Turning again to practice, it seems that there are creative ways to bridge the divide and allow both views to exist simultaneously. The *Most Significant Change* (MSC) methodology, by Rick Davies and Jessica Dart (2005), holds promise for bridging this particular circler-frameworker tension in practice. MSC is a systematic storytelling, gathering and discernment process that has recently been advocated for programme monitoring and evaluation of activities that have more complex social change goals. An example of a programme's early experimentation with using the MSC is included in *Box 1*. In MSC, stories about change are collected at the field level. A group of stakeholders are selected to systematically review the stories and identify those that are the most significant and best capture the changes or impacts associated with an intervention. In choosing the significant stories, the stakeholders themselves need to identify their definition of what "significant" means as well as the value of these changes that are captured in the stories. The process has the advantage of using specific, grounded stories that circlers argue are where the real learning lies. It also has the potential for higher-level abstractions and analysis that frameworkers seek, and can be the basis for learning lessons across cases, or help identify future indicators of change.

Box 1

Stories and Significant Change

A peacebuilding programme currently piloting the MSC methodology has one staff member working with a partner organisation collecting stories in a particular community. Three members of the partner organisation are collecting about six stories quarterly, with each of the staff members collecting two or three stories. The partner staff members are responsible for ensuring that participants are willing to have their stories told and for gathering basic information about the original storyteller as well as the story itself. Members of the partner organisation and the staff member plan to sit together with two or three representatives from the community every six months and review the 12-15 stories and discuss which stories and which changes within the stories are most significant and result from the project. The group is just starting, but in an exploratory trial they found that they had very different opinions about what makes a story significant. For example, one member thought that the most important change was when someone who was influential gained new skills and applied them. Another member thought that the most significant

change was when a community as a whole resolved a problem in a new and participatory way. The group decided that having the conversation about what was significant while reviewing the stories would help them to better understand the different purposes and hopes that each had for the project. They have decided that they can choose several stories as “significant” to represent the different types of changes that have occurred as a result of the project.

5.3

Power and Relationships in Peacebuilding Monitoring and Evaluation

A third tension that emerges between circlers and frameworkers involves issues of power affecting relationships within design, monitoring and evaluation processes. The positivist-interpretive debate is helpful in exploring the role that values (and the power to choose values) play in the inquiry and evaluation process, and the relationship between those observing and the things and people being observed.

Frameworkers seek monitoring and evaluation processes that use objective indicators and look to design a process to establish impact in a way that they believe is “value-free” – meaning, anyone could look at the data and verify its outcome. Frameworkers use objective indicators, in part, based on the assumption that those collecting information – whether data on indicators or stories of change – do so without influencing that which they are collecting: they are “independent” from the process and the community being observed. For example, the number of cases referred to a local mediator may be taken as an indicator that mediation training and community awareness about the mediation centre was successful. Anyone can count the number of referrals and they should get the same answer.

In contrast, circlers view indicators and evaluation methodologies as possessing an inherent subjectivity and set of values that are most frequently established by people from outside the community, often “northerners” in the global South. This is where power comes into play: those making the most influential choices are usually at a significant distance from the community, have more financial resources and impose their opinions and values in the process. This is particularly evident in evaluation processes, where the outside evaluator makes important determinations regarding the success of a project. Circlers, however, see that evaluators have their own biases and values that come into play while they conduct an evaluation and that these are externally imposed on the project. To return to the example used in the preceding paragraph, the choice of number of cases of referral represents a particular view of the way conflicts are mediated in a community that may not accurately capture local conflict resolution processes, or the most important conflict issues in a given community. The power to choose what is important in an intervention is often unequal between funders, implementers and local communities. It is also predicated upon the idea that there are objective criteria and measures against which the community is to be held.

