

Local conflict counselling: when conflicts don't resolve themselves

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The Austrian conflict researcher Friedrich Glasl describes the dynamics of conflict escalation (Glasl 1998). He makes clear that if conflicts are not addressed, they rapidly enter an increasingly violent and destructive downward spiral. While the protagonists can still influence this development constructively for themselves at the start of the conflict – potentially also with the help of competent persons from their immediate surroundings – the question soon arises of whether the participants still have the conflict under control or whether the conflict already controls the participants' behaviour. Glasl then describes different methods that can be used to halt or even reverse the escalation dynamics.

Over the past three decades, mediation has established itself as a process for dealing constructively with conflicts within families, neighbourhoods and organisations. Experience has moreover been gained in various dialogue formats that have proven helpful in certain conflict constellations. The methodological approach of local conflict counselling has been used as a constructive response to extremely complex conflicts in municipalities, cities, towns and rural districts for more than ten years now.

Conflict complexity as the challenge

What are the characteristics of this complexity? As already discerned by Glasl and others, conflicts are contagious. If left unaddressed, a conflict's reach tends to spread and cause secondary and consequential conflicts that often ultimately lead to it no longer being clear what the main conflict actually is – this depends on the respective stakeholder's perspective and could even itself become the subject of conflict.

Municipalities, cities, towns and rural districts have a multitude of stakeholders, who interact (not exclusively determined by conflicts) and depend on each other. These stakeholders (i.e. persons, organisations, groups and institutions) experience the main, secondary and consequential conflicts with different degrees of urgency and are therefore not simultaneously involved in the same intensity.

A third aspect characterising local conflicts is the imbalance of power between different stakeholders that influences the efficient use of dialogue methods, for example. In addition to the stakeholders' positions, interests and needs, local conflicts therefore also always address issues relating to the social integration of a municipality, town, city or rural district and to the participation of its different groups.

It is for this reason that local conflict counselling adopts a systemic approach that focuses on the dynamics of the interactions between different stakeholders that cause the conflict. These dynamics arise from decisions, behaviour and failures, attitudes and approaches, but also from perceptions and assumptions of the stakeholders involved.

Local conflict counselling leaves responsibility for dealing with the conflicts in the hands of the local stakeholders, and uses the resources, experiences and approaches available there to deal with them (Berndt/Lustig 2016). It entails advising relevant stakeholders involved in municipal activities, who are addressing their conflicts. This guidance takes the form of a mandated, impartial intervention by an external counselling team for a limited period of time.

The starting point for local conflict counselling is always a request for support from a local stakeholder, understood as an indication of a problem. In pluralistic democratic societies, a counselling provider is mandated by leading decision-makers and then deploys a counselling team. The mandators are

generally the mayor, councillors or heads of department in the town, city, municipality or rural district, as they are legitimised to speak on behalf of the local community.

Thus, the counselling team does not see itself as a contractor hired by the requester or mandator, i.e. is not a service provider expected to follow the mandator's instructions. Such a constellation could lead to bias in the mandator's favour. Rather, a cooperation is agreed with municipal – state and/or also civil society – stakeholders with the aim of prompting a transformation of tension and conflicts.

The direct recipients of the counselling services are key figures from the political sphere, administration and civil society with local decision-making power, such as managers in the town, city, municipal or rural district administration and politics, decision-makers and practitioners on the neighbourhood level. Civil society is an important point of reference, which is organised in various forms (associations, more or less formalised groups and initiatives, structures of social agencies, etc.), not primarily geared towards generating profit and committed to a value-oriented improvement of the shared coexistence. Ultimately, the local community as a whole is the indirect target group of the counselling process.

The systemic approach of local conflict counselling is characterised by the fact that it

- asks about different perspectives and the participants' "realities", renders the interests and needs behind the positions expressed in the conflict visible, and sheds light on the conflict dynamics;
- uses external counsellors to build trust in the conflict management process, facilitate a change of perspective, and make stakeholders aware of the impact of their actions and attitudes;
- does not focus on linear explanations for the aspects causing and escalating conflicts (i.e. individual cause-effect relationships), but rather looks at the simultaneous effects of different causes, the interactions between different causal relationships and their feedback – commonly known as "vicious circles" – and thus also critically questions "narratives" about the conflicts;
- points out constructive dynamics that reduce conflict and violence, and thereby stimulate reinforcement of these effects through targeted decisions by the stakeholders;
- draws on existing resources and above all local stakeholders and their capacities.

