A SYSTEMS-BASED APPROACH TO TRANSFORMING COMPLEX CONFLICTS: LESSONS FROM ACTING TOGETHER

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These documents have been created to assist the ongoing development of the Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation field. At the time these are being drafted, in 2022, ACCT has benefitted greatly from the courageous, evocative and rigorous work of artists seeking to address war, racism, imperialism, colonialism and other forms of violent conflict. However, the exemplary work of conflict transformation scholars and practitioners is less well articulated within this field. These documents are designed to better share the theory and practice of a systems-based approach to conflict transformation which is needed in addressing complex, intractable conflicts. They include descriptions of aspects of systems based peacebuilding seen in the case studies in the *Acting Together* anthology and documentary.

You might find these documents helpful if:

- you are a beginning practitioner in the ACCT field, and you wish to plan an initiative that addresses complex conflict in ways that enhance effectiveness and sustainability.
- you are an experienced practitioner in the ACCT field and want to enhance funders' and/or policy makers' understanding of the peacebuilding potential and impact of your work.
- you are a funder or policy maker in support of, or interested in, the ACCT field, yet find a need for more rigorous interdisciplinary documentation.
- you are in any of the stages of analysis, design, documentation, or assessment of arts-based conflict transformation initiatives.

Introduction

In what ways can the arts contribute to the transformation of complex conflicts, and how can systems-based approaches to transforming violence help us understand and improve arts-based initiatives? Many complicated conflicts (those that have clear linear causes and effects) can be resolved through established processes of negotiation, mediation, and problem solving. However, complex conflicts operate like systems and require systems-based processes to transform them in meaningful and sustainable ways.

Complex conflicts (Coleman, 2011) are characterized by:

- High levels of violence and harm.
- Multiple elements that exacerbate each other, keeping the conflict in place for long periods of time.
- Very complex aspects that are often portrayed in simplistic, polarized ways.
- Failure to respond to mediation, negotiation and problem solving processes.

Arts-based initiatives seeking to transform complex, intractable conflicts are more likely to be sustainable and effective when they are based on a strategic analysis of how multiple elements of a conflict influence each other.

Disrupting a single conflict element is seldom significant in transforming complex conflict. In contrast, addressing multiple elements that have strong impacts on each other has been shown to be effective in transforming complex conflicts (see Broome, 2004).

According to Peter Coleman (2011) complex conflicts operate like a dynamical system[1], with elements that exacerbate each other, creating a conflict attractor (a kind of force field) that keeps the conflict resistant to change. Addressing intractable conflicts effectively and sustainably requires systems-based processes that align with their systemic nature. Coleman (2011, pp. 97-108), using a dynamical systems approach, lays out central strategies for transforming complex conflicts, some of which are:

- Develop analyses of how different elements of the conflict are influencing each other in ways that keep the conflict intractable. For an illustrative example, see "DAH Theatre in Serbia" on pages 3-4.
- Develop processes that focus on altering parties' patterns of interaction toward constructive change rather than working to bring about specific outcomes. See "Conflict Transformation Rituals and Ceremonies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia and the USA" on pages 5-6.
- Privilege emotions, which are central to decisions in addressing complex conflict. See "Theatre in Uganda: Disrupting the complex system of colonialism" on page 8.
- Open the conflict up to emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and structural complexity, enhancing the ability of those engaged in addressing the conflict to understand and engage others in more nuanced ways. See "Theatre In Palestine" on pages 6-7.
- Work to understand the changing patterns of the conflict. See "Systems based elements of the *Acting Together on The World Stage* documentary" on page 8.

1 "a set of interconnected elements that influence one another over time to promote the emergence of a global state (such as war or peace)..." (Vallacher, Coleman and Nowak, 2012).

Coleman (2011, p. 113) also articulates three practices which are effective in transforming complex conflicts and building peace:

1. Complicate understandings of the conflict to enhance ways of addressing it: Work to disrupt the human drive for oversimplification, which exacerbates polarization. Instead identify patterns hidden by the complexity of the conflict. For example, note the ways in which more nuanced identities of members of opposing groups were developed through the Israeli play In The Shadow of a Violent Past – Docudrama: The Truth and Reconciliation Committee (Nasrallah & Perlman, Vol. I, Ch. 5) See "Bi-communal Theatre in Israel" on page 7.

