

Integrating African Meaning Systems and Systemic Thinking – The Sinani Approach of Working with Conflict Communities

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Introduction

Systemic thinking can take various forms and languages. Many African views on personhood and community share basic principles with systemic ideas – thinking in relationships and network structures and considering social interactions as circular processes. Non-linear thinking (which might be unusual in a Western context) has been a central element of many African philosophies, which are more interested in the social and spiritual balance of a system as a whole than in identifying causal relationships between parts of a system.

This paper will discuss the ideas and practice of a South African organization called Sinani which works with communities affected by political and social violence in the province KwaZulu-Natal. In a process of continuous action and reflection Sinani has been developing its own approach to peacebuilding and community development, which integrates African philosophy with systemic thinking and participatory interventions. How can these strategies be described and in which way did systemic thinking contribute to success? What lessons can be learned from these experiences which could be relevant to other contexts?

While writing this paper we were confronted with the challenge of separating theory from practice in a process where practice forms theory and theory informs practice in a non-linear way. The Sinani model is a fluid, organic, ever-changing approach, which nevertheless follows certain ideas and theories of change. In the interest of clarity we will introduce some of these ideas and frameworks of thinking and explain the Sinani conceptual working by telling the story of interventions and change in the region of Mbumbulu. Analysing interventions through ‘storytelling’ often reveals the depths of change processes more than simplistic cause and effect analyses or complicated peace and conflict impact assessment systems. When looking carefully at the flow of events, decisions and interactions in the case of Sinani’s interventions in Mbumbulu, the structure and boundaries of a conflict system become visible as well as its own resources and solutions for conflict transformation and change.

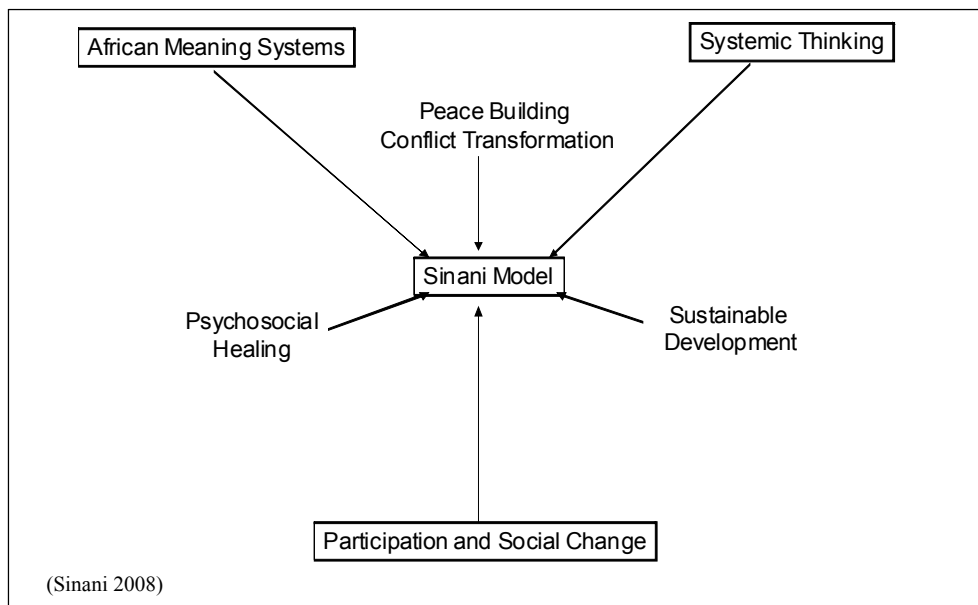
We will conclude the paper by reflecting about the strengths and challenges of systemic thinking in this intervention approach.

1. The Conceptual Framework of the Sinani Approach

1.1 Sources of Inspiration and Thinking

Sinani, which means ‘We are with you’, has been working in more than 20 communities in KwaZulu-Natal since 1995, supporting peace building and development work. The early pioneers of Sinani were coming from a history of support for ex-detainees and victims of violence during the resistance against Apartheid. In the 1990s they started working in communities affected by political violence in the province.

The intervention model has been developed and shaped by multiple influences reflecting South African history and diversity.



Philosophically, it is influenced by the communal view of personhood as part of African meaning systems, which emphasize the interconnection between everyone as part of a cosmic unity. According to Mkhize (2004a; 2004b), ‘community’ in African understanding does not mean a collection of individuals who gather together to pursue common goals but refers to an organic relationship between people who recognize the obligation to be responsive to one another’s needs. It is through participation in community that a person finds meaning in life. The central definition in this regard is the saying “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” – *One becomes a human being through other human beings – I am because we are and we are, therefore, I am*. These principles are reflected in the ideal of Ubuntu, and its basic ideas will be explained below. Individuality is not denied, but it is expected that achievements of outstanding individuals will transform the community to a higher level of functioning just as the community is creating and carrying the individuals.

A person gains self-understanding through the encounter and dialogue with others. It includes the concept that people cannot claim to fully understand who they are when they deny others the right to make meaning or to speak. In addition, the self is also conceptualized as pluralistic. Instead of having one 'true self' that is a product of genetics and interaction with the environment, it is believed that human beings carry with them ancestral/spiritual selves, present selves and the selves that are yet to be born. These different selves can also be linked to different world views a person has been exposed to, like African or Western world views. Ideally, these selves within a person work together interdependently, but they can also be in conflict. Through the principle of dialogue, continuous shifts between different self-perspectives can be explored and can become a fruitful resource to deal with the challenges of life.

