Transitional Spaces:
Transforming Conflict Borders into Frontiers for Peace
Lessons learnt from the
Advanced Master’s Programme in Conflict and Sustainable Peace, K.U.Leuven (MaCSP)
Draft Discussion Paper
on
The Leuven Perspective

René Bouwen, Jacques Haers, Elías López Pérez, Stephan Parmentier, Luc Reychler¹

In peace work conflicts are not only between enemies, but also among peace workers themselves: how to transform the violent conflicts between enemies will depend upon how peace workers (practitioners, academics, politicians, field workers) transform their conflicting different logics, languages and practices.

Over a period of five years, from 2002 to 2007, the K.U.Leuven hosted an Advanced Master’s Programme in Conflict and Sustainable Peace (MaCSP), an interfaculty and transdisciplinary one year programme offered yearly to some 20 selected students. The programme offered a creative pedagogy and stimulated transdisciplinary peace research at the university, while at the same time it became an opportunity to develop the foundations for a model for conflict transformation and sustainable peace building, which we term the Leuven Perspective. In this draft discussion paper we present the interconnected pedagogy and model, in the hope to elicit from readers reactions that will help us to present a longer and more fully developed paper that can become the basis for further research and allow the lessons learnt not to collect dust in some university archives but to be put in practice. Reactions can be sent to any of the above mentioned authors, who constituted the core team of the programme, but please do always include Jacques Haers (Jacques.Haers@theo.kuleuven.be).²

In what follows we unfold the central features of the Leuven Perspective: its core metaphor, transitional spaces and the rhombus perspective, and its five core elements. As the Leuven Perspective vision is theory and practice at the same time, constituting what we will call a transitional space, we interweave the theoretical insights gained and the pedagogical practices as developed in the MaCSP programme. At the end of our paper we will summarize some of the lessons learnt. We close with a set of questions as suggestions for further discussion.

The Core Metaphor “Borders and Frontiers”

Our title refers to one of the core metaphors of the MaCSP approach, addressed specifically during the MaCSP coaching weekends³ with the participants in the programme: transforming conflict borderlines into frontier spaces allowing for creative encounters at the service of peace building. This metaphor of borders and frontiers arose out of the experience of refugees of the African Great Lakes conflicts. Refugees live on the borderline between conflicting parties: they are denied space for sustainable life and are excluded from support communities in which they themselves, by committing to community building, acquire their sense of dignity. Their suffering under all kinds of gross human rights violations, and its five core elements. As the Leuven Perspective vision is theory and practice at the same time, constituting what we will call a transitional space, we interweave the theoretical insights gained and the pedagogical practices as developed in the MaCSP programme. At the end of our paper we will summarize some of the lessons learnt. We close with a set of questions as suggestions for further discussion.

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This metaphor unveils philosophical and ontological, as well as religious⁵ presuppositions. Indeed, conflicts arise out of the need to shape and structure life together we inhabit and share the same world and are, therefore, already and always engaged in relationships with one another towards supportive, life giving and life sustaining relationships.
Our first perspective on conflicts has been inspired by the three diplomacies triangle, expressing the necessity to bring into close collaboration, at the service of those who as victims suffer the consequences of violent conflicts, (a) those people who are present in the day to day concrete experiences of violence and conflict, interacting with concrete situations in the field (Field diplomats or Track 3 diplomats); (b) political and military decision makers (Track 1 diplomats); and (c) academics and conflict transformation practitioners who can reflect on and analyse processes of sustainable peace building (Track 2 diplomats). Creating transitional spaces where field, track 1 and track 2 protagonists from all parties involved in a conflict meet, may create environments where creative ways to transform conflicts emerge from their very different perspectives and assets.

The concept of transitional spaces originates in the idea of transitional object, as developed by Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein in the context of child developmental psychology: here the transitional object allows the child to move away safely from the confining security of the mother, into the wider reality, a transitional space. A transitional space, then, in the context of conflict studies, refers to the building of a safe space where even antagonists in a violent conflict can meet as protagonists in generating and allowing for the emergence of sustainable peace relationships and processes. In transitional spaces visions and renewed relations can be enacted and tested for their life giving capacity and sustainability. Here also smothered and neglected voices will be heard. Multiparty dialogues and praxes aim at the inclusion of the excluded, victim or perpetrator.