In the following sections, two case studies will be used to illustrate this. The first example outlines counselling processes implemented by the Forum Civil Peace Service (forumZFD) to address integration conflicts in small towns in Lower Saxony.

The second example refers to an East German town where the counselling process was implemented in response to conflicts regarding social participation on the municipal level. The counselling was provided by the competence centre for local conflict counselling of the Salzwedel association for the promotion of education (Verein zur Förderung der Bildung, VFB Salzwedel e. V.).

Perceiving immigration and the demographic shift as an opportunity

For more than ten years now, forumZFD has been using its local conflict counselling approach in municipalities, cities, towns and rural districts in Germany to address issues relating to migration and integration (Berndt/Korkor/Lustig 2016). It helped one small town in northern Germany to manage the intake of refugees during the exodus in 2015 without any major problems, for example. Despite this, the tension between different population groups did increase at times – and this manifested itself in public spaces, namely a park and around the town's railway station. Minor offences and illegal activities were attributed to groups denoted migrant groups; police interventions increased and the sense of safety decreased among certain sections of the population, especially long-time residents. Debates among the local public increasingly revolved around the subject of safety.

As a preliminary immediate measure, the municipality deployed a private security service for several months to demonstrate a visible presence in the affected locations and seek a dialogue with the people and groups present there. To prevent the peaceful coexistence in the town from being jeopardised, the town administration was eager to go beyond this preliminary response and to continue to ensure the peaceful coexistence was well managed. The heads of local administration therefore concluded a cooperation agreement with forumZFD in order to address the challenges with the methodological approach of local conflict counselling.

In addition to the mayors, the steering groups responsible for managing the cooperation included managers and employees from several departments (e.g. public safety and order, inclusion and integration, education and culture, public relations). In other cases, members of the town council and rural district managers also belonged to this steering group; the police were very often also represented.

forumZFD's counsellors began by conducting background interviews in individual or group settings, among others with the employees of social service providers, the town administration and rural district, police officers, local residents, young people in social facilities, and volunteers. The analyses developed on the basis of these interviews with more than thirty people had two main objectives: firstly, to learn of and represent as many perspectives on the occurrences as possible and, secondly, to understand and condense the situation into a few core factors that were as clear as possible and the associated dynamics. The outcomes of this systemic situation and conflict analysis (or the parts of the overall analysis relevant to the respective stakeholders) were presented to the steering committees, shared with employees of the town, social agencies, police and other stakeholders, and also discussed with young people and volunteers.

A great many ideas to deal with the conflict emerged from the analysis and subsequent discussions, which the counselling team presented to the steering group as a rich collection of options for action. The list of ideas and possible measures was sorted by theme.

The "Volunteering" category included empowering, involving and acknowledging volunteers and facilitating the participation of refugees, for example. The "Public Relations" category honed in on the fact that content on living together in the community could be presented more on social media. Within the "Integration & Participation" category, the focus was on the greater integration of migrants in committees and institutions, the organisation of dialogues on the coexistence, and the creation of an "integration guide" for better orientation and coordination among the employees of the town administration, voluntary sector and social agencies. This guide took a central role, as all participants were aware that greater common clarity about the goals agreed (e.g. increasing the language acquisition opportunities for newcomers, creating protected public spaces for young people, facilitating access to housing) would help to reduce competition, create synergies and render cooperation between stakeholders more effective.

Other categories in the collection of ideas also addressed the cooperation between different authorities, public institutions and facilities – among others, to help prevent lacunae in services (e.g. social psychological counselling in areas such as prevention or trauma) or competing measures. In addition, the experience of the joint process was the most significant learning effect among the local community: how can the appropriate combination of measures and their prioritisation be developed to address a very specific, challenging situation while remaining true to one's own interests and concerns?

In the course of an evaluation review of the counselling cooperation, one member of the steering group reported that "a breakthrough was achieved" when the background discussions were held – so before the analysis had even been completed and presented. The actual gain from the cooperation with forumZFD thus did not lie exclusively in the preparation of a plan of action, but rather in the shifts in the perceptions of the persons and groups involved in the conflict. For one member of a steering group,

a key moment was when his institution was “confronted with itself” in the counselling interview and he was able to see himself and his colleagues “from the outside for once” and to consider how the institution was actually perceived by others. This experience describes one central aspect in the transformation of conflicts that is also highly effective within communities: gaining a new perspective on oneself, developing one’s own actions and deeds as a prerequisite for being able to consider the situation from another party’s perspective and then possibly also understanding the situation differently and changing one’s own conflict behaviour.

