

## The Network for Peacebuilding Evaluation Thursday Talks “Systems Thinking and Evaluation”

**Diana Chigas, Co-Director of RPP Program, CDA**



### Part 1: Overview

#### About the Speaker



Diana Chigas is Co-Director of the Reflecting on Peace Practice Program (RPP) at CDA and a Professor of the Practice of International Negotiation and Conflict Resolution at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. At CDA she works with governmental and non-governmental on systemic conflict analysis, strategic planning and reflection and evaluation to improve the impact of peace programming. Diana was a contributor to the recent OECD DAC guidelines on evaluation of conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and to guidance for DFID on guidance on evaluation of peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity. Prior to joining CDA, Diana worked as a facilitator, trainer and consultant in negotiation, dialogue and conflict resolution, at Conflict Management Group, a non-governmental organization founded by Harvard Law School Professor Roger Fisher (and now part of Mercy Corps). Diana became involved with RPP as a participant in the first phase, as CMG's programs in Cyprus and Georgia/South Ossetia were the subject of case studies for RPP. With CDA Executive Director Peter Woodrow, she has most recently co-authored a chapter on CDA's experience using systems thinking in evaluation, “Systems Thinking in Peacebuilding Evaluations: Applications in Ghana, Guinea-Bissau and Kosovo” (In Anderson, O. et al. Evaluation Methodologies for Aid in Conflict).



#### Presenter Remarks

Looking at systems from the perspective of conflict resolution, what we want from a systems approach is to make our analysis more relevant. There are hundreds of tools and approaches to systems, qualitative and quantitative. Systems thinking looks at interconnectedness, but in peacebuilding there are no guaranteed, predictable outcomes; you can't tell what's going to happen on the whole based on one project, because there are so many things interacting. What systems thinking enable peacebuilding to do is see its efforts as a part of a larger picture and framework.

The following are some important dimensions of systems thinking:

- 1) **Patterns of interrelationships:** The whole is greater than the sum of the parts
- 2) **Operational thinking:** How and why behavior is generated.
- 3) **Non linearity and feedback:** Systems thinking helps one understand that programs usually don't follow step-by-step linear results; one needs to account for program effects feeding back into future programming decisions, and that – especially in conflict situations- the environment will be evolving and goals and programming will need to change.

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- 4) **Systems have a “purpose”**: Systems serve a function, and as one intervenes, systems will evolve to respond to challenges and will adapt to restore equilibrium.

Systems thinking, and the above dimensions of systems thinking, have big impacts for evaluation.

Systems thinking can help better connect analysis to evaluation to programming, and in that way help programs become more relevant. This quest for relevance ties to the issue of **inside versus outside analysis**, wherein a specific program objective might be achieved, but does not effect change in the larger picture, or the larger impact might not be in line with what you envisioned. It is important to take into account analysis of specific goals and larger picture effects. System thinking requires one to understand system feedback and pushback; as mentioned earlier, programs may affect and work in the larger environment in ways that are not in line with program intention and goals, understanding system feedback is crucial to understanding how and why a program may not be working as envisioned.

When using systems in conflict analysis, it is important to create a list of factors affecting the system, and if those factors are in line with programming, then one may say that the program is relevant. To go deeper, when addressing a theory of change, perhaps a program is slowing a cyclical loop of problems, but is not actually transforming the problems. Systems thinking – in this scenario – can help give a more nuanced picture of how a program is working with, affecting, and being affected by other dynamics within the system.

Diana then gave an example of inside versus outside analysis in Guinea Bissau. In Guinea Bissau, the work was in a context of responding to an evolving conflict, and there was therefore no fixed result, so how to do an analysis? By analyzing the narrative for the system, they were able to examine theories of change and therefore develop a picture of the project's transformational effect on longer term processes.

Another example, from Kosovo, on testing theories of change and understanding system feedback, Diana gave an example where peacebuilders were trying to determine whether peacebuilding helped communities that hadn't experienced conflict before. In this case, peacebuilding projects were having some success, but they were not having a real effect on levels of coexistence. The use of systems gave the peacebuilders the ability to look at what in the environment was returning communities to the loop of non-cooperation. Systems thinking showed them the bigger picture, and how other pieces of the conflict were coming in to work against their program. Through seeing their program within the effects of the larger system, they were able to move forward.

