Practitioner's Guide:

Conflict Analysis

Participatory Editing of a Local Conflict Analysis: A Process Carried Out in Marneuli and Gardabani District

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FRCS
Food Security, Regional
Cooperation & Security
(Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan)

Example:

Participatory Editing of a Local Conflict Analysis: A Process Carried Out in Marneuli and Gardabani District

Introduction

This Application Example provides an overview of an innovative approach to building consensus between the various parties involved in a Local Conflict Analysis. The Local Conflict Analysis (LCA) in question was conducted in the Marneuli and Gardabani districts of Georgia in 2003. The approach, dubbed the "Editing Process," engaged local stakeholders in discussion of the conflict potentials identified by the LCA in a manner which promoted feelings of ownership and provided an opportunity for stakeholders to reach consensus on important issues.

The Editing Process described here is a highly participatory approach to Refine a pre-existing local conflict analysis report. As such, the Editing Process must be preceded by a local conflict analysis, which serves as the raw material for the Editing Process and the development of a stakeholder-supported report. In this instance, following the LCA in the project area (see Participatory Local Conflict Analysis: An Application Example Local Conflict Analysis, Georgia S. Caucasus), the subsequent report was divided into several papers according to sector-specific conflict potentials. Through interviews with conflicting parties, local authorities, civil society representatives, local population, and high governmental representatives, and round table meetings with involved parties, the papers were updated and edited. The final papers contained comprehensive and in-depth information on each conflict potential. Furthermore the content of the analysis was supported by the relevant stakeholders. The different (conflicting) perspectives described in the paper were judged as being relevant and valuable.

The Editing Process' inclusive approach resulted in:

1. updated information from grassroots and official structures on conflicting issues;

2. mutual understanding of perspectives and perceptions of conflict potentials from conflicting parties;

3. a feeling of ownership of the LCA findings and report;

4. creation of basis for dialogue between the conflicting parties; and

5. dissemination of both objective and subjective information on respective conflict potentials;

6. and governmental bodies will require a different approach.

The Editing Process does not attempt to mitigate existing conflict potentials, but rather seeks to empower local stakeholders to voice their concerns to state authorities and thus begin a dialogue. By creating a forum for exchanging the different views on the conflict and a discussion about the different perspectives, a constructive dialogue was established. As it turned out later through this dialogue long awaited progress to the solutions to conflicts could be initiated.

GTZ/FRCS Intervention

Since 2001, the German Government has supported regional peace building efforts in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia through a Food Security, Regional Cooperation and Stability Programme (FRCS). The programme's area of operation is the triangle formed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Within the country of Georgia, the programme's area of operation is Gardabani and Marneuli districts, bordering with Azerbaijan and Armenia. In addition to addressing issues of rural livelihoods and food security, the programme encourages regional cooperation and trade across borders in order to promote economic and political stability.

Conflict transformation crosscuts through FRCS program activities across the target region. FRCS commissioned three experienced NGOs – one Tbilisi based and two local NGOs - to analyse conflict potentials in Marneuli and Gardabani districts. The local NGOs were responsible for data collection, while the Tbilisi NGO was responsible for developing the research protocol and methodology, processing and analyzing data, and composing the final analysis. The purpose of the research was to discover the most important conflict potentials at the local level, expose significant sources of discontent among residents, and understand the determinants and dynamics of the various conflicts so that effective follow up measures could be designed. The research was completed and a preliminary LCA report produced in mid 2003.