Another member of a steering group described this process as a shift from “talking about certain groups” to “talking to the groups”, and ultimately to an understanding that it was not actually about the groups themselves, but about coexisting in the town and the question of “what we want and can contribute to it”, for example.

This change in attitudes and behaviour had very practical consequences when the focus was no longer exclusively on establishing and appointing representatives for an integration advisory council, but rather on the question of how this advisory council should interact with the various committees. For fundamental power relations were then addressed, such as how the advisory council can ensure that migrants’ interests and needs are actually successfully taken into account in shaping of the local community. A list comprising more than fifty suggestions was ultimately discussed and prioritised during the steering group meeting, from which a manageable number of options were selected. The criteria for selection were the capabilities and capacities of the involved institutions and organisations, the effects anticipated, and the urgency of the issues addressed with concrete measures. The municipality then resolved to take charge of the coordination in collaboration with other stakeholders from the local community. The cooperation between the town and forumZFD was concluded at this point as a consequence, as the process initiated with the counselling had gained sufficient momentum to be continued locally in the long run.

“No town without its townspeople”

The mayor of a town in an economically underdeveloped rural area in the north of Saxony-Anhalt with a comparable number of inhabitants as the town in the first case study commissioned the competence centre for local conflict counselling of VFB Salzwedel e. V. to address the rift between administration and policymakers on the one side and citizens on the other. Why did the exchange not work?

Despite the municipality’s efforts to publish draft resolutions in advance and invite the local community to provide comments and suggestions, accusations were repeatedly voiced that “the politicians” were not interested in the townspeople and did not accord them due regard. Conversely, local political representatives criticised the townspeople’s lack of interest in local concerns noted in citizens’ lack of participation in political surgeries and committee/council meetings. They did not discern any reward for their efforts to inform of upcoming municipal decisions in analogue media (official gazette, newspapers) and online. Quite the opposite in fact: instead, they often experienced hostility and subjective criticism when they attempted to communicate with the local community. They desired a long-term commitment by citizens, but instead only experienced intermittent mobilisation, often only very late on. So, highly emotional indignation and harsh criticism – and that only when decisions were being implemented, with no one speaking out any sooner.

In the weeks that followed, the counselling team deployed in the town based on this mandate contacted countless responsible parties: in the local administration; the town council parliamentary groups; the districts spread over a large area (some of which were previously independent villages); associations, social organisations and welfare associations; but also in the local business world, schools, day-care centres and educational institutions. The aim was to listen to their experiences and viewpoints, and to make clear to them that they are all part of the conflict management process. This was also reported and discussed in the town council’s social committee and in the local press.

In this phase, the counselling team initially assumed the role of listener. Not to judge, but rather to understand the experiences of the respective participants as best possible. According to the categorisation of communication scientist Friedemann Schulz von Thun (1989), when a local politician says: "These communication loops ... Citizen participation is all well and good, but I simply don't have the resources", this above all constitutes a self-revelation that essentially means as much as "I'm overworked and need solutions fast.". Local inhabitants understand this statement as a rejection of their participation however: "He doesn't want to talk to us any more."

The statement from the local representatives that "We're constantly being ignored by the town and our concerns often do not play a role." was interpreted by some local politicians as an accusation, whereby it was probably intended more as an appeal: "Take care of us and listen to us!".

The statement from the council for senior citizens that the districts' elderly residents can no longer reach the town at all (relationship statement: "We want to remain an active part of the local community!") made clear that the problem as a whole is more complex than originally believed, as it also relates to the districts' transport links with the town centre, for example, despite the fact that the public transport system had little to do with the original description of the conflict.

The conversations confirmed the high level of frustration among different stakeholders and within the mutual relationships whose extent often could not be justified by the actual circumstances: both citizens and representatives of the local community not represented in the town council and administration were sceptical of politics on all federal levels, though especially on the municipal level. They did not see their concerns addressed, doubted the correctness of municipal decisions, and did not believe that these reflected their own priorities. The citizens were sceptical of the extent to which the town's democratic bodies represented their interests; they voiced suspicions that the politicians only considered the interests of a few, such as the urban centres of the large municipalities newly created in the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt during territorial reforms for reasons of efficiency or the politicians themselves. In particular, citizens lacked insights into administrative procedures, decision-making processes and the functioning of institutions.