Politically, Sinani is guided by theories of participation and social change which are influenced by Paulo Freire, Steve Biko and others. For Biko the first step to social change has to start with attitudes and thinking of peoples' minds: oppression goes along with controlling the minds of the oppressed, who are made to believe that change is not possible. Liberation begins with consciousness (Biko 2002). Freire emphasizes the ownership of change: transformation processes should not be organised for people but together with them in a dialogical approach (Freire 1996, 2007) Inspired by these and other thinkers Sinani understands participation as a very deep, radical approach. It starts from the belief that every human being is able to think and act on his/her own behalf no matter how poor, how oppressed, how educated and knowledgeable he or she might be. Although violence, disempowering relations and oppressive structures destroy people's confidence in their own abilities, human potential is still there and can be developed because that is what human beings are about. Participation in decisions and developments affecting one's own life and having the right to choose without fear is the basis of political development and a human rights culture. It needs to be instilled in the very first interaction any peace and development organization has with the people they want to help.

On a conceptual level, Sinani's theories of change are influenced by systemic thinking, as expressed in the following principles which draw on various thinkers (Bateson 2000, Bronfenbrenner 1979; Watzlawick 1967; de Shazer 1985 and others):

- It is important to look at the relationships and boundaries of a (conflict) system to know who and what belongs to a system in order to intervene relevantly.
- Destructive dynamics tend to become cyclical and repetitive, causes and effects can often not be separated.
- There are no 'objective' solutions; options for change depend on the perspectives of people involved and can only come from within the system ("People know what is best for them").
- Change options develop in communicative and interactive contexts where people feel acknowledged and safe.
- Find the point of leverage – harness the resources that are already there; focus on change instead of problems.
- The whole is more than the sum of the parts – connecting the work on different system levels.
- Look at people holistically.

1.2 Basic Principles of Sinani's Work

Drawing on these inspirations and integrating them with practical experience, Sinani has identified the following principles as a conceptual framework for working with affected communities.

Central to the intervention is the relationship with people in the communities. These relationships are expressed in an ongoing dialogue which is guided by the values of Ubuntu, respect and credibility. As already mentioned above, the ideal of 'Ubuntu'¹ is a process rather than an act and it is characterized by caring, just and respectful relationships in order to fulfil the duties and responsibilities within a community. It requires ideals and moral standards such as generosity, benevolence and respect. Respect is communicated through every aspect of interaction with community members: the way we talk, the way we listen, the way we respond to communities' concerns and the way we give support. In addition, community workers need to act completely worthy of trust, transparently and sincerely in order to gain credibility and to build trusting relationships in a context of mistrust, disrespect and suspicion.

Working systemically means for Sinani a holistic community approach. Instead of compartmentalized interventions, which are only directed towards one specific issue or problem, Sinani looks at strengthening the community system as a whole, its social fabric (cohesion) and its problem solving capacities. This means also looking at people in a holistic way, seeing challenges, capacities and resources on different levels and trying to support them to find their own change strategies.

One important dynamic of conflict systems, especially in poverty contexts in the global South, is the impact of psychosocial trauma, which needs to be seen and acknowledged. A long history of violence, oppression and exploitation leaves deep marks on individuals and social relations and can create problem cycles and traumatic processes. They result in disempowerment of individuals, destructive relationship patterns, fragmentation of communities and ethical corruption of values, which makes social change and peaceful development difficult.

Interventions, however, should not focus on problem cycles but work with the power of survivors. Identifying resources and skills that enabled people to survive can help create empowerment and re-connection. Outside intervention can be useful when it enhances local structures to facilitate change processes, to rebuild relationships and search for alternative options.

Another central principle is the ownership and participation of communities. Change needs to be determined and controlled by the people themselves. Participation of affected peoples on all levels of intervention is the key element of restoring dignity

1 The South African Nobel Laureate, former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, describes Ubuntu in the following way. "It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and is inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness, it speaks about compassion. A person with Ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are. The quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanise them" (Tutu 2000).

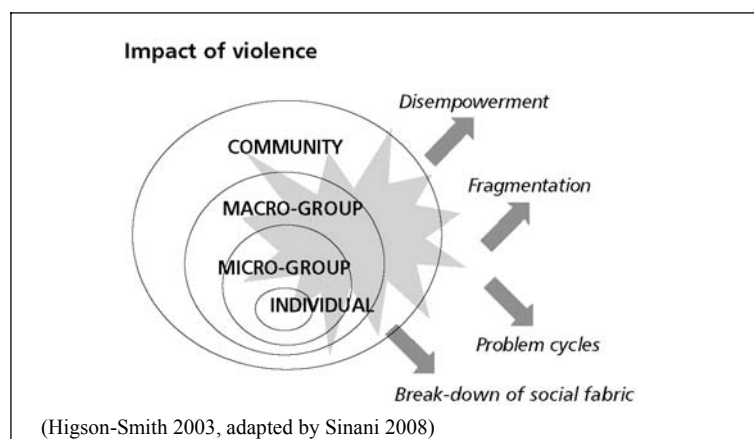
and developing trust in transformation. It is encouraged by an attitude of listening, respect and empathy.

