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Conflict analysis, learning from practice

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Abstract

Conflict analysis is an essential component of designing and implementing peacebuilding action because it focuses on making sense of the situations where a peacebuilding action or intervention is desired. This article presents the results of an exploratory study based on semi-structured interviews with 20 practitioners from 19 countries on four continents. Participants represented diverse organizations working on peacebuilding projects in conflict-affected locations. The study focused on how participants (peacebuilding practitioners) gather and make sense of data (information) about the situations they face so they can make decisions for program design and implementation. Topics addressed by the study's participants included practice trends, methods of data collection and analysis, difficulties in gathering and assessing data, theories of change, and program or project assessment. The study concludes that the practitioners who participated mainly use informal methods to collect and make sense of data and do not make use of systematic approaches to conflict analysis.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article reports findings from an exploratory study about ways peacebuilding practitioners in the field gather and make sense of information about the conflict situations they

face. This work is usually called conflict analysis or conflict assessment (Cheldelin & Druckman, 2008; Levinger, 2013; Schirch, 2013).

In peacebuilding practice, analysis or assessment can be done in various ways. It could be done through rigorous, structured research by scholars or analysts; by a team tasked with that exclusive role in their organization; or by local practitioners who make sense of a situation by relying on their personal or organizational knowledge and methods. In some cases, there may be so little time or so few resources available that their analysis is impressionistic, incomplete, or non-existent.

Given the range of options, this study's research team was curious about whether peacebuilding practitioners in the field, particularly those not in large organizations, regularly use systematic or structured ways to gather information and conduct analysis. Systematic conflict analysis of this type might use structured methods such as narrative or content analysis, follow a list of steps from a handbook, or simply use a visual model for organizing and communicating findings (e.g., stakeholder mapping, conflict tree, forcefield analysis or timelines among others).

The research team intentionally sought diverse participants for a broad sampling of field-based analysis practices. Rather than seeking generalizable data, the research was structured to capture a sample of the diversity of approaches currently in use. The study drew on in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants who work in varied contexts and who bring different levels of experience. The 20 participants were from 19 countries on four continents, and they were all working locally or in the field in conflict-affected locations on a variety of peacebuilding projects.

While this study is not unique in its focus on interviews with peacebuilding practitioners (Katz et al., 2019; Portilla, 2006), it is unique in its focus on practitioners' perspectives on conflict analysis in the field. As such, it contributes not only to knowledge about how practitioners undertake the work of analysis but also centers practitioners' experiences as they act. Participant reflections incorporated the earliest stages of gathering data about a situation to the analysis of that data, to challenges they face in doing systematic analysis.

1.1 | Peacebuilding and peacebuilding practice

The broad definitions of terms in use throughout this study intentionally allowed for the inclusion of a wide variety of practice forms and methods as reported by the practitioners. It also allowed for differences in the responses of interviewees, descriptions of practice, and definitions of terms. The findings reported here mirror the diversity of practical approaches to peacebuilding in the field. The field of peacebuilding and the skills of conflict analysis have evolved since their appearance in the 1960s with academic scholars and programs, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and practitioners influencing definitions, methods, implementation, and evaluation of success[1] (Carey, 2020; Danielsson, 2020; Goetze, 2017).

The term *practice* here is synonymous with *peacebuilding practice*. There is a richly diverse and growing field of professional peacebuilding practice (Goetze, 2017). Practitioners centered in this study are professional peacebuilders, but some are also nonprofessionals who are tasked with addressing a pressing problem of conflict. The research participants may or may not have called their work peacebuilding practice and they may be working as local insiders or non-local outsiders working locally.

Lastly, the researchers use the term *peacebuilding* as a way to describe the work of addressing conflict in general. The definition of *peacebuilding* varies more widely however and is debated among scholars and practitioners alike (Barnett et al., 2007, 2021; Boutros-Ghali, 1992; Call & Cook, 2003; Schirch, 2008). How peacebuilding is undertaken depends on who is taking the action (e.g., government, civil, religious, or professional actors). It also depends upon the context in which it is undertaken (e.g., within organizations, during war or violence, or in situations of inequity or need). See Bolling (2015a) for an example of this. Definitions of *peacebuilding* vary widely (Barnett et al., 2007, 2021; Boutros-Ghali, 1992; Schirch, 2008). The *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding* (Mac Ginty, 2015a) provides an overview of many different meanings and uses of the term peacebuilding. Some common distinctions between definitions of peacebuilding include whether peacebuilding action takes place before or after violence and whether peacebuilding action is performed by state or government, civilian, or other actors.