2. Build up peace systems and tear down conflict systems: Disrupt conflict elements that are exacerbating other conflict elements and support peacebuilding elements that are enhancing other peacebuilding elements. (See John O'Neal's lists of elements that Free Southern Theatre and Junebug theatre engaged in addressing racism in the USA). See "Community Theatre in New Orleans" on page 5.

3. Take advantage of opportunities for positive change, being mindful of the long-term dynamics of conflicts. Identify the small things that can be actioned. Although it can be difficult to identify and engage with control factors in a complex conflict, the results of multiple, strategic smaller actions may be a tipping point in the conflict. The responses of audience members in the Argentinian production of *Fuente Ovejuna* appear to be a tipping point for expressing resistance to all dictatorships. The actions that audience members demonstrated inside the theatre were repeated outside the performance space in resistance to the Argentinian dictatorship of that time. See "Theatre in Argentina and Peru" on page 4.

Borrowing on dynamical systems theory, Coleman describes complex conflicts as conflict attractors, force fields that keep the conflict in place, resistant to change. The force field is created by the power and influence that elements of the conflict have on each other. Likewise, Coleman posits the existence of peace attractors, force fields that sustain a just peace created by the interaction of many elements that shape each other in supporting justice and building peace.

The performances illuminated in the Acting Together Anthology, Documentary and Toolkit address complex conflicts such as war, ethnic cleansing, colonialism, racism, and other intractable conflicts. The following sections discuss aspects of dynamical systems theory that can be seen in the work of the Acting Together artists and peacebuilders who are engaging performance to creatively transform conflict. Although most of these individuals and collectives were not working explicitly with a systems-based approach, one can see how implicit aspects of a systems-based approach enhanced conflict transformation.

ACTING TOGETHER THROUGH A DYNAMICAL SYSTEMS LENS

DAH Theatre in Serbia

Develop analyses of how different elements of the conflict are influencing each other in ways that keep the conflict intractable (Coleman, 2011).

Dijana Milošević (Vol. 1 Ch, 1) names many of the elements that kept violent conflict in place during the war in the former Yugoslavia. She develops analyses of how different elements of the conflict were influencing each other and reinforcing violent conflict. This Babylonian Confusion was a performance by DAH Theatre that addressed the culture of impunity (a culture in which atrocities were committed with little fear of pushback against crimes) that had arisen in Serbia during the war that followed the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. This culture of impunity allowed the violence to continue in multiple forms. Milošević names government silence and suppression of discussion about the war as two of the elements that were supporting the ongoing violence. The artists in DAH Theatre decided that speaking publicly about government sponsored violence was one way to disrupt government silencing of social truths. When this performance was carried out in the city square, the streets were full of people in military uniforms, many bearing arms. In the midst of these people going about their daily business, the actors in DAH Theatre beautifully, powerfully and publicly presented a performance based on Brecht's poem about the dangers of government denial of war. DAH gave voice to the ways in which the Serbian government was committing violence, shedding light on a culture of impunity and encouraging people to stand against the violence. In so doing, they disrupted some of the central elements that were contributing to this intractable conflict.

Among their many other peacebuilding performances, DAH Theatre created a live performance that encouraged Serbian citizens to analyze the role that nationalism played in the ongoing violence toward ethnic minorities in their communities. This performance supported the development of analyses of how different elements of ongoing structural and cultural violence were keeping the conflict alive. (In)Visible City was performed on buses in Belgrade, with the performers playing the role of various ethnic minorities in the city. One of the actors took the role of tour guide as the bus moved through the city, illuminating the multiethnic history that was intertwined with contemporary events. The actors also reminded passengers of the time when Serbians demonstrated pride in the multicultural dimensions of their society. These performances altered perceptions and behaviors that were keeping violent conflict in place. For example, Milošević (p. 37) explained that passengers

departing the buses expressed commitment to rebuild ethnic diversity that was being suppressed.

Build up peace systems: Create hope and possibility for more constructive relations within complex conflicts (Coleman, 2011).