Interventions also need to be integrated – through working on different systems levels (individuals, groups, community, leadership, institutions) and issues (violence, poverty, HIV/AIDS) in parallel in locally appropriate ways. This can connect micro- and macro-processes and create synergy effects. However, interventions should have a long-term perspective. Peacebuilding, community development and HIV/AIDS prevention are long-term processes which need reliable and sustainable interventions and a culture of learning: Since change processes are dynamic and unpredictable; interventions need continuous monitoring and evaluation in an organizational culture of reflecting, learning and self care.

Sinani usually starts a process of intervention on the basis of a request from the community (either from certain groups like youth or leadership, or service structures like police or clinics) or other actors like municipalities, political leaders, NGOs etc. Through extensive consultations and negotiations with community structures appropriate interventions are developed and agreed upon. They start with what the community itself expresses as their primary needs and not the ones Sinani identifies. In the following process these needs might change so interventions are adjusted and renegotiated.

1.3 Intervention Strategies

The overall objective of Sinani's work is to strengthen and build community-based support structures to address violence, poverty and HIV/AIDS in locally appropriate ways. However, conflict and violence are impacting on multiple levels, which reduces the capacity of people and community structures to find change options and act. It disempowers individuals and community structures; fragments memories, relationships and settlements; creates destructive cycles; and breaks down social networks, cohesion and ethics.

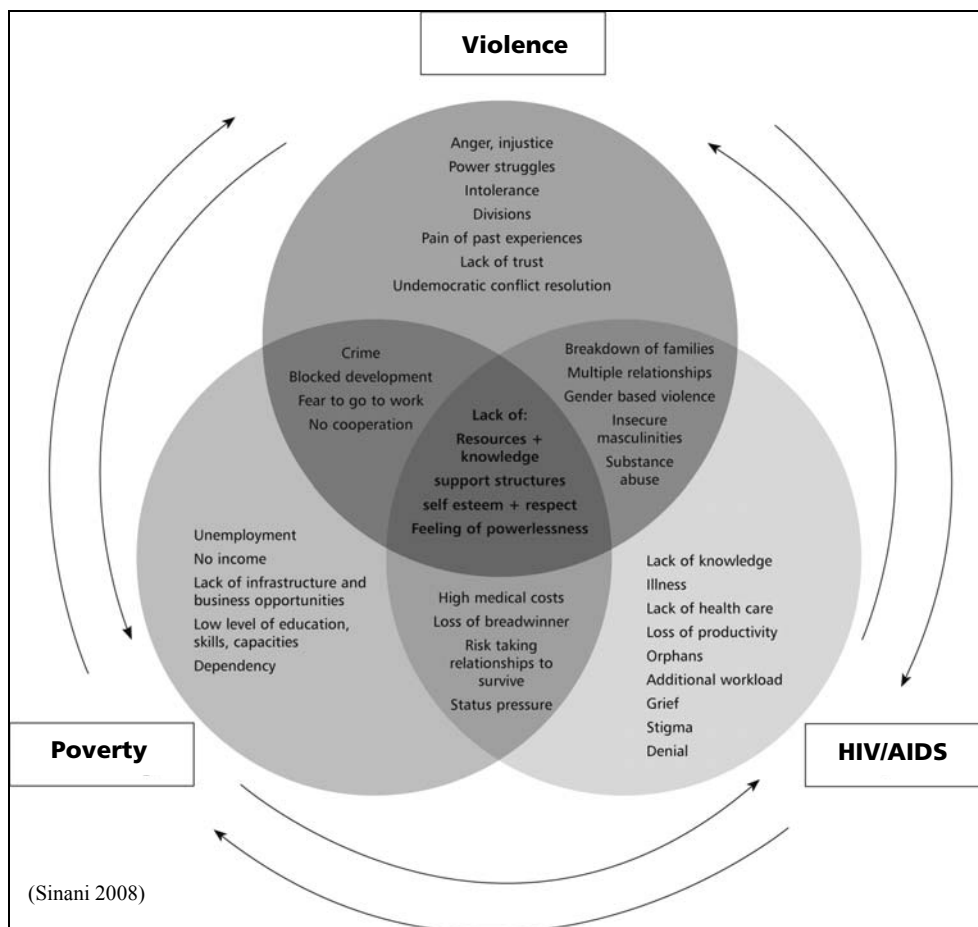


Looking at challenges within this framework helps to identify strategies to mobilize and strengthen the internal resources of communities so that they are able to change their situation. Sinani focuses on four intervention strategies:

1. **Empowerment.** Empowerment means to help people develop their capacities and confidence to deal with their problems and realize their dreams. An important part of empowerment lies in the way people are treated and acknowledged in what they do to survive. It means focusing on the idea that each person has positive contributions to make. This requires humility on part of the facilitator – not taking credit for the achievements but continually handing back the credit for any progress to the participants. Empowerment needs to be encouraged on different levels: with individuals, groups and communities. Promoting connectedness between people so that they work together more effectively is one way of group empowerment. Assisting them in their analysing and planning capacities helps them to understand their situation better and find ways to improve it. Building the capacities of local leaders and service providers to engage in development can empower the community as a whole to be proactively involved in addressing community needs and changing their situation.
2. **Linking and re-connecting.** Connecting fragmented communities means building relationships and trust on different levels: between individuals, groups, community structures, leadership and other key stakeholders. It starts with integrating traumatic experiences into biographies, to remember historical and cultural roots and resources, to recognize distrust and fear, explore barriers to cooperation, learn how to negotiate trusting relationships, and how to develop caring behaviour and social support. Linking and re-connecting polarized communities through a mediated process also helps to increase access to resources inside and outside of communities. It facilitates links between communities and different levels of government to ensure proper democratic processes and economic development programmes are taking place.
3. **Breaking problem cycles.** Helping people to understand the destructive dynamics they experience can facilitate the search for constructive alternatives. Rather than looking at problems as ‘deficiencies’ which need to be ‘repaired’, systemic thinking suggests looking at problems as a system of different interlinking factors which tends to repeat itself in a cyclical way. Especially, conflict systems are characterized by cycles of violent action and reaction, of conflicts about the conflicts and many other complex feedback loops which make it difficult for people to break out. Understanding problem systems as a construction and as dependent on the perspective chosen can help with looking at problem cycles in a different way, and through this to discover options for change. Sinani has worked very successfully with such a concept using the cycle of violence and the cycle of peace as explained in the Mbumbulu case study below. Working with visual images like these cycles means creating the space for people to tell their own specific stories in a way that allows them to see other options beyond the cycle.
4. **Strengthening the social fabric and Ubuntu.** Communities are more than the sum of their parts. In the process of linking and re-connecting fragmented community structures, families and individuals, the values and identities of communities are challenged to renew and reinvent themselves. Violence and conflict tend to corrupt ethical values, polarize identities and mix up social roles and hierarchies. Strengthening the social fabric and restoring dignity, respect and Ubuntu means not going back to a previous situation but creating something new, drawing on the past and the present. It involves the development of common values, narratives and identities in a non-partisan way.

1.4 Integrated Approach

Another very crucial point is the acknowledgement that peacebuilding needs to be integrated with development work and psychosocial support. Many conflicts, problem cycles and narrative frameworks related to violence, poverty and HIV/AIDS within communities overlap and reinforce each other. Improvement on one level can be destroyed by insufficient change on others. At the same time, changes in one area can trigger changes in another. The following graph describes some of the interconnections Sinani observed.



Acknowledging these interrelated problem cycles, Sinani integrates peace and development work in various ways. It works with existing community based systems or structures (community-based organizations/CBOs, leadership/key stakeholders, actors of change, traditional structures in the community) on different levels. These levels include personal development and trauma support, organizational development, conflict resolution and leadership skills, community awareness campaigns and

economic development skills etc., addressing issues around violence, poverty and HIV/AIDS.

The intervention instruments are very diverse and are adjusted to specific target groups, objectives and the programme area. Networking and cooperating with other NGO or government structures, resource persons, and training and research institutions who are experts in specific areas is a key component in this intervention approach in order to increase impact with limited resources, as well as avoid duplication.²

How does this systemic framework guide and shape practical interventions? And how have practical experiences in a context with strong ties to African meaning systems contributed to and shaped the systemic framework? The following section tells the story of interventions and change processes in one region called Mbumbulu. It shows the flexibility of systemic approaches, which allow the integration of different cultural meaning systems – or rather the other way around: (non-Western) meaning systems have never been linear but are in many ways systemic in nature, even if they use a very different language. Through integrating modern systemic ideas they can transform into locally appropriate interventions in the present.

2. Mbumbulu Case Study – Working with Structures and Resources of the Conflict System

2.1 History and Context of Violence at Mbumbulu

“The first sounds I remember hearing as a child were gunshots. Our family was always on the run. In this community violence is just in people’s blood. I don’t know how you are going to change this” (Mbumbulu youth group member, 2002).³

Mbumbulu is a vast rural area to the South of the city of Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The people of the area describe years of violence, as the above quote indicates. Generations of violent conflict between family clans led to strong divisions in some parts of the greater area. The history of political violence dates back to the mid 1980s when the conflict between the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC) escalated. This process was increasingly complicated by the apartheid state’s strategy of mobilizing ethnic and intra-community conflict in support of its overall aims to maintain an authoritarian and racist social hierarchy. It fuelled the conflicts with arms deliveries, training, logistics and hidden operations (TRC1998).

The conflict in KwaZulu-Natal reached its zenith in the months preceding the 1994 elections, after which violence reduced dramatically. However, the effects of peace and reconciliation were not followed through at a community level and many areas that were severely affected by violence remained strongly politically divided. Ongoing cycles of violence, including revenge attacks, began to escalate.

2 The Sinani intervention approach was written up in 2008 in a handbook for community practitioners. It describes the concept, strategies and tools in very practical details. See Sinani (2008).

3 All quotes from community members and Sinani staff are from internal Sinani reports 2001-2008.

2.2 Who Belongs to the System? Beginning of Sinani Involvement in the Area

Sinani was first invited in 2000 by youth in the area who heard about the organization's income-generating work with other youth. During the initial stages of intervention, time was spent on introductions to the leadership and consultation about different ways to work in the area. Building relationships with leaders in the area during the community entry stage was a challenging process. The organization kept being introduced to different levels and groupings of leadership. Often the leaders seemed to 'forget' that they had been consulted previously and demanded why the organization had started work without permission. It became clear that there were other dynamics at play. Only through a long process of interaction and different phases of interventions did we learn about relevant structures, relationships and dynamics of this conflict system.

Working with the youth group was difficult. It was clear that there were divisions in the area and the organization did not have the capacity to start two groups. They were upfront with the youth that they could not only work with youth from one side of the divisions but that the group would either have to wait until the organization had the capacity to start two groups in parallel or agree to form a joint group. The youth requested a joint group. Early members describe their nervousness in canvassing for the group, saying: "We decided to go and visit those youth which were also our enemies. It was so scary. We did not know what they would think about us coming to visit. We could see they were suspicious." Their brave efforts resulted in a large group of youth coming together on a weekly basis at the local school, deemed a fairly neutral venue.