General information on the target districts of Marneuli and Gardabani

The Marneuli and Gardabani districts in southeastern Georgia share a border with Azerbaijan to the east and Armenia to the south. The Marneuli district consists of approximately 83 percent ethnic Azerbaijanis. Ethnic Georgians, who make up only 6.4 percent of the population, hold the highest regional government posts in Marneuli, having often been appointed to these positions by the central government in Tbilisi. In the Gardabani district, the ethnic composition is 45 percent Georgian and 42 percent Azerbaijani, with the remaining population a mix of Russians, Greeks, Armenians, and other ethnic groups. The lack of cultural and political integration among ethnic groups, along with the disproportionate distribution of power, is a constant source of low-level conflict in southeastern Georgia. The area also struggles with significant socio-economic problems, including high unemployment, severely degraded infrastructure, collapsed economic and social networks and increasing social stratification. These problems are often viewed by the local population through a lens of ethnic-political struggle and thus become the basis for politically motivated accusations.

Conflict Analysis

Background on Local Conflict Analysis

The conflict analysis examined regional conflict dynamics resulting from the break up of the Soviet Union and the stresses of the subsequent transformation process, as well as the general dynamics of a multi-ethnic society.

Conflict Fields

While there are no open conflicts in the region, there are serious conflict potentials, which can be divided into two groups:

1) Ethno-political issues arising from Azerbaijanis' estrangement from Georgian society and state structures. These include:

▶ ignorance of the national language

▶ privatization and distribution of the land

▶ manpower policy

▶ inaccessibility of resources

▶ opposition between different groups of residents in the region

▶ interethnic opposition

 2) Discontent caused by unemployment, widespread emigration, and destroyed public infrastructure such as roads and irrigation systems.

▶ unemployment

▶ social infrastructure, roads, irrigation

▶ low wages and pensions

▶ devastated production

▶ power supply

Editing Process

A series of changes occurred throughout Georgia after the 2003 LCA was completed. The "Rose Revolution" of 2003 led to new elections and ultimately, a new government. As a result, it was in question whether the results of the LCA were still valid and useful or some aspects of the initial LCA report became dated. Additionally, those involved with the LCA wanted to make the report accessible and acceptable to the wider stakeholder community so it would not simply be shelved and forgotten. Whereas as under the previous regime the Editing Process would not have been possible, the Rose Revolution provided an opportunity to re-examine the LCA report and commence the participatory Editing Process.

Conflict Analysis

The process of reviewing and updating the report was undertaken with two objectives:

▶ To produce a joint analysis that reflected the perspectives of different stakeholders and could serve as a starting point for identifying solutions in the new political atmosphere; and

▶ To support constructive dialogue and exchange on the different perspectives of the parties.

Because the existing conflict potentials are multi-dimensional and ethno-politically complex, they were addressed gradually. Initially, identified conflict potentials were grouped according to their similar characteristic under several headings where related sub-topics were consolidated. The following three sectors were identified:

▶ land distribution, including problems connected to irrigation;

▶ language issues, including ignorance of the state language and problems related to education and migration; and

The Editing Process comprised the following steps:

1. **Selecting sector-specific topic** – The Editing Process begins with the selection of a topic identified in the LCA. Criteria for selection of a topic could vary, but the conflict should not be so sensitive that dialogue is impossible.

2. **Selecting local partner** – A network of local partners who can serve as intermediaries between the initiator of an Editing Process and the respondents must be established. Usually, local partners include civil society representatives, project partners and similar entities.

3. **Selecting respondents/stakeholders** –Respondents directly or indirectly involved in a conflict potential must be selected to update the sector-specific topic and provide a local perspective.

4. **Gathering information** –Individual interviews are conducted with the selected respondents to update information, provide an overview of how the conflict potential is perceived locally, and provide material for initiating a dialogue.

5. **Elaboration of an updated draft and gathering of comments** – Based on the interviews an updated draft is elaborated. The draft is distributed in hardcopy to key persons and they are asked to provide specific comments to the draft paper. Once more meetings are organized and comments collected for further editing the paper.

6. **Round table meeting** – The round table provides an opportunity for conflicting parties to discuss the perceptions of the topic of concern. The paper that has been refined through the individual interviews and the collected comments are the basis for the discussion.