DAH Theatre's discipline served as an element that supported the creation of a latent peace system, one that could be sustained when supported by a significant number of interactive elements designed to build peace. Through their highly disciplined approach, DAH's performers created performances of high aesthetic quality that supported life, rather than focusing solely on the destruction of war. These more complex patterns of thinking, behaving, and organizing themselves resulted in more constructive responses to the violence.

Build up peace systems: engage elements that strengthen each other in building peace (Coleman, 2011).

Milošević (2011, p. 36) names numerous processes that DAH Theatre facilitated which also can be understood as elements for creating attractors for a just peace: expressing mourning, truth-telling, witnessing testimonies, taking responsibility for violence, bringing memories to life, and giving voice to those who had been silenced by oppression and violence.

The work of DAH Theatre is further explored in this short video from the Acting Together Toolkit.

Theatre in Argentina and Peru

Tear down conflict systems: disrupt elements that are keeping violent conflict in place (Coleman, 2011).

In his chapter *Fire in the Memory* (Vol. I, Ch. 6, pp. 153-178), Roberto Varea illuminates the power of remembering in disrupting cultures of impunity and facilitating social healing in the aftermath of atrocities. In his detailed analysis of the dirty wars that took place during dictatorships of Videla in Argentina and Fujimori in Peru, Varea lists elements that fueled the violence. These elements served as feedback loops, shaping each other, and exacerbating intractable conflict. Elements included the loss of both voice and vocabulary to address the atrocities, repression and killing of dissenters, loss of trust, and damage to the social fabric of communities. In the anthology, Varea goes on to explain ways in which performances disrupted many of these elements.

Develop peace attractors so that there is somewhere for the conflict to move when it becomes disestablished. This helps 'ripen' conflict for being ready to be resolved or transformed (Coleman, 2011).

Varea also illuminates the ways in which performance created numerous elements that support an attractor for peace: the use of ritual and theatre to restore voice and vocabulary to victims of oppression and their families, facilitation of the expression of grief and loss, effecting measures of restorative justice, restoring abducted children to their families and original identities, and restoring agency to the wider community in addressing the violence.

Varea further describes the ways in which performances created latent peace attractors in these countries by supporting transitional justice, honoring the dead and disappeared, and emboldening victims and their families to share testimonies of the violence, creating a more nuanced and robust social truth that supported justice initiatives. You can hear Varea further explore these performances.

Community Theatre in New Orleans

Build up peace systems and tear down conflict systems: Create hope and possibility for more constructive relations within complex conflicts while disrupting elements that exacerbate violent conflict (Coleman, 2011).

In his chapter (Vol II, Ch. 5) John O'Neal takes a deep dive into the elements that created a system of racism in the USA, a system that continues to be characterized by direct, cultural, and structural violence toward people of color. The elements below could be understood as feedback loops that exacerbate each other, creating an attractor for the intractable conflict of racism in the US:

- Appropriation of resources belonging to others
- Oppression of others to provide labor for imperialistic regimes
- Development of racist theories and policies to justify appropriation and oppression
- Deep embedment of racism into lives, institutions, and social mores
- The ways in which endemic, systemic, institutionalized constructs operate subconsciously to influence and control social behavior
- Lack of social change both at the grassroots and national level
- Lack of a sustained long term social movement to create a just peace
- Racial discrimination at the polls
- Public discrimination of all types

O'Neal also illuminates some of the elements that Free Southern Theatre and Junebug Theatre engaged in seeking to create a just peace. These elements can be envisioned as reinforcing each other to create a latent attractor for peace:

- Engendering deeper, more empathetic understanding through story and performance
- Using art to challenge the norms of those who are benefitting from injustice
- Facilitating story circles to develop democratic processes of sharing experiences, rather than debating issues
- Building relationships through shared narratives
- Improving conditions of life in communities
- Publicly exposing oppression and exploitation
- Producing art of high aesthetic quality to inspire people toward positive social transformation
- Engendering hope for peace with justice.

See a short video of O'Neal's work.

Conflict Transformation Rituals and Ceremonies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia and the USA

Develop processes that focus on altering parties' patterns of interaction toward constructive change rather than working to bring about specific outcomes (Coleman, 2011).

