

(Facing Ethnic Conflicts: perspectives from research and policy making. Bonn 14-16 December 2000)

‘From Shelf to Field - Functional Knowledge for Conflict Management’

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“In spite of the useful research findings of some of the institutes and the valuable capacity-building projects of others, the overall contribution and potential of the research institutes remains largely under utilized by the United Nations community. The research institutes tend to exist in a world of their own...the need for such bodies to pursue their research and other activities with a degree of autonomy and intellectual rigour partly explains this remoteness...the institutes have an obligation to make their work both relevant and accessible to the larger United Nations community.”
(Kofi Annan 1997)

There is a fundamental divide existing between scholars, our traditional research providers, and policy makers and practitioners, particularly in the field of conflict prevention and management. This was brought home to me with particular force when I was appointed as first chief executive of the Community Relations Council (CRC) in Northern Ireland in 1990. The CRC is an independent public body, funded mainly by the EU, with a board of individuals drawn from across the traditional community divide. Its task is to initiate and develop conflict resolution programmes with all sections of society, including local communities, trade unions, businesses, and public bodies in such a way that they helped facilitate the necessary move in Northern Ireland from violence into sustainable politics.

The task was daunting. However, while there were, and still are, no blueprints for such a body, I was well aware from my own policy and programme development work for the British government on conflict resolution work in Northern Ireland (Frazer and Fitzduff 1986) that the theoretical/research field of conflict resolution, which had begun in earnest in the 1940’s was beginning to be reflected in institutional growth and in focused discussion and research (Rogers and Rambotham 1999). I was also aware that some Academic Staff in the universities in Northern Ireland had been part of such developments. Facing with an increasing budget, increasing responsibilities, and continuing violence, the need to find a theoretical and policy rationale to underpin our developing strategies was vital.² I accordingly invited about 20 academics in the field to assist us with such.

¹ INCORE (www.incore.ulst.ac.uk) is a United Nations University based in the University of Ulster in Derry/Londonderry. There are 12 UNU centers around the world, and INCORE is one of two dealing with issues of conflict. It is an international research center with a particular emphasis on producing research that is relevant to policy making..

² The budget of the CRC was \$10 m per annum in 1996

The academics came from many fields: local and international politics, history, psychology, sociology and public policy. We suggested the task i.e. given their knowledge of the developing field of conflict prevention and management and the work that many of them had undertaken on issues of conflict, we were interested in hearing from them about best agreed ways of expenditure and development in order to achieve our goal of an agreed political solution. We emphasized that no ideas were off bounds, and no groups needed to be excluded as part of such strategies.

I now remember that weekend meeting with a sense of amusement at our naiveté, and a sense of disappointment as we went back to our desks on Monday morning. I also suspect that I am where I am now at INCORE at least in part as a result of my reflections upon the meeting – and many other meetings of a similar nature that followed in the next few years with both local and international academics. And, although I do believe in Northern Ireland we did gradually find very productive ways to work with some of our researchers, the dilemmas inherent in that meeting are still those that face many researchers to-day and which act as a barrier to a productive, and necessary interaction between researchers, policy makers and practitioners in the field of conflict.

a) A research culture whose parameters are usually other researchers.

My first surprise was to find out how protected and narrow a world is the academic one, even in the midst of a conflict. Now, having been working within an academic context for the last three years albeit one that, given my own disappointments as a policy maker, is very consciously policy focused, I truly appreciate just how narrow such academic contexts can be. In the UK in particular, where the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) has become the measure of worth for all research and almost all appointments, and where peer academic review is almost the only measure of quality now for points gained within the RAE, the system has become truly an iniquitously narrow context. Reports that may have had a useful policy affect, and that in some cases may have helped to define or redefine an approach to a significant social programme, count for almost naught unless tailored (I would say sometimes contorted) in such a way as to satisfy a very narrow range of people who rarely include those for whom the research might have some actual utility. Many of us within the academic community are also very aware of the difficult choices we often have to make about publishers e.g. to accept publication with a very academically reputable, but very expensive publisher, who usually print in the hundreds, at a cost only acceptable to University libraries, or a more populist publisher who can publish more cheaply and disseminate more widely. As far as I can see, most academics choose the former where possible. Interestingly, there are some suggestions that this might be about to change. The governing Labour party in Britain, exasperated by what they see as the inability of academic institutions to transcend their narrow research contexts, are likely to introduce an 'Application' criteria into the next round of the RAE which begins in 2001. Such a criteria are likely to focus research minds considerably, as well as validate those who prefer to produce research that is relevant to programme and policy development.

b) Not appreciating the needs of many policy makers.