Circlers also worry about how external evaluators and decision-makers affect the communities they operate in, which brings us to the issue of how power affects relationships. Relationships are a central part of peacebuilding, and in most peacebuilding interventions

improving trust in strained inter-group relationships is a key component. If peacebuilding NGOs receive external funding, they are responsible to more than one stakeholder group: at a minimum, they are responsible to those within the community and those providing the funds. While an organisation may look to be responsive to both stakeholders equally, often those who hold the purse strings make key decisions, such as where funding will be allocated. When peacebuilders are up-front about who is funding them and what their interests are it helps to improve understanding and maintain positive relations on the ground but it does not bridge the power divide. Top-down and quasi-participatory decision-making processes send implicit messages that counter and even undermine peacebuilding messages of cooperation and trust. The concerns regarding hierarchical power relationships between donors, development agencies and communities are not new, nor unique to peacebuilding (see Earle 2002, 8-11 and CDA 2008). However, given the delicate nature of relationships and the importance of process in peacebuilding work they are of particular concern.

Both frameworkers and circlers need to consider the interactive and interdependent nature of design, monitoring and evaluation processes, the power inequities within them and how they affect relationships during interventions. In order to respond to these concerns, critics of logical frameworks have argued for more downward accountability and transparency (Earle 2002; O'Neill 2002). Once again, the MSC, ground-up, storytelling methodology may be a bridge for both frameworkers and circlers and enhance their accountability in practice. As noted above, in MSC impact and change are identified by and with the community through storytelling and establishing the criteria for what is "most significant". The MSC process includes deciding what is significant, which requires articulating and choosing amongst multiple competing values. If the decision-making process is fully equitable to community members, implementers and donors it can achieve a degree of power-balancing.

Another way to structure equitable involvement in decision-making during monitoring and evaluation is to utilise "accountability circles" (Fast et al. 2002). Accountability circles are groups of stakeholders from within and outside of the intervention, including members from the participant, intervention and donor communities, who provide feedback and guidance on interventions. They need to be established and facilitated carefully to balance the power relations amongst the stakeholders. An example of an accountability circle that is helping a peacebuilder to balance the power of a funder is presented in *Box 2*.

Box 2

An Accountability Circle in Action

A colleague, who is a university professor and a committed pacifist, has been working with members of the US military on their approach to peacebuilding. In order to help her to make decisions about how she engages with the military, she has established an accountability circle. In this case, the circle includes professors of religion, ethics and conflict resolution. The meetings are informal and have sometimes had as many as 20 people involved and sometimes as few as four. She convenes the group to gather their opinions about her work and check ideas with them.

An accountability circle can be established during project design to periodically review and discuss insights, problems and learnings that are occurring during the project, and can help distill the “significant” change in the MSC methodology. They can also be used to help design evaluation processes in ways that can deliberately maintain relationships and meet the donor, participant and intervener stakeholder needs. Accountability circles can function somewhat akin to boards, but ones which ensure there are balanced stakeholder voices at the decision-making table.

5.4 The Nature of Our Operating Reality

A final, critical tension that is often not spoken about between circlers and frameworkers is rooted in different understandings of the nature of reality itself. How we think about reality and our world affects how we think we can come to know things about it and our interventions within it (discussed in *section 5.2*). Using the positivist-interpretivist debate, we see that positivists argue that our world is singular, tangible and can be objectively determined; that is, it exists in one particular way outside of our human perception of it. The scientific method was developed as a set of procedures to determine things about our world utilising particular methods and criteria that independent researchers could verify. In contrast, the interpretivist argues that reality is socially constructed and people interpret and make meaning of their world in communities; the language we speak, for example, affects how we understand our world. Interpretivists argue that there are many constructions of reality, which are accessed through shared meanings and understanding, and that these shared meanings are shaped by our cultural lenses or worldviews.

The positivist-interpretivist debate is helpful here because it articulates differences that exist in the ways that frameworkers and circlers see the world. In logical frameworks, indicators are used as indications that there have been “real” changes. Circlers tend towards the interpretivist argument and view reality as locally and socially constructed, therefore implying (although often not stated) that there are multiple constructions of reality and the community’s construction of reality is the most important. An interpretivist will also argue that “objective” indicators are not possible, but can agree upon inter-subjectively developed indicators of change if need be (although the purposes of indicators, as discussed above, are different).