In her chapter on conflict transformation between Indigenous and settler peoples (Vol. I, Ch. 9), Polly Walker describes how ritual and ceremony address the ongoing violence of colonialism as well as how these performances contribute to building a just peace. She draws on two annual memorials: the Two Rivers Powwow in the state of Washington in the US and the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial in New South Wales, Australia. The creators of these two conflict transformation ceremonies 'work upstream.' In other words, they are developing processes that focus on altering Indigenous and non- Indigenous peoples' patterns of interaction, building relationships of respect and reciprocity across divides. Rather than initially focusing on specific projects, the leaders of these memorials worked

to transform patterns of interaction by creating long term relationships based on exploration of silenced histories, open expression of emotion, and commitments to decolonization and social healing. These processes contrasted with the more common entrenched oppositional relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples based in distorted histories, suppressed emotions, and avoidance of addressing the pain and ongoing effects of colonization. The chapter depicts numerous ways in which these processes developed empathy and more complex understandings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

This chapter also depicts some of the elements that sustained an attractor for complex, intractable conflict:

- Un-mourned losses of the wars against Indigenous peoples
- Unaddressed injustices toward Indigenous peoples
- Epistemic violence toward Indigenous peoples
- Colonialism, as expressed in the ongoing marginalization and suppression of Indigenous peoples' rights to full cultural expression
- Racism, as seen in the physical violence experienced by Indigenous people seeking to revitalize their cultural expression on traditional lands

The memorial rituals and ceremonies depicted in this chapter exhibit many elements that create a latent attractor for a just peace. Note the ways in which they:

- Address epistemic violence toward Indigenous peoples
- Effect symbolic and restorative justice initiatives
- Work 'upstream' with story circles, shared meals and deep listening before performances were created, building more nuanced and understanding relationships
- Bear witness to testimonies of colonial violence
- Memorialize and mourn losses due to colonialism
- Create ongoing commitments to justice for Indigenous peoples
- Effect measures of social and relational healing
- Provide symbolic and embodied ways for people to come together across difference

This short video provides further exploration of these performances.

Theatre In Palestine

Build up peace systems and tear down conflict systems: Create hope and possibility for more constructive relations within complex conflicts while disrupting polarized and over-simplified concepts of those involved in the conflict (Coleman, 2011).

Abeer Musleh (Vol I, Ch. 4) explains that creative, 'beautiful' nonviolent resistance to oppression is one way to disrupt the elements that keep violent conflict in place, and at the same time introduce elements that support a just peace. In her chapter on theatre, resistance, and peacebuilding in Palestine, Musleh describes proactive and generative processes of resistance aimed at ending occupation and supporting peace with justice: "building healthy and effective individuals and communities, maintaining a rich culture, and developing the social, political, and economic infrastructure for independent statehood" ... or "defying injustice by acting justly" (p. 98). These elements shape and influence each other to disrupt conflict and build peace.

Privilege emotions, which are central to decisions in addressing complex conflict. Open the conflict up to emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and structural complexity, enhancing the ability of those engaged in addressing the conflict to understand and engage their opponents in more nuanced ways (Coleman, 2011).

The work of Ashtar and Alrowwad theatres also addressed intractable conflict by privileging emotions, demonstrating systemic wisdom that supports conflict transformation. One example can be seen in performances in which audience members and actors express grief and loss for the death of martyrs, emotions often suppressed in occupied Palestine because they are construed as weakening the fight for freedom. Rather than focusing solely on glorifying the sacrifice of martyrs, performances were created to facilitate the expression of sorrow and deep loss occasioned by these deaths. In many ways, the work of these theatre companies opens up a much more complex range of feelings and behaviors, enhancing visions for relationships across difference, and expanding dreams for societies that could be fully realized in a more just society.

Bi-communal Theatre in Israel

Move away from concepts of "everyone on this side of the conflict/the other side of the conflict thinks and behaves in a certain way" to "there are many types of individuals on each side who think and behave in many ways" (Coleman, 2011).