The usage of conflict related research by policy makers and practitioners is a particular concern of INCORE, who, in 1999 set up a Policy and Evaluation Unit to address this particular issue. (<http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/home/policy/>) One of the first activities of the unit was to undertake a survey with UN and other IGO policy makers based primarily in Geneva and New York (many of which agencies it sees as its target group) so as to try and understand the processes within such agencies which would facilitate the dissemination of research results (not only those produced by INCORE) to the relevant agencies and in a productive fashion (Williams and Robinson 1999). Underlying these reasons was the appreciation that much research was not leading to policy-oriented outputs and, more importantly, that even policy-oriented research was not being used in policy-making.

What they discovered was a great deal of frustration with the research community, both that within the UN itself and in the wider field. The people interviewed were struggling with the fact that there were dozens of major conflict situations in the world today, and hundreds of incipient conflicts with the potential to intensify. Responding to these situations on a daily basis with live-giving and taking decisions to be made are the everyday requirement of the United Nations and its agencies, of international assistance of inter-governmental organisations, and of regional, national, and local NGOs. This was clearly brought home to our researchers as an interview they were conducting was interrupted by a telephone call which needed an urgent and very difficult life and death decision on a particular situation in an African country in conflict. And yet, at times almost in the midst of their exhaustion, policy-makers and practitioners in all of these organisations were asking similar questions: How can we best deal with what confronts us? How can we develop effective strategies, and implement our plans with maximum effectiveness and minimum risk? All desperately wanted the time and the means whereby to understand the conflicts situation better, and to learn from current research and best practice. Almost all felt that they had gained little from the years of work of the academic community. Such cynicism is palpable within the UN e.g. if you examine the various advisory committees of the Secretary General, and of agencies such as UNHCR, and UNCHR, you will rarely find that they choose academics to assist them with such.

c) Lack of awareness of the differing of the research/policy contexts.

There are significant reasons for why research often fails to impact upon policy and various theories which concentrate upon the differences between researchers and policy-makers and between the worlds in which they operate (Finch 1986, Langford 1998, Harvey 1998, Sutton 1999, Porter and Hicks 2000). In the world of research, decisions concern what to investigate and how, with a long *time-frame* and a focus determined by the researcher. For policy-makers, local and world events determine the focus, and the time frame is usually the present and the urgent. The idea that it is the *quality* of their research that will impress prospective policy makers, who in turn would ensure that relevant ideas emerging from the research process would be implemented has also long been discounted. Juma and Clarke (1995) have suggested that the policy making process

is by no means the *rational* activity that is it often held up to be in the standard literature. Indeed the research that has guided policy researchers over recent years suggest that the process is actually very untidy, with outcome occurring as a result of very complicated political, social and institutional processes which are rarely obvious. There is now little empirical support for a model of *knowledge utilization* that sees policy decisions as discrete events, undertaken by isolated actors, who make an authoritative decision, based on comprehensive analysis of policy options. Other theories would suggest that research seldom has a *direct impact* on government decisions, but rather its effect is incremental and indirect, creeping gradually over a span of years into the consciousness of policy makers. However, this is in fact often far from the case in conflict where the very crisis nature of the situation can either block or accelerate research according to emergency or political necessities. The reality of such policy making are probably better exemplified in a model (Kingdon1984) which suggests that that streams of problems, solutions, and politics often move independently without and through the policy system, and occasionally, usually as the result of advocacy work, often from within the system, these streams will merge in the process of making policy choices. It is also important to remember the strategic importance of the implementation processes, without which good intentions, even by the most esteemed of policy makers, will wither (Brocklehurst 2000)