1.2 | Scholarly/academic and professional literature

Peacebuilding is an area of scholarly inquiry and also a professional field of practice. Scholars and professional practitioners agree that knowledge from academic sources as well as from practitioner experience, is necessary and helpful in peacebuilding practice (Verkoren, 2008). There is research-based academic literature that is written by both scholars and practitioners about practice (Cox & Sisk, 2017; Danielsson, 2020; Goetze, 2017; Juncos & Joseph, 2020). There is also professional or trade literature written by both practitioners and scholars for use in practice (Bean et al., 2007; Fisher et al., 2000; Grove & Zwi, 2008; Lund & Mehler, 1999).

2 | CONFLICT ANALYSIS

At its most basic, *conflict analysis* is a process for understanding conflict. The definition, method, and content depend upon the purpose of the analysis and who is conducting it. However, all conflict analyses are organized to focus inquiry on conflict and how it is impacting a situation (Botes, 2008; Herbert, 2017; Sandole et al., 2009). All conflict analysis is not equal, however. Herbert notes, "The literature widely states that systematic conflict analyses are an important element underpinning policy and practice" (2017). The word *systematic* highlights analytical efforts that thoroughly and methodically consider the many factors impacting conflict situations. Analyses are made systematic by organizing questions, and the data elicited from questions, into categories often through the use of visual or conceptual models and frameworks.

Conflict analyses might include questions about the context (systems, structures, locations), actors (identity such as gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.), actions (tactics, motivations), dynamics (trends, triggers, escalation), sources (history, narratives), and issues (resources, perceptions, and values) (Herbert, 2017; Schirch, 2013). Additionally, the analysis may be focused on different levels (micro, meso, macro), sectors (education, trade, international relations, policy, development, etc.), and/or social institutions (families, communities, social movements, organizations, religious bodies, nation/states, etc.) (Levinger, 2013).

Conflict assessment is another term often used interchangeably with the term *conflict analysis*. It describes the same function of data collection and analysis to make sense of a situation or event. Though many scholars and practitioners use the terms interchangeably, some use the

term conflict assessment and conflict analysis differently. Schmueli's (2003) definition of conflict assessment, for example, lists conflict analysis as one step during the assessment process. In this study, however, we treat them as equivalent.

Like the definition and practice of peacebuilding, conflict analysis also includes scholarly or academic sources and professional or practitioner sources. There is a very large literature that analyzes conflicts and a growing literature about conflict analysis itself and how it is conducted (Herbert, 2017).

2.1 | Academic/scholarly conflict analysis

There are many cases in the scholarly conflict analysis literature where frameworks for systematic analysis have been put forward by scholars for practical use. One framework appears in the *Routledge Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution* (Sandole et al., 2009). In his chapter, Sandole et al. (2009) notes that conflict analysis is achieved by the "construction of a framework through which conflicts can be analyzed" (Sandole et al., 2009). His framework focuses on the theory of conflict and included "relationships and interactions between individuals and between the micro, macro, and meso levels of analysis." There are many more scholarly contributions to practical conflict analysis. Examples of these include Jeong's (2008) *Understanding Conflict and Conflict Analysis*, Levinger's (2013) *Conflict Analysis*, and Ricigliano's (2015) *Making Peace Last*.

Conflict analysis can also be conducted through formal research methodologies in which analysis follows from structured inquiry as demonstrated in Druckman's text, *Doing Research: Methods of Inquiry for Conflict Analysis*. Scholarly and academic peer-reviewed conflict analysis methods can be found in practical use by policy and decision-makers at various levels in various contexts (Herbert, 2017).

Think tanks and research institutes also contribute practical knowledge about conflict through their research. They typically produce assessments of conflict situations, policy analysis, situation briefs, and guides for conflict analysis. One such example is from the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (Conflict Analysis Tools, GSDRC, n.d.).

This category of scholarly conflict analysis could include experimental or theoretical analysis sometimes in use in communications theory, computer modeling, or economics and game theory such as in Pawlak (2005).

As in peacebuilding practice, there is a critical scholarship and a critical approach to conflict analysis. Julian et al. (2019) note that critical conflict analysis requires a focus on equity, power, inclusion, and justice issues.