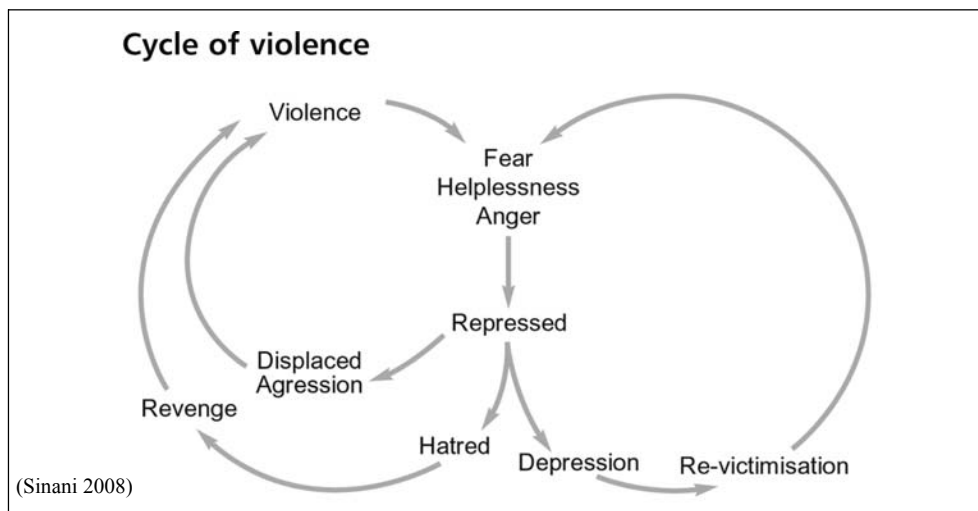
Working with the youth also kept being derailed by the conflict in the area. Their income-generating grass-cutting project was not very successful, and it was difficult for them to operate in the areas worst affected by violence. The organization was approached by some of the youth from one part of Mbumbulu that was particularly severely affected by violence. They told how they were once again being pressured to join in the violence in the area. One said: "I am just on the edge. I cannot decide between committing suicide and becoming involved in crime." However, the fact that the young people were confiding in the staff each time things became tense and their will for change was seen in a very positive light. A staff member reported: "What struck me was the incredible will they had not to be drawn back into the violence."

There was an agreement to help the youth to work on peacebuilding in their local area. They were assisted in doing a profile of the violence in their area. Confidentiality was kept, even when known perpetrators of violence were identified. One of the key emerging issues was that the local police operating in the area were somehow caught up in the dynamics of violence. The youth agreed to approach the police to encourage them to request support from the organization.

2.3 Discussing Conflict Dynamics: Working with Police and Traditional Leaders

When Sinani received a request from the police for training in peacebuilding, it was taken up immediately. During the workshop with the police, key higher-level traditional leaders (*Amakhosi*) were invited. After some preliminary exercises to clarify expectations and help people to settle down, participants were divided according to their areas and asked to provide a profile of the violence in their area. They were asked not to mention names or highlight individuals but to describe some of the dynamics between the various groupings in the area.

The dynamics identified were related to a Cycle of Violence model which illustrates ongoing cycles of revenge, displaced aggression and re-victimization.



This process seemed to be a powerful point in the workshop. Consensus amongst participants was reached: they would like to work together to break this cycle of violence. The model was introduced at the end of the first day, and on the second day, during a reflection on how people were feeling about the process, almost all participants reported that they had not slept that night because of thinking about the ongoing cycles of violence in their community and how it has affected them. There was a strong urge to prevent further exposure to violence, with people saying that they did not want their own children growing up in the same conditions.

Sadly, one of the participants, who was filled with enthusiasm for the peacebuilding process, was soon killed. Community members hinted that he had declared his position of peace too strongly and hence had been rendered vulnerable to his enemies. They attacked him at home one night. This was a huge shock to the group and the facilitators. It was a difficult lesson in the importance of moving forward carefully with the peacebuilding process.

What emerged in the workshops as well was the awareness that another important group of the system needed to be brought into the process: the traditional army, who was at the centre of the fighting.

2.4 Confusion of Roles in Conflict Dynamics: Working with the Traditional Army

Rather stupidly, the first workshop with the traditional army was arranged to take place at the police station. Since many of the warriors were known perpetrators of violence, the venue created much fear. Those that arrived were extremely scared, and many others did not turn up. There was also a difficult dynamic where the participants were warriors who had trained and dedicated their lives to fighting. Honour and revenge were important principles to them. The presentation of the cycle of violence, for example, led to one participant saying: "I lost my brother and I revenged his death. I felt better afterwards and do not regret this."

However, the workshop shifted when the group began discussing traditional conduct relating to warfare, as opposed to how the violence is carried out at present. Traditionally, when there was a point of conflict between two villages, the fighting happened during specific pre-arranged times and places. It only involved adult male warriors who were trained, and not civilians or boys. The battle had a clear beginning and end, and attention was focused on reconciliation initiatives after the battle.

The group reflected on the way in which violence had spread into all parts of life and to the rest of the community. There were also currently no measures in place to reconcile after the violence.

The workshop venue was changed to a more neutral community hall. It was opened up to other warriors. The group grew to over 50 participants. Each time more participants were added, the ones from the previous workshops insisted on bringing them personally and then stayed on as part of the new, larger group. Working with these participants from different villages was very tense. People arrived armed. Clear rules of communication needed to be established.

