

**Addressing Intractable Conflict:  
The potential of systems dynamics training as an intervention tool,  
Case study Rwanda**

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**Key words:** Intractable conflict, conflict resolution, Rwanda, training, divided communities

**Using systems thinking to aid analysis in intractable conflict**

Situations of intractable community conflict are situations of dynamic complexity – the number and diversity of actors and sub-actors, changing alliances and violent outbreaks, the nonlinear sense of time when present-day actors seem governed by the dances of the past re-created anew. The growing number of violent intractable conflicts in Africa represents a major challenge to the international community. These conflicts result in human suffering and the loss of life, massive displacement of refugees and the devastation of communities. The moral burden to intervene in these complex emergencies continually falls upon the international community, yet the dismal record of these interventions highlight the need for additional analytical tools to strategize interventions in these systems. The robustness of these systems and power of the feedback loops also makes the possibility of impacting their dynamics seem overwhelming. This paper explores how system analysis can aid in understanding intractable conflicts and the emerging patterns of genocide or violent civil war and will focus on how this understanding can better equip actors to ameliorate tensions without exacerbating or deepening the underlying conflicts.

Coupled with these dynamic environments is the changing ambitions of interveners from the linear and contained ‘we are here to save lives’ towards the complex tasks of nation building, peace building, and preventing civil war or genocide. These more lofty goals require more sophisticated analysis and a dynamic understanding of the overwhelming complexity of these circumstances. Far too often aid agencies and interveners are swamped with the detail of the complexity and miss the dynamic complexity and overarching patterns. Despite being known as ‘complex emergencies’ there is a surprising lack of tools to understand or analysis their complexity to ensure that coordination and collective response is not simply a list of actors and the activities they are attempting to implement.

Many of the existing conflict resolution methodologies fall down precisely because they themselves do not take the system dynamics into account. Far too often, interventions do not see the impact that pressure on one part of a conflict system may have on other aspects of the system. This was illustrated in Rwanda in the early 1990's when the international community's intense pressure to force the parties into peace talks to address an escalation in the conflict actually solidified the pressures for the genocide as opposed to appeasing them (Bruce Jones, Peter Uvin).

Aid Agencies are becoming more cognizant of the fact that they themselves are significant players within these systems and may in fact be doing harm by their presence (As outlined in the work of Mary Anderson and others). The challenge we are addressing is how to capture the benefits of systems dynamics to help individuals and organizations navigate systems and intervene at the most effect points of leverage. The time is ripe for this work particularly as many of international agencies and Rwandan institutions are engaged in organizational development initiatives.

The history of Rwanda has the reoccurring theme of civil strife, genocide, and the creation of massive movements of refugees. Although the genocide in 1994 of approximately 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus serves as one of the worst in history it represents the culmination of reoccurring themes within Rwanda. There have been many attempts to explain these patterns as demonstrated by Peter Uvin's focus on the role of structural violence permeating Rwandan society. As part of illustrating the potential of using systems dynamics in analysis the paper considers some of the feedback loops present in Rwanda in particular the role of social cohesion and an its impact on the interaction between different levels of the system. Using system dynamics to attempt to understand the role of social cohesion at the community level and its role as a contributing factor to the intensification or de-escalation of conflict – and how this might change over time. Leading to a better understanding of how social cohesion within a community acts as a balancing loop to resist external pressure towards violence, yet can later become an intensify loop once violence erupts.

### **Amplified Resistances to Systems Thinking in Intractable Conflict:**

We know that people, particularly adults, are resistant to systems thinking and the awareness that it brings (Chris Argyris, John Sterman), these resistances can be increased in conflict situations when one is under threat. People often cope in the intractable conflict system through their denial of the systemic nature of it – for instance not seeing ones own role in perpetuating the conflict. As such introducing systems thinking faces particular challenges because it has to overcome these resistances, which are themselves part of the social psychological dynamics of conflict. It is important to see these resistances as loops within the system that reinforce each other for instance attribution bias.

The paper will explore what some of these resistances are and how they are amplified/adapted in a situation of intractable conflict such as Rwanda. For instance one coping mechanism since the genocide is to deny ethnicity – it cannot be spoken of in many contexts (an example we will argue of the fixes that fail systems archetype.) This

section will also consider the risks inherent when certain participants in a conflict move towards a systemic viewpoint – this may actually take away the coping mechanisms that have allowed them to survive in the system as it is currently functioning (for instance dehumanizing the other can allow one to protect oneself in combat more easily.)

One particular angle that is considered is that participants themselves may be traumatized by the system and their role in it. We consider how this effects their own participation (and the effect it will have on them) and also at a macro level the systemic impact of trauma and how it is reinforced or dissipated (there is interesting work on the connection between individual and collective trauma following the work of Judith Herman, Sossan Abadian, Donna Hicks and others).

It is not just direct participants in these conflicts but also the interveners who are resistant to this kind of analysis/methodology and it is very hard for an organization to try to introduce systems thinking into its projects if the organization itself has not taken on systems thinking and its implications – really internalizing this change and transforming organizations can itself be the largest challenge. This process of change proved very difficult with the introduction of participatory methods it will also be hard with systems thinking and we consider what kind of holding environment is required for an organization to take this methodology on.

### **How might a training curriculum be adapted for situations of intractable conflict?**

Here the paper considers the particular needs of the intractable conflict situation and how to adapt systems and conflict resolution methodology. It will suggest what a training curriculum could look like, building upon the systems focused work of John Sterman, Peter Senge, Barry Oshry and others, as well as Dale and Everett<sup>1</sup> and the process oriented community based conflict management work of the Canadian Institute for Conflict Resolution, (CICR), and others. The particular focus is on how to introduce an experiential aspect to the training.

This suggested process would take into account how to overcome the particular resistances to systems thinking that have been outlined and how to enable people to widen their mental model and strategies on what actions they will take. One of our findings given the nature of the context and resistances to systems analysis is that introducing formal modeling too early can short-circuit the transformative potential of systems dynamics thinking. The paper as a practical example will consider how the process can be applied to the Rwandan National Unity and Reconciliation Commission in its own planning and policy making. This could be used both internally, by the commission, and by donors and others.

Finally as a caveat we cover the issue of how can we be sure that systems thinking will lead to ‘better actions?’ Considering its implications for issues of responsibility, morals and integrity.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Introducing systems dynamics to conflict analysis and resolution - A Hybrid Approach. MALD Thesis, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 2000 (unpublished)