2.2 | Professional and practice-based conflict analysis

There is also a rich and diverse literature that consists of guides, frameworks, handbooks, and tools for practical conflict analysis developed by peacebuilding practitioners and organizations. This literature can be similar to the academic literature in terms of quality and content, though it may not be peer-reviewed in the traditional sense. In this practical literature, conflict analysis is not an end goal, but rather it is a necessary basis for policy, programming, and decision making (GPPAC, CDA, 2015; Herbert, 2017).

Organizations vary in their definitions, but the following three examples seem to cover the range. One organization defines analysis as "the systematic study of profiles, causes, actors, and

dynamics of conflict to better understand the contexts for conflict-sensitive programming" (Saferworld, n.d.). Lu et al. (2000) put it more simply. They say that "understanding of conflict dynamics helps in the design process of a program." A final definition suggests that conflict analysis can contribute to peace *writ* large in that it helps "organizations trying to address conflict to know how to promote positive changes in the situation to reduce the potential for violence and/or transform the conflict to make room for development and social justice" (GPPAC, CDA, 2015).

There are many quick guides for carrying out conflict analysis and these generally share the same types of straightforward methods. Some examples include: Search for Common Ground's Conflict Scan (n.d.), the International Security Sector Advisory Team's *Conflict Analysis Tools Tip Sheet* (Team ISSAT, n.d.) and the World Vision's Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response (GECARR) (n.d.). The United Nations Sustainable Development Group's *Practice Note* (2016) has links to several other frameworks as does a list compiled for *The Broker* (Bolling, 2015b). *The Broker's* list includes a sample of governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental organizations and frameworks.[2]

In the category of handbooks, a thorough handbook for conflict analysis is the *Conflict Analysis Framework: Field Guidelines and Procedures* from the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) together with the CDA Collaborative Learning Project (2015). The handbook provides step-by-step instruction for undertaking a conflict analysis with chapters on preparation, putting a team together, gathering information, and choosing methods/tools. Schirch's (2013) book, *Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning* and Responding to Conflict's *Working with Conflict: Skills and Strategies for Action* (Fisher et al., 2000) are examples of handbooks with significant sections on conflict analysis.

Most practical conflict analysis also depends on specific tools (e.g., log frames, iceberg models, pillars, timelines, etc.) to help categorize qualitative data and show relationships visually (Levinger, 2013). The most helpful of these show how gathered information and concepts relate to one another. For example, when using tools like Connectors and Dividers, Drivers and Mitigators, or Forcefield Analysis, individual issues can be gathered and shown visually in opposing relationships.[3] There are many more visual as well as conceptual models to choose from, and these can be found in texts, handbooks, and guides (Fisher et al., 2000; Grove & Zwi, 2008; Herbert, 2017; Levinger, 2013; Search for Common Ground, n.d.; Schirch, 2013; Team ISSAT, n.d.).

3 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study explored the conflict analysis/assessment practices of peacebuilding practitioners to determine if they were conducting systematic conflict analysis, and how they approached analysis in their work. Participants were asked a series of questions and encouraged to support their responses with examples from their field experience. They were encouraged to reflect on a specific case from the recent past if that was helpful to them.

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. How do practitioners or organizations who wish to address a conflict situation find out about the situation?
2. What specific methods are used to gather information (data collection) and were these adequate?
3. What systematic steps do practitioners or organizations take to make sense of (analyze) information?

4. How are the conclusions of an analysis used to inform practice or action plans?

In addition to these questions about conflict analysis, the researchers asked interviewees to provide details about their organizations, the work that they do, how long they have been doing the work, and what education, training, or experience prepared them for this work.

4 | METHODOLOGY

The research team prepared a qualitative study with in-depth interviews to provide data from the lived experience of participants (Josselson, 2013; Kvale, 1996). The team chose semi-structured interviews to provide flexibility for storytelling with enough structure so that answers could be compared across interviews. This style also allowed for back-and-forth or "interactive" interviewing with the possibility of additional probes to gather specific references to conflict analysis and assessment (Josselson, 2013; Silverman, 2018). The interview questionnaire was kept to fewer than 10 questions to allow adequate time for participants to address the questions in depth.

4.1 | Sampling

The 20 study participants, 8 women and 12 men, were identified through purposive sampling by referrals from practitioners in the field as well as from a search of peacebuilding organizations' websites. Potential participants were those at the field level, and responsible for peacebuilding-related programs, for program or project design, or for monitoring and evaluation. The selection of participants was made for regional and gender representation, focusing on a range of participants from each of four continents (Asia, Africa, North America, and South America). The inclusion criteria for participation prioritized active affiliation with one or more organizations doing peace-building work that addresses conflict, violence, or injustice at grassroots levels. Participants needed a minimum of 2 years of experience in the field.