The work with the various traditional structures continued for several months. It became clear once again that there was an urgent need to work on role clarification in order to rebuild the traditional structures and regain respect and dignity. For each structure, participants came up with a type of job description. Lines of communication and accountability were clarified. The role between the traditional and political leadership was also discussed. Many of the traditional leaders felt undermined by politically-appointed outsiders who had legal authority as government representatives.

2.5 Finding Points of Leverage in a Conflict System: Working with Traditional Music Groups

Participants of the peacebuilding intervention described that entertainment events had become a focal point of violence in the area. Traditional music events involve singing

and dancing competitions between villages in the area. Traditionally, the army or warriors (*Izinsizwa*) were involved in planning and negotiating the events and ensuring proper behaviour of the young people. They would control the crowd and monitor the interactions between men and women. They would be present to prevent conflict, if tensions arose about the outcome of the competition, which was judged by elected representatives from both villages.

However, violence changed these events. Music composers (*Ababizi*), whose role is to listen to the dynamics and issues of the community and compose songs to offer messages to the leadership and to the community, played a powerful role in instigating violence. Their songs became oriented towards insulting the neighbouring village and opposing family clan.

The singers (*Amagosa*) were also involved in the violence, particularly in relation to their conduct and manner of singing at the events. Participants reported that some were even chosen for their fighting strength, not their musical ability. Even the judges and the selection of the judges at the events became an issue of conflict. The judges were said to no longer focus on the quality of the music but to use the judging as an opportunity to create violence.

One of the key interventions, as it turned out, was the production of a CD with traditional music, which was completely unplanned on the part of Sinani. Some of the participants asked to work on this, and the staff grudgingly supported them, since it was a lot of work, and they were coming into the office almost daily to work on the project. The effect that this CD had on building peace in the area seemed greater than the facilitators' so-called sophisticated peacebuilding techniques. People said about the CD and the launch:

“We are the talk of the town since our traditional music was played on the radio. Even the crime levels have dropped. The morale is up – there is excitement and hope.”(Traditional music group member)

2.6 Identifying Impact and Further Intervention Needs

The initial momentum of the peacebuilding process until around 2004 was great. The local police superintendent reported:

“Since Sinani has been working in our area, we have had the lowest levels of violence ever before, especially over Christmas. We even received recognition from our national office who wants to give us an award.”

However, during election time things became tense again, even though levels of violence remained low. There were mixed feelings among Sinani staff about whether or not the situation was stable enough to retreat. After lengthy discussions within the organization, it was decided to go on another consultation round to find out how people feel about the peace process. One staff member describes the consultations and discussions which led to the idea of a traditional cleansing ceremony:

“We had done many workshops and meetings with the Mbumbulu leadership, we had big community meetings, and we had meetings with the police. But I could tell somehow that there was something missing, something that leaders could take up together to cement the peace. But I

couldn't put a finger on it what exactly it was. We spoke about this situation with colleagues. Some said our task is fulfilled, we should withdraw, others said, no, let's consult again. Then we decided to go on a consultation mission and knocked on many doors, visited leaders at home, one by one. We asked them how they feel, if the workshops are helping, if there is something missing and what they feel could lead the way forward towards peace.

The idea of having a cleansing ritual was brought up by one chief. He said we need to bring people together. There was so much violence here, so many people lost their lives, people are still scared, even when we meet in the workshops, people still have issues inside. The nation needs to be cleansed from all these bad feelings in order to feel free to visit and relate to each other again. Mbumbulu is a violent place, unless we perform certain rituals we will be under the influence of bad luck spirits. Those who died cannot find peace and will keep on influencing the living to continue fighting. When we came back to the organization, we knew this suggestion was something completely different. Management was at first very sceptical, asking if it just was about a big celebration with lots of meat. Only after many more consultations and discussions did we realize the importance and meaning of this cleansing ritual and agreed to help facilitating such a process" (Sinani staff member).

2.7 Integrating Ancestors into the System – Facilitating a Cleansing Ritual as a Public Reconciliation Ceremony

Where are the boundaries of a system? After this consultation, Sinani staff realized that even those who died during the violence are an important part of the conflict system. Within African meaning systems the ancestors are mediators between human beings and god. But only some move into the stage of being ancestors who lived a certain life and fulfilled certain spiritual obligations. Otherwise, ancestors can create unbalance and have a bad influence on the living.

"Those people that died during the war are still fighting, even if we have made peace now. There in the mountains they look for you. When you walk there at night you hear a great wind and a fire because they are still at war. Then in our culture there is no good luck. So we who are still alive have to help our ancestors to make peace. We have to wash off the blood and apologize to them. By helping those who are dead we are helping ourselves" (Mbumbulu inkhosi).

Cleansing rituals and ceremonies, known as *inhlambuluko* or *ihlambo* in Zulu, are common traditional approaches to conflict transformation in Africa, especially in societies recovering from the trauma of war. The purpose of cleansing ceremonies is to provide an opportunity for the parties that were involved in the conflict to publicly confess their wrongdoings and also to seek forgiveness from the wronged party. It also means a process of opening communication with the ancestors, of creating connections and balance again. Cleansing ceremonies are holistic not only because of their grass-roots approach to peace building – the entire community is involved – but also because they appeal to the religious-spiritual worldview shared by the participants. The process is to bring about societal harmony and social integration thought to have been thrown out of balance as the result of war or conflict and without which the community cannot forge ahead with life.