The triangular approach further evolved into the so-called Rhombus Perspective, connecting in a transitional space four main actors in the four different angles of the rhombus: practitioners (peace workers in NGOs or enterprises), researchers (academics, experts), political decision makers in political institutions, and constituencies (civil societies, religious organisations, social networks, etc.). The Rhombus Perspective pays particular attention to the excluded voices putting them at the centre of the rhombus. The four different actors are at the service of including the excluded voices in the field. At field level also we can find a rhombus transitional space among field politicians, constituencies, researchers, practitioners. What is core is not the action of each single actor in its corner of the rhombus, but how they relate among themselves opening up a space which transforms the violence of divisive borders. In the Rhombus Perspective what is key is not only the truth of each angle, but that they are articulated in a life giving relationship for the antagonist parties.

Participants in the MaCSP programme and in the transitional space created by it, are trained in five so-called “core elements” that have emerged out of the learning practice that MaCSP has been. They constitute key perspectives on and conditions for the building of frontiers or transitional spaces of encounter towards sustainable peace building. These five core-elements are: contextuality, comprehensiveness, relational constructionism, human development, and leadership.

Contextuality. Conflict transformation and sustainable peace building require skills and well tested procedures recognized by the expert community, but they also constitute an art, in that every conflict is different and takes place within its distinct context. This context should be taken account of, in articulating the conflict, as well as in exploring and eliciting endogenous peace building approaches. Action-research is a consequence of this sensitivity for the context, as proposed approaches for sustainable peace building always profit from feedback loops from the lived reality of the conflict, as well as from the political actions that are undertaken to impact on conflict transformation. Part of today’s context is also the global world as, for example, conflicts display global characteristics and implications, such as the environmental crisis. Also, the peace actors’ backgrounds have to be taken into account when analyses of conflicts are made and suggestions offered for conflict transformation towards sustainable peace building.

Comprehensiveness. Sustainable peace building requires the articulation of many different dimensions that condition the process and that interact amongst one another. Luc Reychler’s concept of Peace Architecture attempts to
unfold this complexity and the interactions between the various dimensions at work. This requires an integrated view on the big picture of a given conflict, as well as a sense for complexity and the emergence of new approaches and transdisciplinary types of knowledge out of the interaction of the various conflict and peace work dimensions. More particularly, comprehensiveness relates to: effective systems of communication, consultation, and negotiation; peace-enhancing political, economic, legal and security structures; a sustainable physical environment and an integrative climate (dismantling of mental and sentimental walls); support systems such as health, education, law, mass media, humanitarian aid, […]; multilateral cooperation; a critical mass of peace building leadership; the assessment of violence (the use of a broad definition); the analysis of conflicts from different positions (empathy); the inclusiveness of peace negotiations; the peace building deficiency assessment at the base line; the inclusion of past, present and future expectations in the conflict transformation process; and the peace building process itself.

Relational constructionism. Challenges that concern communities, as well as conflicts, require people to collaborate. Part of tackling the issue is the construction of a community of practice9 that addresses the challenges; through common practices — that sometimes only tangently touch the real issues at stake — the protagonists or antagonists find ways to build a community that resolves the challenges. Particularly in the case of conflicts, the building of such community is really at stake. In his research, René Bouwen analyses these approaches and suggests methods for building communities of practice, and in doing so he unfolds new forms of shared construction of knowledge (“knowledge is between the noses”, not only between the ears). Relational constructionism focuses on: interactions and processes of interchange beyond the mere individual party; the quality of interactions and relational practices; and the creation of conversational realities. This relational constructionism facilitates transdisciplinarity in the comprehensive peace architecture through the creation of transitional spaces or multi-party collaboration towards sustainable peace. In such transitional spaces, protagonists at various levels of a conflict (political decision makers, researchers, practitioners, and other civil society actors at different levels – from the local field in direct contact with those suffering violence, up to the global centres of decision making, this is the Rhombus Perspective) are brought together. Through the use of methods such as appreciative enquiry10 a practice of peace building is set up, which means also the building of a community of practice and the development of a creative, contextually adapted transdisciplinary knowledge showing how to articulate the relationships and interdependencies amongst all parties in a life giving way for all.

Human Development. Conflict transformation towards sustainable peace building requires, from the antagonists and protagonists in conflicts, a process of human transformation that follows a path of discernment as to their motives and attitudes. Key values to human development are empathy and trust, as well as the willingness to collaborate towards the emergence of processes of sustainable peace building. This is also true for those who want to become peace workers and reconciling third parties in conflicts. So, processes of inner knowledge, of ethical discernment, and of spiritual growth, are being paid attention to in order to empower peace workers with the capacity to recognize and include all violently excluded parties.11

Leadership. The Leuven Perspective emphasizes shared leadership or distributive leadership in community building to sustain peace. Shared leadership among all members of the community is crucial for a sense of shared ownership and responsibility, without which peace is not sustainable. Such leadership, exercised in transitional spaces allows for antagonists in a conflict to become protagonists at the service of sustainable peace building.