7. **Publication c of the selected topic** - The views and agreed conclusions of the parties to the round table meeting are incorporated into the paper and with the agreement of all the stakeholders, the selected paper is published.

Editing process on land distribution

The first topic selected for the Editing Process described here was land distribution, specifically the distribution of land in the context of the general economic reforms occurring in the post-communist society. This topic was selected because it was perceived to be the most acute problem in the region, causing estrangement between and within different layers of the population and the state authorities, including riots, clashes and general discontent. As the majority of the population in both regions is engaged in agriculture, it is natural that the land is the most vital resource for community.

In soviet times, agricultural holdings were predominantly kolkhozes (agricultural cooperatives) or sovkhozes (state farms). Farmers could use the land individually only in the form of small homesteads. Fertile land and proximity to Tbilisi, as well as access to the Soviet marketplace, made the regions' agriculture quite profitable, even under the Soviet conditions of ownership.

With the breakdown of communist system, the system of kolkhozes and sovkhozes began to fall apart. The question of the privatisation of land in Georgia, however, turned out to be quite painful, as it has in many post-Soviet states. While politicians oriented towards market reforms considered private land ownership a critical elements of reform, conservatives opposed the notion of private land ownership. One of their main arguments against private property was an ethnic-national argument. In the eyes of many conservatives, permission to purchase and sell land in a multi-ethnic country where the minorities are often concentrated in border regions would result in strategic threats to the territorial integrity of the state. The border regions of particular concern were Kvemo Kartli, with its Azerbaijan population (including the regions under study here), and Samtskhe-Djavakheti, where the ethnic Armenian population is concentrated. In both Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe- Djavakheti, ethnic minorities are concentrated along the border with their "ethnic homeland", i.e. Azerbaijan and Armenia respectively, which creates the ethnic demographic prerequisites for the emergence of irredentist movements.

From independence until 1996, government regulations created a border zone 21 kilometres wide in which the state reserved the right to control land resources. Control over the land in this zone was handed to the Department of Defence. The Department of Defence, in turn, created military agrarian farms on these lands. In 1996, a new law was enacted which abolished these border zones. Under the new policy, land was available for rent on a competitive basis, a process which was controlled by local authorities.

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Unfortunately, the process by which land was distributed was far from transparent. According to local respondents, decisions were made based on bribes, nepotism, or directives from the higher authorities. As a result, the land was leased to firms and private persons, mainly in the form of big land lots. Many smaller farmers were left without land. The local population, especially Azerbaijanis, appealed for assistance to authorities such as regional administration and deputies. When these appeals failed, many farmers resorted to public actions such as riots, gatherings in front of regional or local administration building, and blocking streets.

Selecting partners

Given the complexity of the land distribution issue, the variety of stakeholders involved, and the diversity of cultures in the regions, selection of appropriate local partners was critical. The partners selected had to serve as informal intermediaries between FRCS and the stakeholder community, be knowledge about local land issues, and capable of eliciting specific information regarding conflict potentials from respondents.

FRCS had already established formal and non-formal relations with stakeholders operating in different fields of activities whose input was valuable in identifying potential respondents. In addition to identifying respondents, local partners arranged meetings and served as intermediaries between FRCS and respondents who may otherwise have been reluctant to meet with FRCS representatives. Local partners included local NGO representatives who previously worked with FRCS on local conflict analyses, local self-government representatives, and other individuals with whom FRCS had worked.

Selecting stakeholders

Because the Editing Process aims not just to produce a study of existing conflicts but to start a productive dialogue, the information provided should be as inclusive as possible. Respondents were selected to represent all different perspectives and to have a equal representation between the conflicting parties. Respondents were thus selected from formal power structures, such as local governments, and informal leaders, such as the Akhsakalis -- the respected elders who represent local population and articulate their concerns to governmental authorities. Also included were members of the aggrieved/disadvantaged population, who could not obtain land at all, and those who had no stake in the conflict but observed it from outsider's perspective. The primary source of the information used in selecting respondents was local NGOs that operated in the region and worked on the issue concerned. Other stakeholders recommended during interviews were also included in the process.