The process leading up to the traditional cleansing ceremony was extremely complex and lengthy – it took nearly one and a half years. The main challenge was to get all the relevant parties to participate equally in the process. There was extensive consultation and planning within the leadership forum. The date of the event was post-

poned several times because it was felt that the ceremony would not be well represented by senior leadership of both political parties in the area. Finally, sufficiently senior people from both sides agreed to participate and the ceremony went ahead in March 2007.

The process started with a small pre-ceremony with the *amakhosi* on the evening preceding the actual event, where the burning of incense and the slaughtering of goats took place. The burning of incense, together with the goat slaughtering, is perceived as the channel that opens communication with the ancestors.

“The cleansing was for the amakhosi to apologise to the ancestors, who founded the community. The amakhosi had to apologize that they failed in their responsibility to look after the clans. Then the izinduna [local headmen] apologised to the current amakhosi for leading young men to war without the approval of the amakhosi. We washed our hands in the water mixed with the bile of the sacrificial goat to symbolize the cleansing of the entire clans from the isinyama [pollution] caused by the war. We sought forgiveness on behalf of the clans” (Mbumbulu Inkhosi).

The next day, a huge ceremony with more than 8000 people followed. It was graced by the king of the Zulu Nation, the chairperson of the Inkatha Freedom Party and the (ANC) minister of Economic Affairs in the province. Nearly 5000 of the participants were warriors, who came in with traditional arms and loud songs in military formations, creating moments of extreme tension and fear among the community members present when they marched in. They were calmed down by the party leaders, and slowly tension and fear made place for relief and joy. The ceremony was a combination of speeches, singing, dancing and traditional spiritual rituals. In the end ten cows were slaughtered and the food was cooked and shared by all present.

2.8 Impact of the Cleansing Ceremony

“Our hearts were very happy to see the people of the chiefs gathered together after what happened before. This has made me to see that I am free. I can go alone to other sections now. I would reach there safe because that gathering was a success and it shows that there is peace and safety. Everything went well till the end of the ceremony, nothing bad happened. I felt that was a wonderful thing. Even the lord and the ancestors of the nation have accepted that” (Community member Mbumbulu).

The impact of this event went well beyond original expectations. A participatory research, which Sinani conducted along with its intervention in cooperation with the University of KwaZulu-Natal, showed a significant change in perception and behaviour among the community members interviewed. Immediately after the events the bus and taxi routes changed and were now passing through the former conflicting communities freely. People talked about visiting each other in the different communities again without fear, feeling free to walk at night. Development projects that were put on hold because of the violence were reactivated again. One woman who lived next to a piece of land where many people were killed said she used to be troubled at night by the screams of the deceased. She described how the night after the cleansing ceremony and ever since, the voices have been quiet and she has been able to sleep peacefully.

Also, an external evaluation came to the conclusion that the “cleansing ceremonies were effective as a symbolic gesture of community reconciliation, allowing parties

formerly at war to publicly denounce their former behaviour and also to establish spiritual reconnection with their ancestors, who are the custodians of peace and prosperity.” (WFD/BFPS 2008)

Reports from the local police station showed such a decline in violent crime levels that the police station got an award in 2007 for being the one with the highest decrease and the best conviction rate in the province.

One month after the ceremony the Mbumbulu *amakhosi* were invited by the provincial economic and finance minister to discuss development needs and future programmes for the region. Other development activities also started. Even though new challenges came up at the same time (like tensions between traditional and elected leadership) a spirit of making peace sustainable continued in the following years.

3. Reflecting on Sinani’s Experiences with Systemic Thinking

3.1 Lessons Learned – the Potential of Systemic Approaches in Peacebuilding

“Working with Sinani is like looking into a pool of water – you begin to see yourself and your community more clearly.” This comment by a leadership forum member eloquently describes one of the roles of an organization like Sinani in systemic community interventions. Rather than coming in as an outside ‘expert’, Sinani emphasizes the value of creating a space for reflection where people are able to identify their issues and resources.

In particular, Sinani believes in helping people to identify ‘points of leverage’. As the example with the leadership forum shows, it was they who identified the traditional warriors as key participants in the process. From there the youth involved in traditional entertainment were also drawn into the process for their role in instigating violence. And it was the leadership again who suggested the cleansing. This is often an organic process shaped by community partners themselves in order to be truly impactful.

This links with another key learning that the organization realized through this approach – to work with the existing energy of community partners. When the idea of a traditional cleansing ceremony was introduced by the leadership, Sinani was a bit sceptical of the practice. The organization wondered if it was going to contribute to a specific religious or spiritual agenda, or if it would become a politicized process which marginalized others. It could also have been a rather expensive function to raise the status of some members. However, it became apparent that there was a lot of energy and enthusiasm around this idea. People genuinely felt that in order to engage in deeper reconciliation, spiritual and cultural aspects were crucial to lasting peace. Working with the energy of the group, rather than against it, ended up having much more significant impact than many months of carefully planned workshops on specialized topics.

Working systemically may involve engaging with the system and harnessing the power of the existing processes within that system. It also means at times using the energy of the system constructively to promote change. It may mean working with the current area of interest as a vehicle or metaphor for other processes that one wishes to introduce into the system.

In doing this work, while one may bring to the system certain principles and aims of one's own – for example, wishing to promote reconciliation by bringing together people from different sides of the conflict – there is an implicit belief that people know what is best for them. Letting go of a controlling or pre-planned approach may bring about unique outcomes that are less likely to have negative spin-offs.