For some time, INCORE has been involved in briefing governments, particularly those who are interested in developing peace processes, and in managing diversity, and have had to learn that dealing with their pressures, and their concerns are part of the assignment. Such meetings are often attended with imminent political crises with attendant tensions; the need for immediate short term political gain from any such development, as well or, in some cases, at the expense of long term gain for the overall community, a concern over budgetary implications for any new institutions and who should carry such (preferably another department!); concerns about how such initiatives should be presented so as to achieve political agreement, and above all, how or whether such initiatives could be prioritized given existing political tensions. Without antennae that are sensitive to the realities of such pressures, and an ability to help policy makers deal with such questions, and accepting that the context is just as important as the research, then help with option development can easily fail.

In order to understand these constraints, and their attendant sensitivities, it is often important to consider involving end users where possible, and as soon as possible in the research. These will of course vary according to the research and its context – they may be governmental officials, or IGO personnel, or military personnel (who have particular problems because of their supposed executive, versus policy development role) or local community leaders. Without their commitment to the utilisation of knowledge, and their understanding of how their particular systems work, when and how decisions get made, how budget allocations are decided, and what the institutional priorities are, your work is not likely to be effective. And an extremely important factor is also the learning that such end-users may productively accrue through the process of the research itself.

It is also important to remember that research results, similarly insights that are relevant and provocative only at certain moments and for certain audiences. As an ESRC workshop on research and users concluded:

“The potential for using research depended on the existence of specific situations or ‘windows’ in which the capacities and interests of users temporarily aligned with the capacities and interests of researchers and in which research became momentarily relevant. (...) As a result, relevance, rather than being a quality of the research itself, is better seen as a property of potential contexts of use.” (Shove, 1996, p2)

d) An inability to ‘mediate’ research

Another significant problem is that the complexity of research findings often contrast with the perceived needs of practitioners for simplicity, and researchers have to find ways to prevent our need for innumerable caveats from destroying the possible utility of the research. As a commissioner of research, while I required research to be rigorous enough to stand up to scrutiny if necessary, my prime request was for usable and brief findings, if possible with options for decision making. What particularly concerned me was that researchers often seemed to operate in environments where they are discouraged from drawing conclusions for option generation. Policy people, conversely, operate in an environment in which contexts and questions change constantly. The policy-makers themselves cannot usually control the variables or limit the arena of action, and they are accustomed to having to take the best decision possible with insufficient information, relying often on applying their own broad experience to the problem at hand. Shove (1996, p.26) asserts that if users are policy-makers, then they want clear summaries of finding, findings which are free of methodological caveats, and unambiguous conclusions. And, crucially, as Williams and Robinson have pointed out :

‘Policy makers may also be accustomed to working with consultants, who readily draw on experience, analysis, and option-generation as the currency in which they trade. Researchers will need to understand that, if they are themselves cautious about drawing policy alternatives from research results, then consultants will probably continue to be used as mediators who present such alternatives in their stead.’ (William and Robinson 1999, p10)

e) Perspectives and disciplines that are often competitive.

Within the field of conflict there are many different approaches, which too many researchers see as competitive. Multiple and often what appear to be contradictory perspectives abound e.g. structuralist approaches, needs based approaches, psycho-cultural and relational approaches, psychoanalytic approaches, and problem solving approaches, to name but a few (Ross 1997). (There may even still be some who see human beings as innately aggressive. Although I don't tend to hear that perspective at too many academic contexts now, it is surprising how prevalent it is in many social contexts!) Often such perspectives are adopted and unquestioned, by policy makers or practitioners. And, however unexamined they are, they will inevitably inform practice

and affect choices such as e.g. whether to try to lock up and/or kill illegal militias or to engage them in dialogue, whether to validate cultural and political differences, or deny them for fear of state disintegration.

f) A fear of not knowing enough

Given the varying perspectives on the causes of conflict, and the varied options for strategies which result from such, it can be tempting to hide behind a reasonable fear of unfitness to advise. And indeed often this is appropriate. However, as suggested above, to refrain from making choices, or suggesting such choices is a luxury indeed and one reserved for few who are active in the field, and in the thick of conflicts where, in the absence of advice grounded in good research, often action itself was sometimes less a strategic choice, and more an antidote to despair.