The local administration felt overburdened and hindered by the implementation of decisions reached by the state government (e.g. regulations on the personnel and material resources of the volunteer fire brigade) and the consequences of the territorial reforms when political requirements conflict with the legal requirements or municipal finances, for example. One example given here was the need to ensure unambiguous addresses in the municipality to enable emergency services, delivery companies and other service providers to do their jobs. The merging of villages meant that there were sometimes now several roads within a community with the same name (e.g. Hauptstraße, Dorfstraße, Feldstraße) and, in the wake of losing their independent status as a community, residents feared a further loss of identity if they now also had to rename their roads. The local politicians and administrators wanted the local community to be involved, but were at the same time often very sceptical about "citizen participation". Some districts had associations that were implementing innovative concepts, but at the same time questioned the local community's unity and overburdened the town councils or local administration as a consequence. Different districts developed seemingly contradictory demands of participation.

It became apparent in the tension between mutual accusations and frustration that all sides perceived themselves as the victims of a situation. The discrepancy between the different needs and interests appeared difficult to resolve. The following emerged as key issues in the coexistence within the town:

- Confidence in one's own political impact is impaired.
- The value of the town's political institutions is questioned.
- Development of the self-perception as a unified community is not (yet) complete.

The perceptions and attitudes arising from these key issues, associated behaviour and actions as well as the effects of the interplay of attitudes and actions of different stakeholders were subsequently

portrayed in graphics and discussed with individual stakeholders from the local community again together with the following questions: Does the graph reflect your experiences in your town? What needs to change to make the coexistence more satisfying for everyone? What would you be willing to contribute?

It rapidly became clear that the conflict management process needed to take place on a broader scale. Hence “future talks” were organised. Facilitators from the town were trained for this purpose and invited to joint counselling in the districts. The facilitators created an atmosphere of mutual listening, which was also maintained when conflicting views were expressed. Both citizens from the districts and representatives from the town council and districts took part in the future talks. The discussion rounds were organised as moderated informal meetings. Particularly the citizens in attendance were mostly people who had not spoken out before; for some local politicians, hearing what they had to say was therefore an entirely new phenomenon. They discovered that listening can be beneficial to their political mission.

One goal of the discussions was to identify possible contributions of those present for changes within the local community. The ideas and proposals derived from a whole series of future talks were made public, the mayor and town administration responded with concrete solutions regarding implementation steps and, while not always popular, the concerns raised were met with openness and interest. Inspired by this process, the future talks subsequently became a model for other forms of participation in the town, for example the participation of young people.

If conflicts are taken seriously and all involved parties can contribute their interests and needs in a participatory manner, then opportunities for local future development can open up.

Local conflict counselling as cooperation with a public mandate

As the practical examples show, local conflict counselling is adapted to the specific local conflict situation and provides advice and support to handle the conflict(s) constructively. A cooperation agreement is concluded between the counselling provider and the municipal decision-makers at the start of the counselling process.

This agreement among others sets out the understanding of local conflict counselling as support for the counselling process; the roles and contributions of the cooperation partners; the occasion, subject and goals of the cooperation; and the mechanism envisaged for monitoring and guiding the counselling process. The counsellors remain independent above and beyond this. This ensures that the counselling remains an intervention by a third party, i.e. a party from outside of the conflict.

The local conflict counselling process, which can run for anything from six months to several years, is divided into seven counselling steps:

1. Build trust and agree the counselling mandate

At the start of the counselling process, trust must be built and the counselling mandate issued – often long before a cooperation can be agreed. However, both are also always necessary when stakeholders (or their representatives) are approached for the first time and included in the process. The conflict stakeholders must understand the value of the conflict management and counselling as well as the tasks and roles of the counsellors. They must give their consent to participate in the process, at least implicitly, by agreeing to participate in a discussion.

2. Listen to the different viewpoints

Background discussions help stakeholders to gain a voice and contribute their experiences, perspectives and views to the ongoing conflict resolution process. These take the form of individual and group

discussions with local citizens and stakeholders, moderated discussion forums, workshops, etc. Background discussions also form the basis for the preparation of a systemic situation and conflict analysis. The willingness to listen has proven to be a prerequisite for conflict stakeholders being willing to address their own role in the conflict and the concerns of the other conflict parties in the first place. At best, this enables them to describe the conflict, or at least to listen to a description of the conflict provided by counsellors. Counsellors create a protected space for empathic listening in which confidential matters remain confidential, without adopting the positions and viewpoints of the stakeholders.