The researchers reached out to 34 potential participants, 23 of them agreed to be interviewed, but only 20 completed the process. This falls within the sample size range of most qualitative studies, between 12 and 60 interviews. Although qualitative studies often depend on saturation of the intended population, this study intentionally sought a broad sample of a specific set of people, similar to a case study approach (Baker & Edwards, n.d.; Marshall et al., 2013; Mason, 2005). The research team was based at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). Careful selection ensured that participants had no affiliation with EMU and that fewer than 10% of participants ($n = 2$) had significant knowledge about EMU.

The challenges associated with this study's sampling included the identification of a broad range of participants with diverse geographic and organizational backgrounds. The research team wanted to include participants from Europe, for example, but no one responded positively to invitations. Other challenges included willingness of participants to be interviewed; language barriers for participants and researchers because English was not the first language of 17 out of the 20 participants; diverse contextual roles and limited understanding of conflict analysis; and the duty to maintain the confidentiality of information about participants' organizations.

An email of invitation with a consent form and set of questions was sent to each of the potential participants; only those who expressed interest and provided written consent were interviewed. Each interview took 35–40 min through video calling methods including Skype or Zoom.

4.2 | Data collection

The interviews elicited rich stories of peacebuilding action and intervention, successes and failures, field challenges and opportunities, and motivations for continuing the work despite difficulties or insecurity. The findings presented here draw on those stories but prioritize responses from participants that speak specifically to their descriptions of how they collected information about the situations they were tasked with addressing, and their use or lack of use of systematic conflict analysis or assessment as a way of managing data.

The researchers adhere to Herbert's philosophy as stated earlier that "systematic conflict analyses are an important element underpinning [peacebuilding] policy and practice" (2017). This adherence guided the selection of data for consideration with specific attention to references to forms of systematic analysis. In addition, the research team was interested in contributing to the body of literature that includes the voices of local[4] or grassroots, practitioners working to build peace in their contexts (Julian et al., 2019; Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015; Mac Ginty, 2015b; Neufeldt et al., 2020). Interviewees were treated as reliable sources of information about the situations and cases they described. One strategy was used to increase reliability. By asking interviewees to tell a story about a specific recent case, the researchers reduced the likelihood of aspirational descriptions. Argyris and Schön (1974) differentiated this as *espoused theories* that might inform stories about desirable actions versus stories about specific actual actions taken, called *theories in use*.

4.3 | Data analysis

The researchers conducted a five-tiered review of interview data through an inductive process. The research team: (1) transcribed the interview recordings via the online software Temi,[5] (2) reviewed transcriptions to ensure spoken language was accurately captured and that meaning was correctly transferred through the body language and expressions of participants during the interview, (3) color-coded the text for themes and categories, (4) compared findings across regions and organizations, and (5) identified primary themes for organizing participants' practices of data collection and analysis. Data analysis revealed three main themes that arose directly from interview questions. These are discussed in the next section. These findings cannot be generalized to all practitioners and contexts, but rather they provide insights and practice considerations across practitioners in diverse settings.

4.3.1 | Demographics

Table 1 depicts the characteristics of the study participants.

4.3.2 | Gender representation

The research team intentionally sought a balance between men and women to participate in this study. This was challenging due to the limited time to pursue participants. The team was able to interview 12 men and 8 women.