In their chapter on performance and conflict transformation in Israel, Aida Nasrallah and Lee Perlman (Vol. 1, Ch. 5) analyze a play, In The Shadow of a Violent Past – Docudrama: The Truth and Reconciliation Committee. The central goals of this performance were to encourage Israeli Jews to more deeply understand and empathize with Palestinians, and to shift public opinion towards ending the Israeli occupation of Palestine. As the play evolved over time, real life testimonies from victims and perpetrators of violence in this conflict were woven into the lines of the play, resulting in more complex and nuanced portrayals and understandings of people from both sides of the conflict. Watch this short video further exploring the perspectives of the two sides.

Addressing the Gujarat Massacre in India

Identify and foster superordinate identities that link opponents in mutual endeavors (Coleman, 2011).

Superordinate identities are those that focus on valued commonalities, transcending oppositional identities, and that have been shown to be powerful change agents in conflict transformation. In her chapter on performance that addressed the 2002 massacres in Gujarat, Ruth Margraff (Vol. I, Ch. 7) provides examples of superordinate identities built around humility and empathy rather than ethnicity and religion. Margraff asks, "How can we ignite the imagination of identity as multilinear and multifaceted...and celebrate theatre as an external place in which the whole truth about us is inscribed?" (2011, p. 185).

Youth Arts In Australia

Identify and foster superordinate goals that link opponents in mutual endeavors (Coleman, 2011).

In her chapter on youth arts in Australia, Mary Ann Hunter (Vol. II, Ch. 3) describes the ways in which young people transform conflict through cultural action. Building awareness of and engagement with the diverse worldviews and cultural issues among these youth allowed them to see each other as complex, diverse humans who also hold common needs for conflict transformation and peaceful communities. Articulating these superordinate goals for peace is a critical element in systems-based conflict transformation.

Theatre in Uganda: Disrupting the complex system of colonialism

Complicate understandings of the conflict to simplify ways of addressing it: Work to disrupt the human drive for oversimplification, which exacerbates polarization. Instead identify patterns hidden by the complexity of the conflict (Coleman, 2011).

Throughout his chapter, Charles Mulekwa (Vol. I, Ch. 2) develops a nuanced analysis of colonialism, the complex system of violent conflict that has impacted and continues to shape Ugandan societies. Mulekwa describes many processes that have been engaged through theatre to address colonial power imbalances and to create more just and peaceful societies:

- Examining the human condition in nuanced ways
- Truth telling: "With so many vital records and documents lost or falsified during and after the war the stage has become an important way to chronicle the postcolonial Uganda in which I grew up." (p. 46)
- Expressions of visions and yearnings for peace
- Speaking truth about government abuses of power
- Shedding light on individuals' complicity with violence
- Acknowledging suffering
- Raising awareness of collective responsibility to address violence

Mulekwa also articulates a nuanced analysis of elements that have historically and contemporarily contributed to creating a complex system of colonialism:

- Disruption and suppression of cultural practices: "Forged in Fire is thus a story of how war can disrupt rituals and violate traditions, how it can keep people from performing the acts that are most sacred to them and most important to their sense of belonging and communion with ancestors" (p. 66)
- Abduction of children to serve as soldiers
- Using theatre to control what audience members "see" or understand, for example, the National Theatre's demonization of traditional ritual and practice

Systems based elements of the *Acting Together on The World Stage* documentary

The examples above, drawn from the Acting Together Anthology illuminate the systems-based tenets that can be implemented to transform complex conflicts in effective and sustainable ways. Although most of the artists and peacebuilders in *Acting Together* did not consciously take a systems-based approach to their work, their exemplary use of performance in building peace demonstrates many of the tenets of a dynamical systems framework required to address complex intractable conflicts such as war, ethnic cleansing, colonialism, racism, and other forms of violence depicted in the cases in these volumes.

The *Acting Together* documentary also articulates many elements that can be understood as mutually reinforcing elements that create attractors for peace. Sometimes these elements are exploratory, as those described in the introduction to the film: "We invite change through performance.... performance offers us a space to try on the possibilities of peace." At other times they are depicted as elements that powerfully shape peacebuilding. For example, when describing the play Fuente Ovejuna, Varea describes the work as "illuminating and celebrating the deepest fabric of community as a resource for peacebuilding."