This is particularly true if the emphasis of the work is on respectful relationships with people. Sinani has found that before wishing for change, it is important to build strong collaborative relationships with community partners. This process also assists in understanding the system at a deeper level, before planning for change.

It includes the importance of reflecting on one's own behaviour as development facilitators, as people who engage with the system. Observing oneself, one's attitudes, the language one uses and the way one behaves towards other people, is a valuable tool for development work. This is an attitude of respect that is also viewed as a crucial African value. People can sense very quickly if actions are done in a patronizing manner. Showing genuine respect may mean sharing a meal when offered, drinking a glass of water in the poorest person's house, serving people and doing concrete things to help people, using proper terminology to address people and taking an interest in people's personal lives.

Sinani's experience showed that working with existing community-based structures is the most effective way of introducing sustainable peace. Finding the structures that are appropriate to support takes time and relationship-building effort.

Sinani believes in 'walking the talk' when it comes to systemic peacebuilding. This means that the organization itself is regarded as a dynamic system, which may be supported to develop peaceful and democratic ways of being. This links with the style of management and consultation, respectful and collaborative ways of interacting at all levels of the organization and creating opportunities for self-reflection and learning. It means living in the positive tensions of diverse realities and multiple frameworks of meaning.

The Mbumbulu example also indicates how powerful it can be if systemic ideas are integrated with indigenous meaning systems. The cleansing event was no coincidence, even though it was never planned as a 'project'. The ceremony was the result of years of reflective interventions and many small steps.

Systemic thinking can be present in many different cultural languages and codes. It can be enriched and also broaden its perspective if it is not reduced to Western meaning systems and languages, especially in conflict contexts. Indigenous African approaches to conflict transformation represent deep wisdom about the systemic and relational nature of conflicts, the symbolic role of connections and linkages as people perceive them.

"It may very well be said that Africa's very special contribution to conflict resolution is its orientation to the dimension of relationships. However, it is no contribution to be added on to any non-relational approach of conflict resolution. It is no additional technique. It is an integral part of a way of life. It is lived reality" (Malan 1997, 87).

3.2 Challenges of Working Systemically – Where are the Limits of this Approach?

“Sinani to us is like our father, our father of the house, you find that if the father comes from work, children get very happy and Sinani is like that to us” (Wife of a traditional leader).

Joining with a system so intimately leads to the danger of losing perspective – for example, Sinani adopting and supporting a particular cultural (and at times patriarchal) system. Respecting the solutions that community systems want to promote can sometimes clash with the ethical values of the organization: gender equality, human rights, democracy and non-violence. However, engaging with people about these issues in an open way and debating the pros and cons often leads to more awareness about the consequences of some decisions. Sinani’s experiences have shown that it is important not to confuse respect for people’s solutions with acceptance of everything they suggest. It has also shown that processes like the cleansing ceremony can be facilitated even if they are not part of the facilitators’ belief system. However, it is useful to critically monitor our own work and have ongoing reflections on ‘bottom line’ values.

The neutral, ‘non-ethical’ character of systemic thinking, which looks at the function of people as part of a system in a non-judgemental way, may also make it difficult to challenge political and economic power relations. Change options of communities might be limited to what they see as manageable, leaving aside broader inequality issues like, for example, land distribution. However, if people are feeling empowered and confident, they tend to see and start challenging issues even at a broader level.

Another critical issue is the timing of retreat. Staying in a system too long can also mean that Sinani becomes part of the system and is unwillingly contributing to continuous dependency and problem cycles. On the other hand, terminating interventions too early and hastily can also create problems and new conflicts. Therefore, finding the right timing and ‘exit strategy’ remains a key challenge of any process-oriented intervention.

Process orientation, as one of the major principles of systemic approaches, is also a challenge when it comes to planning and funding frameworks. Most funding proposals require logical framework plans which follow a linear cause-and-effect logic and which require long-term oriented planning, monitoring and evaluation. Even though an orientation towards impact assessment of goals and objectives is necessary if one does not want to lose focus and end up with *ad hoc* interventions, indicator-oriented monitoring can often not capture unplanned impacts and developments. Working systemically within a ‘logical framework’ funding contract sometimes means doing a lot of adjustments, renegotiations and rephrasing in order to fulfil the donor requirements, which takes away energy and creativity from the actual intervention process. If systemic conflict transformation approaches should become more prominent in the peacebuilding field, peace programme funding might need to reconsider its application, reporting and monitoring formats.

Evaluating interventions through storytelling, like the Mbumbulu case study, is slowly becoming more relevant. Recent methods, like the most significant change approach (Davies, Dart 2005), acknowledge the radical shift needed when analysing non-linear processes in a non-linear way. Change stories reflect ‘indicators’ no one would have thought of. For example, when Sinani asked community members what change

they observed after the cleansing ceremony they said that the next day they were all standing in the same bus queue.

Conclusion – Learning from Experience and Local Knowledge

Peace processes are complex, unexpected and uncertain. Some of its dynamics can be grasped but much remains unknowable. We may have some assumptions, but we know that any plan can prove useless and wrong.

Through the Mbumbulu intervention, Sinani has learned again that suspending your plans and expectations around peacebuilding, meeting people where they are, joining with the system, finding where the energy is and facilitating this process in a constructive way can be a most powerful approach. This is what we appreciate about systemic concepts and their contribution to conflict transformation.

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