3. Explore and understand the conflict

A comprehensive situation and conflict analysis is prepared using methods from the conflict analysis toolbox. Factors contributing to local challenges are determined and the dynamics discerned. Systemic analysis methods are used, introduced and implemented by counsellors. Conflict stakeholders in the municipal system engage with a model (or the design or proposal for a model) for understanding conflict, whereby they recognise their own role in the conflict dynamics as well as that of other stakeholders. The conflict(s) become(s) clearer as a consequence and increasingly manifest themselves as problems that municipal stakeholders must address. They can see themselves as stakeholders in constructive change processes and assume responsibility accordingly.

4. Develop options for action

The situation and conflict analysis serves as the basis for the identification of resources and development of options for action by representatives from the local community. The counsellors accompany this process. Conflict stakeholders assume responsibility for developing new options for action or adapting existing measures to the conflict situation in such a way that constructive dynamics emerge. They see themselves as part of a collective acting as one and break free of the sense of powerlessness inherent to a victim mindset while also taking care to safeguard their own interests. Existing overlaps between responsibilities are considered and decided. Counsellors assist in the overcoming of obstacles, help to foster trust in the willingness of other stakeholders to act, offer suggestions, and highlight intentional and unintentional effects of proposed options for action on the conflict. They remain open to new perspectives and appreciate momentum in the process.

5. Select options for action and create synergies

A plan of action is discussed and agreed. A commitment is established between the local stakeholders for this. The latter see themselves as part of a constructive dynamic (awakening) in which others are also involved. The trust placed in the counsellors at the start of the process is increasingly transferred to the conflict management process and the other conflict stakeholders.

They increasingly develop positive energy for implementation of the steps adopted responsibly. Counsellors support this process, create an impartial framework for the development of a common understanding of a plan for action, and suggest suitable formats for its definition. They moreover create a situation that affirms and potentially publicly symbolises the stakeholders' shared commitment to independently implement measures to support constructive conflict resolution processes. They are watchful of setbacks and pitfalls in the process that could lend renewed weight to the victim mindsets of the past.

6. Implement measures

The counsellors continue to accompany implementation of the measures. Where necessary, further external experts are involved to support implementation. The outcomes of this phase are on the implementation level and can for example be recorded in periodic plans of action and determined and processed using indicators. Measures are part of the portfolios of the stakeholders active in the municipality. Counsellors continuously review the need for their presence during the respective

implementation steps and withdraw wherever this seems possible. They draw stakeholders' attention to keeping sight of effects.

7. Withdrawal strategy

Municipal stakeholders manage the conflict management process independently. Experience gained can be transferred to new issues, as the capacities for this are available or can be mobilised or created. Counsellors withdraw from the process and at most offer to keep in touch.

Due to the complexity described at the start in the form of asynchronicities and power imbalances in the local conflict process the counselling process will only follow the chronology described above to a limited extent. It will be necessary to return to past processing phases time and time again to process secondary and consequential conflicts involving new stakeholders.

To ensure that this procedure remains transparent locally, the cooperation partners (i.e. the municipality, town, city or rural district and counselling provider) agree to set up a steering or management group that creates the institutional framework for counselling by updating the cooperation agreement, adjusting it as necessary and reaching the agreements required for the organisation of counselling, namely financing of the counselling process, quality management, impact monitoring, etc. Linking of the counselling teams to an authority that fulfils this function as a public, civil society cooperation project with assigned responsibilities that is separate from the actual counselling service has therefore proven sensible.

Conflicts as a quality attribute

Local conflict counselling is often only requested when conflicts have already escalated to an acute level and their existence can no longer be denied due to a public debate. A request for counselling at an early stage, when the conflict is still all but latent, would actually be preferable however. This would also be a more cost-effective option.

Experience has shown that the constructive processing of local conflicts puts less strain on the (financial) budgets of municipalities, cities, towns and rural districts than the consequences of conflict escalation. Based on the realisation that conflicts require external support at an early stage in order to prevent them from spiralling ever further, recognising and talking about conflicts could become a quality attribute of municipal action. At a time when dwindling municipal budgets mean that decision-makers are dependent on local participation and commitment to maintain and promote active and vibrant communal life, conflicts would even be desirable as they make groups' genuine interests and needs clear and essentially prompt participation.

Within this, providers of local conflict counselling such as the Forum Civil Peace Service and the competence centre for local conflict counselling of VFB Salzwedel e. V. do not intend to provide counselling to an ever-growing number of municipalities, cities, towns or rural districts in the future. Rather, they are keen to motivate other organisations to offer counselling in conflicts on the municipal level according to the standards described above.

Note

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