The elements of these theatre-based peace attractors do not operate in isolation from each other, nor from the people involved in the performances. For example, O'Neal explains that story circles improve the quality of life of oppressed peoples, including the quality of their relationships, stating that "theatre does not happen in my imagination, or your imagination, but in the shared energy between us." Likewise

in her description of peacebuilding performances Walker alludes to the systems-based power of peacebuilding performances around the world, stating that while they might be considered 'tiny flames' in isolation, when linked together, they become a 'powerful fire'.

The elements of systems-based peacebuilding do not function in a linear fashion, rather they create spaces for collaborative, creative, and generative ways to transform conflict. Milosovic expresses this well when she states, "We are not here to preach or teach but to create the space for transformation." This emergent power for peacebuilding often shifts power imbalances that are foundational to complex conflicts. Mulekwa shares a potent example of this when he describes performances that shed light on government surveillance in Uganda under Idi Amin's rule. Mulekwa states that these plays were "reminding them that the power lay with the people, and not the people they put in power."

The documentary also has poignant examples of the role of superordinate identities in building peace. In summing up her work and that of Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani, Correa asks the question, "Should we be artists or political activists? What we want to be is better human beings."

Many of the peacebuilding performances explored in the documentary honor intense emotions, a central tenet in systems-based conflict transformation. For example, Hunter explains the ability of performance to engage strong emotions in ways that do not further fuel violence, stating that "art opens up ways to express emotion without judgment."

There are also numerous depictions in the documentary of actions which disrupt elements of conflict systems and create elements of peace and justice attractors.

Conclusion

This document has been created in the belief that a deeper understanding and more explicit engagement with systems theory will enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of arts-based conflict transformation. For a more comprehensive outline of transforming complex conflicts through a dynamical systems lens, see the full works of Peter Coleman. Our hope is that this systems-based lens will be helpful to those planning, documenting, and evaluating arts-based peacebuilding initiatives designed to transform violence. We look forward to engaging a community of systems-based practitioners committed to transforming complex systems of violence and creating systems of peace with justice.

References

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For further information on systems-based conflict transformation:

Massively Parallel Peacebuilding

DESIGNING ARTS-BASED INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS COMPLEX CONFLICTS

Mapping elements of the conflict:

What elements seem to be keeping the conflict in place? List as many as you find relevant and explain how each element is exacerbating the conflict.

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Which of the elements seem to be most powerful in keeping conflict in place? In other words, which elements are most strongly influencing the other elements that you listed?

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Which of the more influential elements do you have the capacity to address through arts-based initiatives?

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Are other initiatives working to address elements that you do not have the capacity to address? If so, how might you be able to support or extend their work? How might your initiatives be enhanced by their work?

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How might you engage with complexity by:

• integrating multiple aspects of a conflict into the initiative?

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• navigating a wide range of emotions?

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• tolerating ambiguity (being comfortable with uncertainty, unpredictability, conflicting imperatives and demands)?

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• taking into consideration a range of possible outcomes?

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How might you work with the energy of complex conflicts?

• In what ways can you work upstream to address patterns, conflict dynamics that influence the conflict system over time?

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• How might you begin to develop empathy for all parties in the conflict?

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EVALUATING ARTS-BASED INITIATIVES DESIGNED TO ADDRESS COMPLEX CONFLICTS

• Which conflict elements were disrupted through the initiative? In what ways?

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• Which peacebuilding elements were established or enhanced? In what ways?

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• In what ways were emotions constructively engaged?

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• How did parties' patterns of interaction move toward constructive change?

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• In what ways was nuance reintroduced into perceptions of the conflict system and of those involved in the conflict?

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• Were superordinate goals and identities created or enhanced? If so, explain how.

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• What long term goals is the initiative contributing to?

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• In what ways did tolerance for ambiguity shape the initiative?

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• Did the initiative 'work upstream' to address longer term patterns of interaction that are shaping the conflict? If so, how?

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• **Was empathy for members of both sides of the conflict enhanced? Please explain.**

• **Were you able to find ways to extend the work by linking it to other initiatives?**

• **Notes:**