The difference that this makes in practice becomes clearer when we examine a sample intervention. For example, a rural, West African community identifies ancestral spirits as an important influence on conflicts and preventing conflicts in their village. In working with the community, the frameworker analyses the problems and develops a logical framework that includes objectives on reducing conflicts. Ancestral influence and the spirit world are hard to measure and quantify or account for in a logical project design; frameworkers are not likely to put it into a logical framework, even if they believe it is a necessary component for a project to work. Circlers do not have such linear and quantifiable hang-ups, so they can more quickly listen and adapt to the context with an understanding that change is determined by how this village constructs their world. The circler can easily respond to issues that the frameworker may

omit, which are of central importance to the community and critical in pursuing the changes and outcomes he or she seeks. Omitting alternative worldviews undermines our ability to impact change within those contexts.

While we can see the tension with the circler lens, the question then becomes, how do we include it in practice? In order to be effective in practice, interveners need to hear what is important for change in the local community setting, which requires them to listen carefully to the community and at a minimum learn to communicate in the language that matches their worldview – although I should note that using “circler” or “frameworker” language does not necessarily mean you really understand the worldview. The listening process is part of effective partnership and needs to occur not only during the programme design phase but also in establishing and undertaking monitoring and evaluation. Storytelling processes, such as MSC, can be used to structure the listening and identify impact. However, to make decisions about what is significant about the change, it is important to maintain local-level involvement. Here again, accountability circles can help to ensure equal and systematic involvement of the multiple stakeholders in a discussion process and provide the important element of inter-subjectivity in determining what is significant about change. The dialogue process required to establish inter-subjective agreement can further reinforce building relationships and trust in conflict settings, and link the monitoring and evaluation process to the relationship-building process. It is a “learning and doing together” approach to monitoring and evaluation.

6. Conclusion

Currently, there is an emphasis on developing and improving the frameworker approach to monitoring and evaluation in peacebuilding, likely due in good part to increased integration of conflict transformation and peacebuilding into development work. Frameworkers face numerous challenges to determining impact in peacebuilding work, such as measuring hard-to-measure phenomena and the time horizon of change. However, these are not the only difficulties. There have also been internal debates and resistance to logical frameworks, and their accompanying systems, by circler-orientated peacebuilders who see the world very differently. In practice this means that both often either ignore or seek to justify their approach with the other without getting to the underlying issues or finding ways to really work with multiple worldviews and diverse stakeholders.

As the positivist and interpretivist arguments around research help to articulate, these debates are not only due to lack of understanding. There are significant differences of opinion in understanding: how the world operates, how we interact within that world, how we can determine the impact of our programming interventions upon that world, the role of different worldviews and the purpose of determining impact. Many of the tensions between circlers and frameworkers have been unspoken and involved unclear assumptions, which have hindered

constructive and effective work in practice. The tensions, however, provide instructive insights into ways we can move forward and modify practice in order to better pursue change in a world where there are multiple valid worldviews.

While there are significant differences between circlers and frameworkers, there are also significant similarities between the two groups: both strongly desire to change the course of conflicts, to promote peace and respond to community needs. Given this common base, very practical methodologies are emerging that can help frameworkers enhance their work by including circler approaches and worldviews. In my experience, the theories of change approach, as well as an adapted version of the *Most Significant Change* methodology, offer excellent foundations for opening-up monitoring and evaluation inquiries in ways that both circlers and frameworkers understand. Intriguingly, they both allow for, but do not rely upon, notions of linear causality or particular worldviews. They are a starting point and there may be many other bridging methodologies. The role of different worldviews, as well as relationship-building processes, can further be enhanced by implementing circles of accountability as a practical and functional structure to improve inter-subjective agreement on impacts and to balance power between communities, implementers and funders. It is worth developing more formal and regularised ways to respond to the tensions that circlers identify in their debates with frameworkers. These practices can go a long way in helping to respond to the circler-frameworker tensions that currently exist, helping the constituencies work together better, and enhancing peacebuilding impact.

7.

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