To refrain from advocating options on the basis that our knowledge is as yet insufficient is contrary to practice in other professions, many of whom still function as through a glass as yet fairly dark. The gaps in our understandings in psychology, in the cycles of economics, in the realities of health and medicine remain substantial, yet do not significantly interfere with our adoption of working assumptions which are based on lessons learned – so far. And I believe that we are in fact developing a few such nuggets of understanding, helped significantly by the recent trends towards more significant evaluation of interventions, which should help to raise the confidence of our voices as we attempt to make ourselves more useful in the field.³ I would tentatively suggest the following as a sample of what we use, and that feedback tells us have been particularly helpful in our work with policy makers.

- Our understanding of the life cycles of a conflict, and the relevance of different interventions at different stages of the conflict.
- The necessity to engage with many differing levels of power broking and holding so as to secure deliverable agreements.(Lederach 1997)
- The adoption of strategies of economic and other development which enable people to co-operate and to shape their future together where possible. (Anderson, 1999)
- In situations of conflict, processes of political participation should be tailored to ensure power sharing and cross-communal voting (Reilly, 1999)
- While economic and other inequities per se may not cause conflict, they are likely to do so if they are related to certain group identities (UNU/WIDER 2000, de Varennes 1999)
- Peace Processes are more likely to succeed if they are inclusive, spoiler groups are neutralized with the active involvement of ex-militants, leaders recognize their prime task is to deliver their own people, post conflict roles can be found for former militarists and victims needs are addressed. (Darby and McGinty 2000)

I appreciate that many of you can significantly add to the above list. I also appreciate that many of may not be aware enough of the capacity of the even the above minimum to

³ See INCORE website on Evaluation at www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/policy

assist in addressing possibilities for policy makers in situations of conflict who are often struggling to identify patterns and directions in the midst of the urgency of their chaos.

g) Not understanding the pressures of politics.

It is useless to assume that the best and most proven of knowledge will have an effect on policy makers who are politicians, unless they can be assured that it is in their interest to pay attention, and act upon, such knowledge. (Lindblom 1993) There are usually competing problems to which politicians are paying attention to at any one time. Whether or not they will focus on a particular problem in need of attention is less likely to be determined by the quality of the research, than by the requirements of their prospective voters, or political party, by external influences such as being challenged by the media to pay attention to particular problems, or by the arrival of a particularly determined minister or political party with a particular focus.

In conflict such attention getting is often particularly problematic, given the contentious nature of the conflicted parties. In situations where the agenda is set by outsider IGO's e.g. World Bank, or UN agencies, or aid agencies, the agenda may be contrary to what is desired by certain political parties who may not particularly endorse e.g. participative processes which may in turn challenge their authority. Probably the most difficult concept for researchers to take on board is the fact that the values of the political communities are often less rarely concerned with the overall good, than with the particular political necessities with which they are grappling – and this is particularly true in situations of conflict. Because of such necessities, even overwhelming evidence about issues and causality will be ignored and selective choices of statistics, often taken out of context may be used to substantiate personal theories.

Researchers can however often help constructively to 'depoliticise' policy making by suggesting reframed contexts within which decisions about issues can be taken (Shore and Wright 1997). INCORE has found that using international contexts on e.g. changing approaches to pluralism can often help such depoliticization. It is also important to remember that politicians, if they find an idea useful, will often like to present it as their own, and happily forget its provenance. (Remember - you can achieve most things – as long as you don't want the credit for it !) Another issue to bear in mind is that most of the best work with politicians is often undertaken in 'corridor' conversations, or in private, which often may mean choosing, again, between acknowledgement of your work, and its effectiveness. And of course the use of in-agency, 'confidential' research is often critically useful.

INCORE is just completing a study of Leadership in Conflict, in which it addresses the dilemmas faced South African, Northern Irish and Palestinian politicians who have moved from opposition politics to the politics of governance and responsibility (Gormley 2001). One of the most interesting aspects of the study is that, while their perspectives and approaches to the conflict have obviously changed, very few of the politicians are conscious of any personal history of learning, which of course limits their perspective on future learning needs and of course their perspectives on research. In the end, learning to

live with – and see as a creative challenge - the interaction of politicians, policy makers and researchers is a key component of research utilization.

h) Avoidance of explicit values.