Local farmers with large lots were not targeted for interviews and general feedback because of a perceived unwillingness to engage in dialogue. Moreover, confronting these large landowners with the landless population could have escalated the conflict rather than contribute to constructive dialogue. Nevertheless, the interests of the large landholders were indirectly represented in the process through the involvement of the state structures that are the official lessors of the big land plots.

Process of gathering information

Information was collected in two rounds. Face to face interviews with individual selected stakeholders were held in the first round. The interview process was informal, posing open questions about the current situation, comparing it with the past, discussing issues for clarification, sharing the information gathered from other interviews, and collecting feedback. Most interviews were held in casual environments, such as cafés, streets, respondents' home, or chaikhanas, where Azerbaijani men gather to drink tea, chat, and play chess.

Local partners attended the meeting with the respondents to foster trust and ensure as much openness as possible. The interviewed respondents remain anonymous in the report and identities were not made public unless requested by the respondent. When all the interviews were concluded, the information was consolidated and integrated into the analysis and written report. The result of the interviews was a validated and updated analysis.

It should be emphasized that the information gathering stage is one of the most crucial in the Editing Process and a great deal of time and effort must be invested in building relationships with the respondents. Most of the respondent population does not have access to modern tools for communication such as mobile phones and internet connections. Locating respondents and scheduling meetings often took weeks and required daily visits to the communities where they lived, the fields where they worked, or the chaikhanas where they socialized.

Information gathering is associated with certain risks. On one occasion, a pre-scheduled interview with an Akhsakalis coincided with a riot demanding land. During the course of the riot, a community member was shot. The interviewed Akhsakali says that if he did not have the alibi of the interview with the FRCS representative, he would have been accused of organizing the riot and arrested.
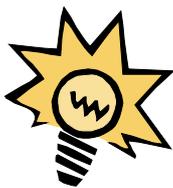
In the second round, a hard copy of the draft paper was distributed to the interviewed stakeholders, who were asked to review the paper and provide feedback on its contents. These comments were incorporated into the paper as a pre-final version for a round table meeting. It was agreed with the stakeholders that the paper would not be published unless all parties agreed. The interviewed authorities and official bodies in particular demanded this assurance.

Round table meeting

As mentioned above, one objective of the exercise was to create grounds for a constructive dialogue, which occurred at a round table meeting. All the stakeholders involved in the process were invited to the round table meeting. The stakeholders' involvement in the process created a feeling of ownership which enabled them to speak more freely and comfortably with opposing parties to the conflict. It also helped create a respectful atmosphere among the participants. It should be noted, however, that civil society representatives and informal district leaders were initially reluctant to attend the meeting. Previous experience led them to believe that little could come from such meetings and that without the will of the central government, the problem could not be resolved. In some cases only after intense explanation of the purpose of the meeting their participation could be assured.

Because the main goal of the Editing Process was to create grounds for dialogue rather than conflict solutions, FRCS participated only as an observer at the round table meeting to avoid bias from its previous involvement in the LCA. The Tbilisi based NGO, which was previously commissioned by FRCS to develop a research program and methodology for local conflict analysis, facilitated the meeting.

The following general objectives were met at the round table meeting:
- ▶ overview of the current situation and sharing information/experience on on-going measures of problem solution directly with each other in a dialogue;
- ▶ discussion and agreement on the final version the land paper for further publication; and
- ▶ brief overview of the summary of LCA and selection of the next topic for further discussion.

Discussions at the meeting did not focus on the issues contained in the land paper. Rather, they tended to bog down on expressions of discontent towards the new government at central or regional level for neglecting local land distribution conflicts and other sensitive issues. The participants felt there were no actual changes after the "Rose Revolution" and that local affairs were managed as they were in previous times. The changes in laws and regulations relating to taxation, land, and education were enacted without consulting local authorities, stakeholders, and the general population and without considering local reality. The participants felt that although the government, including the president, had made many promises, they remained unfulfilled.