– 4 –

Lessons Learnt

Relational constructionism gives us the insight that the building of the community in the transitional space is as crucial as the theoretical exploration of the topic. We learned that it takes time to build the relationships that allow for a deepening of experience sharing and that one cannot rush into theoretical models without allowing the various experiences and viewpoints to influence one another and converge, overcoming moments of spontaneous distrust amongst for example people in the field and academics.

What have we learned from the MaCSP experience? First of all, that it was fun and fruitful to collaborate in a transdisciplinary way, i.e. to ask questions jointly – not only interdisciplinarily amongst academics, but also together with people coming from the field and political decision makers –, so as to be able also to become a peace building “body” (where the whole is more than the sum of the parts) that makes possible the emergence new kinds of knowledge and approaches. It has been very rewarding also to involve students in this process and to learn from them, from their experiences, from their backgrounds and ideas, from their expectations. The vision

Page 3 of 6
behind MaCSP is precisely that sustainable peace building is about the never ending process of building transitional spaces and communities that develop new knowledge and practices for concrete conflict transformation and peace building in different settings, through which a new form of togetherness emerges in which antagonists become collaborating protagonists in a vision of sustainable peace. The mission statement of MaCSP is, therefore, quite simple (at least in its formulation): to empower people to collaborative shared leadership in building transitional sustainable peace frontier spaces, to invite people to move to frontiers and to create transitional spaces from violence to peaceful life for all in face to face relationships with other parties involved in a conflict.

We also discovered the value of processes, and the logic and rationality needed to sustain processes, very different sometimes from the static packages of knowledge that professors transmit to their students. Therefore, we were more inclined to workshoping and coffee discussions than to magisterial classes, just to open up some other transitional spaces. Within the MaCSP programme, academic hierarchy took on new forms, joining professors and students in a common research project that, at the same time, became for all of them a pedagogical adventure. We experienced what René Bouwen always insists on, that knowledge is constructed in between noses, that knowledge is relational and involves the whole person in dialogue with others. So, it very soon became clear that our best students were also those who interacted most and who helped one another in getting their degrees: collaboration instead of competition, a key rule precisely also for transitional spaces, that gain by opening up to the discarded and neglected voices.

We continue to regret that this process was abruptly put to an end in painful circumstances. MaCSP was hard work, but at the same time an enjoyable and stimulating experience, and we experience its disappearance not only as a personal loss to each one of us, but also to our university and to the peace building community in general. We still have a lot to learn and to develop also from the mistakes we made and have learned to see. Producing this draft discussion document towards a more comprehensive article represents a step towards making available the lessons learnt to a larger audience.

– Conclusion –

As we said at the beginning, in peace work conflicts are not only between enemies, but also among peace workers themselves. Both conflicts are stumbling blocks on the peace road, not only the conflict between enemies. To solve the conflict between enemies depends also on the way a transitional space is facilitated among peace workers: how to transform the violent conflicts between enemies will depend upon how peace workers (practitioners, academics, politicians, field workers, constituencies) transform their conflicting different logics, languages, interests, and practices. The challenge, therefore, is to transform excluding borders into including frontiers not only between parties at war, but also within the peace building community.
We know we would benefit tremendously from your remarks and suggestions while in the process of writing down our experiences and the Leuven Perspective for conflict transformation towards sustainable peace building. To help your reflection we suggest the following questions, but we value any broader remark, suggestion or question.

1. What are your comments, ideas or suggestions with regard to the Leuven Perspective? Do you feel that some aspect of conflict transformation towards sustainable peace building is missing?

2. Have you gained any expertise in rhombus thinking? Could this perspective be improved?

3. What kind of workshop would you suggest to further develop MaCSP insights and expertise?

4. We found the link between pedagogical project, practice and research very fruitful. Do you share and value such experiences? Would you have any suggestions for implementing such insights via the WWW?

5. If you were to make a SWOT analysis or to formulate critical questions with regard to the above discussion paper, what would these be?

6. Would you like to implement a project as MaCSP in your own context or apply the Leuven Perspective to projects of your own?

In July 2004, Luc Reychler was elected secretary general of IPRA. Reychler (Ph.D. Harvard, 1976) is professor of International Relations at the University of Leuven and director of its Centre of Peace Research and Strategic Studies.

Jacques Haers (*1956) is a Jesuit and professor of systematic theology at the Faculty of Theology, K.U.Leuven. He chairs the Faculty’s research department for systematic theology and its Centre for Liberation Theologies.