Policy makers, practitioners, and of course politicians, particularly in conflict situations, are rightly skeptical of so called ‘neutral’ experts. They are often more at ease with lobbying groups, and advocacy approaches, as they believe these groups to be clearer about their values. Academics, however, are often loath to admit that they have values per se, other than so-called ‘intellectual integrity’. I think therefore it is useful to examine such values, and to be able to state them clearly when asked, as one inevitably will be, in a situation as sensitive as on-going conflict.⁴ This is particularly important for those researchers who are functioning within a situation of conflict. Even where they view their perspectives to be ‘partial’ as opposed to neutral, it is usually far more helpful to be clear about such, then to aspire to be seen as otherwise. This is also true of course about practitioners in a conflict where aspirations of neutrality are significantly tested on the ground. What is now becoming increasingly the norm for such practice in situations of conflict is the use of ‘co-partials’ i.e. people who are from clearly differing identity or political perspectives but who are willing to work on common solutions to ending violence (Fitzduff 1989, 1996). As Mc Sweeney (1998) has suggested, ensuring that you are clear about, and can articulate, the ethical base from which you function is extraordinarily important. Many international academic researchers who came to Northern Ireland were fairly cynically seen to do so by many within the community as a move designed to further their own academic career, rather than attempting a contribution to the work of those struggling with developing approaches to end the violence. Those who had most credibility were often those who came from a Mennonite or Quaker tradition, whose traditions were well known to encompass active peace-making as part of their religious values.

i) Fear – particularly within a context of conflict.

Another issue that INCORE has been studying are the difficulties involved in researching in situations of conflict, and the particular requirements, both personally and professionally, of such research. (Robinson and Smyth 2001). For the first two decades of the conflict in Northern Ireland, researchers were discouraged from engaging in research, and particularly action research about the N.Ireland conflict. Mainly this was mostly a reluctance, and in many cases an inability, on the part of many academics to engage in research that was both personally and politically problematic. When we first brought academics together in Northern Ireland to assess how they could help us as policy makers, it was fairly clear that the issues we needed to address were not ones that they had considered as a part of their daily personal or institutional discourse. Given that Northern Ireland is a place where the line of Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney ‘*Whatever*

⁴ INCORE’s own value statement is ‘*INCORE’s vision is of a world where the non-military management of ethno-political conflicts is the norm, and where research and policy centres such as INCORE are utilised in achieving this norm.*’

you say – say nothing ' is taken as a baseline for survival, perhaps such was not surprising. But to have to walk academics through a process of beginners dialogue amongst and with each other about issues on which they had never spoken in any depth was a sobering experience. And yet, in retrospect, such a caution truly was deemed necessary where cultures and traditions, at least in the public sector, had to find ways to work together without generating political friction which would endanger both their work capacity, and in some cases their personal survival. I have of course come across similar difficulties in others areas where we work such as the Middle East, Sri Lanka and the Basque country. Notwithstanding such fears, there have eventually developed a group of Northern Ireland academics who have moved beyond silence in Northern Ireland, who have found ways of reflecting, analysis, and option generating that has changed the conflict, and the capacity of local and policy communities to deal more effectively with political and cultural differences.

j) Wary of becoming a 'player'.

A particular example of this where the process of research/policy practitioner interaction worked particularly well was in the Interface research that the CRC commissioned in Northern Ireland.⁵ In Belfast alone, there are some 19 high 'Peace Walls' built to keep communities safely apart, particularly at times of tension. Built into these walls are doors, which are occasionally opened when it is deemed safe to do so. These walls are mainly built in working class areas, where trouble more generally exemplifies itself, and where each side sees itself as the most victimized community in terms of poverty and violence. The project was initiated to ascertain the social realities of unemployment, ill health, sectarian attacks and violence, etc in both protestant and catholic areas on both sides of the peacelines, and was undertaken by a University of Ulster academic. (Murtagh 1997)