Lots of directions one could go with systems. These are some things that we have done, but are by no means exhaustive as examples of what systems can do.

## **Part 2: Question and Answer**

**Timothy Ehlinger, University of Milwaukee (Co-Moderator)**: When you talk about a system having purpose and adapting, that's something we struggle with when looking at how people will deal with climate change. When gathering your data, how do you decide how you

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**Diana:** That's a very difficult and important question. It can often be a political decision, who do you look at? Where are the boundaries of your system?

**Timothy:** You are comfortable having multiple levels of systems simultaneously in an evaluation?

**Diana:** You have to be.

**Timothy:** Would you recommend many simple maps or one larger complex one?

**Answer:** It depends where people are, many people will start with where they are working in a community, and then see how they can bring it into a larger map. In other cases where the goal is to affect the larger dynamic, one needs to know the larger dynamic. But then one needs to look at the map at different levels to know how to proceed on the community level.

**Melanie Kawano-Chiu (Co-Moderator):** Do you find that this approach takes more resources?

**Diana:** I don't know that systems are different; systems is a perspective that helps you think about your evaluation questions, lines of inquiry, and looking at analysis. It depends on scope, like any other evaluation. Systems adds an additional layer that helps analysis. Having participatory dimensions are very helpful, which adds time and expense but also adds buy in and utilization.

**Mark Clark (Attendee):** Loop diagrams are extremely good for visualizing relationships within a system, but we find they are extremely difficult to draw in practice. One simple tool we use is a force-field diagram of positive and negative attractors, and that seems to be easier for community members to use. What experience can you share of helping develop people's (beneficiary community) capacity to draw loop diagrams?

**Diana:** It is important to have the diagram as a part of a process and have an attached narrative. Diagrams don't stand on their own. With certain constituencies, you can have a loop diagram. Start with a forcefield diagram, then move to how it tells a story. Diagrams can't be relied on their own.

**Debi Parush (Attendee):** Did I understand correctly that in Kosovo, there were negative effects of increased perception of injustice from the inter-ethnic programs and cultural impacts restricting interactions? How could the map visualize these factors so they could be dealt with better?

**Diana:** In Kosovo we found how groups which were outside the program's field of vision came back in to affect the program success, that these groups were indirectly affected and needed to be accounted for in the analysis. There were key groups who felt they were being treated unfairly, and their reactions undermined program success. This example really reinforces the importance of looking at larger dynamics.

**Bruce Hemmer (Attendee):** In every conflict systems map I've seen, everything is a loop. Why? Isn't it possible that some processes are inherently or primarily linear? Loops are more

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complicated to understand and may add unhelpful complexity if we insist on seeing everything as a loop.

**Diana:** I agree. Not everything is a loop and not everything has to be a loop. Some things are linear. There are some pieces of programs that don't need to be evaluated this way, this is not something that you should be forcing when it doesn't fit.

**Mark Clark:** The loop diagrams (and indeed any systems diagrams, maps, force-field diagram, timelines etc.) can be used as a diagnostic tools, but also as participatory interventions in their own right, for example by asking community A and community B separately to develop their own visualization of the system, and then to swap them over and reflect on each other's' perspectives: is that something you have tried?

**Diana:** In participatory programs in Kosovo we've had people look at and create loops and share them. It helped people see what was going on in the larger scheme, but it did require skilled facilitation.

**Kuldeep Niraula (Attendee):** In systems thinking, coordination between different peacebuilding organizations is very important. However, from my experience in Nepal, coordination is the most difficult thing to manage. Questions such as, who leads the coordination? Who has power over whom? What would be your suggestion for an effective coordination?

**Diana:** Coordination is difficult to manage, yes. We found that looking at context and looking at analysis and placing programs within that context helped make synergies between organizations because they were looking are real connections rather than looking programs within a vacuum. Systems and loops can help make coordination better and more effective, though not necessarily easier. Archetypical structures can be also helpful frames and discussion starters.