Stephan Parmentier (*1960) teaches sociology of crime, law and human rights at the Faculty of Law, K.U.Leuven, and serves as the head of its Department of Criminal Law and Criminology. He is the editor-in-chief of the Flemish Yearbook on Human Rights and the co-general editor of the international book Series on Transitional Justice.

Elías López Pérez is a Jesuit and conducts his doctoral research at the Faculty of Theology, K.U.Leuven. He is assistant to the director of Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS).

René Bouwen is a retired professor of organizational behaviour and group dynamics in the Faculty of Psychology, K.U.Leuven. He is a member of the Faculty’s Centre for Organisational and Personnel Psychology.
Endnotes

1 The ideas developed in this paper would not have come about without the contribution of some of the MaCSP collaborators we would like to mention explicitly: Stefan Renckens, Michèle Jacobs, Anton Stellamans, Richard Lappin, Tom Sauer en Edmund Guzman.

2 This discussion paper offers questions for discussion but leaves open, of course, the possibility to make any type of suggestions or comments. The e-mail addresses of the authors are the following: Rene.Bouwen@psy.kuleuven.be, Jacques.Haers@theo.kuleuven.be, Elias.Lopez@student.kuleuven.be, Stephan.Parmentier@law.kuleuven.be, Luc.Reychler@soc.kuleuven.be. Please, when replying to the paper, always include Jacques.Haers@theo.kuleuven.be.

3 MaCSP arranged three coaching weekends every year. These weekends were hosted in residential areas away from the university with the intention of facilitating experience-based learning in an informal setting.

4 The very word “religion” here refers to the forces that connect people and weave them into togetherness (re-ligare), while at the same time indicating processes of reflection and awareness, dialogues and narratives, that are necessary for the building of such togetherness (re-legere).


6 The theoretical and practical background for these transitional spaces has been developed by René Bouwen in his thought on relational constructionism and appreciative enquiry. Another source of inspiration for the development of the idea of transitional spaces has been the work of Stephan Parmentier on processes of transitional and restorative justice. Seen from a Christian theological perspective, such transitional spaces resemble ritual and religious practices, as has been explored by Elias López Pérez in his work on transitional justice in relation to the sacrament of forgiveness or reconciliation (see his No Peace Without “Forgiving-Justice”, http://soc.kuleuven.be/iieb/CPRS/cahiers/cahier76-forgivingjustice.pdf).

7 During the MaCSP weekends as well as in the MaCSP project seminar and in the interactions between themselves, MaCSP students and participants have been trained to build up and work in such transitional spaces. The MaCSP programme itself came to be understood as a transitional space, the building up of a community through addressing the conflicts of interests amongst the participants, professors and students alike. With the support of UCSIA-Antwerp, we organised a Peace-Building Leadership Workshop from February 21st to 25th, 2005. The workshop was developed on the basis of the Leuven Perspective, and helped to gain insight in this perspective. Selection criteria for the 25 participants were the triangle (participants from the field, experts and decision makers) as well as geographical and political diversity (contextuality) and various occupations and backgrounds (comprehensiveness). Participants were also chosen on the basis of their capacity to relate constructively amongst one another. The process of the workshop, supervised by a team of coordinators and observers, intended the creation of a transitional space exploring peace building leadership using an appreciative enquiry structure (Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver). The experience was fruitful for the participants and led to further workshops in Kosovo and in Eastern DRC. In close interaction with the development of the Leuven Perspective, we also built up, in collaboration with OCIPE in Brussels, a Relational Peace Advocacy Network (RPAN) focused on Eastern DRC and the African Great Lakes Region, particularly with regard to the illegal exploitation of natural resources. Collaborative networks have been and are further established in which international expertise is coupled with advocacy in Brussels and Washington, and with connections in the field. This project is still ongoing.

8 Concretely, we developed this Rhombus Perspective out of the diplomacy triangle and the Relational Peace Architecture Network (RPAN) that we elaborated for the African Great Lakes region. For the RPAN model, see: http://www.ocipe.info/index.php?id=33.

9 Communities of practice are intimately connected to the above mentioned transitional and frontier spaces. The ideas and concepts developed in relational constructionism also have a parallel in the spiritual and religious practices of common apostolic discernment.

10 Anton Stellamans has been instrumental in introducing and refining the use of appreciative enquiry in the MaCSP perspective.

11 Franz Baro and Luc Quintyn helped to develop this approach through the “Sense of Coherence” model and their attention to trauma healing. Johan Verstraeten provided support in developing both the ethical and spiritual practices that are part of sustainable peace building processes.