As part of the process of the research, Murtagh set up local committees on each side of the conflict divide, who helped by developing the questions, and commenting on the research as it progressed. In addition he also developed an advisory group of policy makers from social services, housing agencies, economic development agencies, and others whom he hoped would be involved in taking any research recommendations forward. To bring the policy makers together to face difficult issues on which they had differing cultural and political views was in itself a fairly daring move, given the tensions inherent in such meetings. As confidence developed among the local committees, and as the research progressed, revealing fairly similar levels of poverty and social exclusion on both sides of the walls, he arranged for a few of the community leaders, fearfully and for the first time, to meet with each other to discuss the findings. Such connections grew as trust, and understanding of each other's needs, developed. In addition to enabling communities to gain a greater appreciation of the social and conflict management needs in each community, such connections and confidence were eventually to help the development of new political voices among loyalists and women who subsequently entered the political system for the first time in 1998. They also increased connections

⁵ The interface is the term given to those street areas where the boundaries of Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Unionist communities meet. There have been over 600 murders in one square mile of such an interface in Northern Ireland.

among republican and loyalist community workers (many of whom were ex-prisoners, whose voices were significant in developing the peace process) and also in providing community leaders, many of whom were and are able to help diminish the worst of the violence that still erupts at particularly tense political occasions in Northern Ireland.⁶ In addition, the research provided many of the statistical data about the social dilemmas facing local community for usage by policy makers, which eventually helped in the development of area partnership boards for the conflicted areas, which were subsequently set up to address such needs.

CONCLUSION:

LESSONS for useful conflict research

From our own research with UNU and other IGO agencies, and from the work of researchers, policy makers and practitioners who have been struggling to find a way to be useful, the following would seem to be key points in enriching the relationship between research and policy making communities so as to ensure relevance and respect

- i) *Know the problem you want to address, and the people you want to reach.***
Talk to communities, or policy makers about the problems they are facing, and work with them on framing the research. In the process help them to appreciate and develop a variety of ways of approaching the problem. (paramilitaries seminar)
- ii) *Critically assess the culture, restraints and opportunities of your target audience.***
You will need differing approaches according to the nature of the groups you want to influence. Research that uses a language/value system (where possible) that is familiar to a group or institution is more likely to be successful.
- iii) *Present research in a way that is provocative, focused, and concise.*** Choose your opportunities for dissemination to suit your audiences – e.g. lunch time briefings, in situ briefings, predigested results by email, research given to aide de camps to include in briefings, etc. Introducing new concepts and reframing the debates is also useful particularly where such conflict has been long-standing.
- iv) *Timing is of the essence – and can define success or failure.***
Stay in touch with the cycles of strategy development, of crises arising, and above all, maintain wide networks.
- v) *Research is particularly influential when undertaken/ presented by a credible source.*** Remember credibility differs from groups to group. Using enlightened like to

⁶ Such tension is particularly likely to arise during the ‘Marching’ season, when approximately 3500 parades take to the streets of Northern Ireland. Most of these are Protestant, and some of these are particularly contentious due to changing demographics which mean that Protestant marches now find that many more of their ‘traditional’ routes than hitherto are now populated mainly by Catholics,

speak to like where possible e.g. military to military, government official to government official paramilitary to paramilitary, business people to business people can shorten the process of learning.

vi) *Ideas need ‘champions’ within an agency, institution or group.*

S/he will understand in an intimate way the values, blockages, and opportunities for taking such research forward.

vii) *Comparative research can reassure and inspire policy makers and practitioners.*

(Provided it is preceded by a caveat about all conflicts being different !)

viii) *A multi-agency/level approach is particularly useful in conflict.*

It diminishes hopelessness and encourages partnerships and wide change-agent involvement.

ix) *Use the research process to gain acclimatization and acceptance.*

The best partnerships are ones of process, where issues are discussed and defined, and ownership of the project and its results are developed with end-users, and options are teased out with relevant agents. Research that comes unheralded is much less likely to be effective. (Policing Hamilton)

x) *Remember those at the top often set the parameters, but those below them deliver.*

While influencing those at the top of the hierarchies is important, implementation strategies are even more important.

(A final note of caution from our own research with the UN and other international agencies: we got a very clear message from them that the usual productions of conference proceedings, in particular, were of little use to them !)

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