Representatives of regional government responded to these complaints by pointing to new measures undertaken by the state and enumerating the obstacles inherited by the new government from its predecessor.
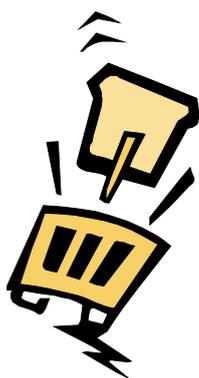
The open discussion between the participants at the round table meeting served an informative function as well. This is significant because the LCA had revealed that one of the sources of conflicts, discontent and estrangement of minorities from Georgian society was lack of information. Due to the lack of knowledge of Georgian language, minority groups are not able to access information disseminated through official media sources such as television, newspapers, and radio. Instead, the information available to the local population is based on rumours and exacerbates the gaps and estrangement of minorities from Georgian society.

Outcome

The agreement and discussion of the round table meeting were integrated into the final version of the analysis for publication and distribution to concerned parties and decision makers. At the end all stakeholders agreed that the paper was the most comprehensive one available on the subject. As they stated at the end it helped them to develop and understand additional aspects of the issue.

As was told to the project later some of the stakeholders continued the dialogue without the projects involvement. One consequence of the dialogue initiated by the editing Process was the redistribution of 1400 hectares of farm land in the Marneuli district from Georgian landowners to mostly Azeri landless households.

The Editing Process was a very important step towards changing the approach to conflict resolution in the region. The customary way of dealing with conflict potentials was for someone at the top to decide how the conflict should be settled without involving the concerned parties. The Editing Process established a precedent for tackling local conflict through a participatory approach. During the Editing Process, the parties' active participation and openness created natural ownership over the paper as an impartial foundation for further discussion. Through the process, conflicting parties were able to both express their perceptions of a conflict and, through constructive dialogue, understand the obstacles to settlement of the conflict and agree on the steps to resolution. Through this approach, the participants became confident that through such a process, positive changes could be undertaken with their active involvement and possibilities created for articulation of their concerns.

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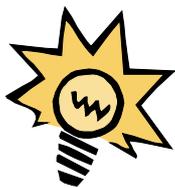
Lessons Learnt

▶ In general, individuals tend to voice opinions about the resolution of a conflict without examining how they actually perceive the conflict. The Editing Process attempted to elicit each party's perception of the conflict so that misunderstandings and misperceptions could be clarified and the information gap between the parties narrowed or even eliminated.

▶ It is important to ensure that all participants have the same understanding of the objectives of the process and do not harbor unrealistic expectations that would lead to further skepticism and possible escalation of the conflict.

▶ Significant emphasis should be placed on establishing a network of local people who can build open and trusting relationships with the stakeholder community.

▶ Participants should be prepared and selected carefully, so there is not a big gap between the involved parties. When the selected conflict can be resolved at the local level, the involvement of higher governmental bodies and officials should be avoided so as to not create confusion and estrangement between the participants.

▶ The Editing Process must be led by the same person from beginning to end. Interrupting the process by handing it over to another person/organization will hinder success by risking the loss of networks, positive informal relationships, and the intensity and openness of respondents.

▶ The Editing Process can be a successful tool for addressing conflicts that where dialogue is still possible. It is not a tool for handling violent conflicts.

▶ Throughout the Editing Process it is important to focus on building local conflict transformation capacities so that local competencies exist to initiate the same process if necessary in the future. Additionally, local capacity is needed to follow up on the round table meetings and update the information on the status quo for further dissemination.

▶ The Editing Process can be a successful tool for addressing conflict potentials at a local level. Conflicts requiring the involvement of higher officials and governmental bodies will require a different approach.