TABLE 1 Characteristics of study participants

No.	Code	Gender	Education	Experience	Thematic focus	Country
1	ORG-01	Male	Bachelors	04 years	Entrepreneur	Brazil
2	ORG-02	Male	Masters	11 years	Mediation Consultant	Canada
3	ORG-03	Female	Masters	06 years	Peacebuilding Projects' Management of	Colombia
4	ORG-04	Female	Masters	07 years	Design/Management of Conflict Resolution Programs	Georgia
5	ORG-05	Female	Masters	08 years	Gender Justice	Haiti
6	ORG-06	Female	Masters	10 years	Peacebuilding Trainings	Indonesia
7	ORG-07	Male	Masters	10 years	Monitoring of Humanitarian Response Programs	Lebanon
8	ORG-08	Male	Bachelors	05 years	Youth Activism in Peacebuilding	Malawi
9	ORG-09	Female	Bachelors	08 years	Advocacy for Gender Justice	Nepal
10	ORG-10	Male	Masters	06 years	Business and Peacebuilding	Nigeria
11	ORG-11	Male	Bachelors	08 years	Conflict Resolution Research	Pakistan
12	ORG-12	Male	Doctorate	03 years	Peacebuilding and Development	Philippines
13	ORG-13	Male	Masters	12 years	Conflict Resolution	South Sudan
14	ORG-14	Male	Masters	08 years	Peacebuilding Advocacy	South Sudan
15	ORG-15	Male	Masters	06 years	Youth Activism in Peacebuilding	Sudan
16	ORG-16	Male	Bachelors	09 years	Media and Advocacy for Stabilization	Tunisia
17	ORG-17	Female	Masters	07 years	Religion and Peace	United States
18	ORG-18	Female	Bachelors	02 years	Peacebuilding Advocacy – Youth and Children	Egypt
19	ORG-19	Female	Bachelors	04 years	Peacebuilding Advocacy	Mexico
20	ORG-20	Male	Masters	08 years	Youth activism and Peacebuilding	United States

4.3.3 | Education

The education level of study participants ranged from undergraduate to doctorate levels, with varied academic concentrations. Participants named that their educational specializations were not the primary reason they chose to work in peacebuilding. The availability of jobs, motivation to promote peace or justice, or life events guided the practitioners toward organizations that build peace and promote justice. Six participants belonged to international organizations that were working locally, including one grantmaking organization, and 13 were working with local organizations.

4.3.4 | Continent and country

One of the primary goals of sampling for this study was to talk with practitioners from as many continents and countries as possible. While this removed comparability of context, it allowed for the ability to include a wide variety of practices without significant overlap in social contexts. There were two exceptions where invitations and acceptances crossed

routes, which meant that researchers interviewed two people each from South Sudan and the United States. As noted earlier, Europe was not represented.

5 | RESEARCH FINDINGS

The three primary themes from interviews that related directly to conflict analysis were participants' data collection methods, ways of making sense of the data, and challenges in analyzing data. Table 2 presents the three primary inquiry lines along with the categories that arose inductively from participants' interviews. The findings overall show that data collection and analysis are done informally with limited use of systematic processes for gathering or making sense of information. The findings also showed that participants face significant challenges in doing conflict analysis depending on their regional and situational contexts.

Table 2 presents conflict analysis themes and categories that emerged from interviews.

5.1 | Data collection methods by practitioners

Practitioners made use of typical methods of gathering information with some evidence of innovation. The selection of a method to collect data varied by organization level, geographic context, and relevant capacity of the practitioners.

Practitioners working for local organizations relied upon traditional or customary methods of data collection such as note-taking, engaging their informal networks, and accessing local news platforms. These were sometimes used systematically. Practitioners associated with non-local organizations working locally utilized formal systematic methods to collect data.

5.1.1 | Meeting minutes or notes

One common tool of data collection mentioned by several practitioners was taking notes during a routine peacebuilding activity or meeting. These practitioners talked about how their notes of discussions, meetings, or other activities were their primary source of information. No one talked about the practice of recording, organizing or being able to later refer to notes in a systematic way. This was articulated directly by this participant in relation to how they analyze conflict:

> I try to take manual notes of all the meetings I conduct with members of groups or parties at conflict, but I do not record them systemically. (ORG-02)

5.1.2 | Informal networks or connections

Cost-effectiveness and operational convenience were the primary reasons practitioners shared that they were using their informal networks for data collection. The practitioners viewed their

TABLE 2 Illustration of key themes, categories, and sub-categories of conflict analysis practices

Theme	Categories	Sub-categories
Conflict analysis practices by peacebuilding practitioners	1. Data collection methods	1.1. Meeting minutes or notes 1.2. Informal networks or connections 1.3. Local participants in programming 1.4. Local news networks 1.5. Community groups 1.6. Online portals for social media and radio 1.7. Communication
	2. Approaches to understanding and making sense of data	2.1. No analysis at all 2.2. No systematic analysis 2.3. Systematic thinking 2.4. Stakeholder engagement
	3. Practitioners' challenges in doing conflict analysis	3.1. Lack of access due to fragile contexts 3.2. Lack of trust related to local versus foreign workers 3.3. Lack of trust related to divided communities 3.4. Difficulty in trusting information 3.5. Inadequate time for analysis 3.6. Limited capacity or training for conflict analysis 3.7. Limited learning practices and knowledge management within organization

informal networks or connections as gatekeepers of their fieldwork, such as collecting the data and further activities after that. One participant said:

> It is easy for us to reach out to a leader of a particular tribe or group who can make it mandatory for their followers to provide the information or data we need. We can collect that either via email, telephone, or in-person. (ORG-09)

The same practitioner also said:

> Since our team leader is a media personnel and she personally knows most of the media reporters, we use her connections to reach out to our target audience for the data collection purposes. (ORG-09)

5.1.3 | Local participants in programming

Five practitioners gathered information as part of their peacebuilding programming efforts. They valued the inputs of and engagement with their field partners or stakeholders as necessary steps in the planning or design phase of their peacebuilding programs. For example, one participant, not a native English speaker, shared that in addition to doing trainings and holding dialogues, they asked stakeholders in the situation to participate by responding to a questionnaire:

> By...asking the actors to [respond] to a prepared questions guide, they help us gather the information needed and to identify the main causes of the situations. They even suggest means to address the problems. (ORG-07)

Another practitioner shared the formal practice his organization used to collect the data.

> We used focus group discussions ... and surveys from different local people (such as) victims of militancy and extremism to get the information we needed. (ORG-11)

5.1.4 | Local news networks

Secondary sources of information were also consulted for data collection. Some practitioners relied on public data sources to be informed about the political situation in their contexts. For example, this practitioner relied on local news updates.

> I am responsible to analyze the news printed in the daily newspaper and (collect information on) the race issues (if) reported. (I see) what kind of (race) issues made headlines (as well as reports on) gender differences and elites' injustices. (ORG-09)

5.1.5 | Community groups

Community groups were referenced as another local source of data to assess conflict situations.

> I used to work with the youth with disabilities (and) was dealing (with) everyday conflicts between the families and the youth. With situation assessment informally informed by community groups, I found myself at the end of the day a mediator between families and youth with disabilities. (ORG-03)

5.1.6 | Online portals like social media and radio

One organization tried the innovative idea of using a source that was not being used by any other organization studied.

> We launched a radio program on conflict and security related issues which helped us to collect the data through audiences' calls and comments on the Livestream channel. (ORG-11)

5.1.7 | Communication

Two research questions focused on how participants "find out" about a situation for potential engagement, and how they then proceed to gather information. In the interviews, these

questions led participants to comment on their typical communication methods. The most common methods for gathering information among the participants included message exchanges through representatives or back channels, storytelling, video messages, or in-person meetings between the parties. Several of the participants used telephone communication. One participant said,

> I pick up my phone and call the people in my network to ask the potential solution to the issue, and this is how I get a lot of insights and ideas to design my project. (ORG-10)

More than half of the participants ($n = 11$) commented that consistent communication provided nearly synchronous sense-making when parties contributed to planning ways to transform their conflicts and restore peace. For example, one participant said,

> Our communication is not systematic or formal, but we tend to have regular communication with our partners in the field which keep us informed of the situation... Hence guide our interventions for peace or mediation. (ORG-12)

For those participants who were working in situations of deep-rooted conflict, or where there were severe harms, several named indirect communication methods for making sense of the situation, and then engaging or intervening. Individual participants named the following strategies: spending more time listening to people, taking time to observe the situation, and engaging with stakeholders through indirect communication methods.

5.2 | Approaches to understanding or making sense of data by practitioners—(analysis of information)

Like the varied methods of data collection used by practitioners, approaches to making sense of the data also varied depending on the context or conflict situation. Throughout the interviews, most practitioners needed time to reflect on how they made sense of the data before they responded.

5.2.1 | No analysis at all

Several participants noted that in the situations they were facing they or the organizations they work with did not do analysis at all. For example,

> Since the [area] has a situation of tribal conflicts, we often do not have to wait for a formal project or intervention to mediate the conflict... We just get into the situation to do what we can. (ORG-14)

Such responses were common among the participants from Colombia, Malawi, South Sudan, Tunisia, and Pakistan.

5.2.2 | No systematic analysis

Another participant perceived that in the situation they were facing, the local organization did not do a systematic analysis. In this case, the participant made a specific assumption about what type of data would be appropriate for a systematic analysis.

> The informal organization create[s] something, let us say, a report on the event or the program that they've done. But those reports would be based on the description, observations, quotations, emotions, heartfelt things – without having any proper data or facts. (ORG-11)

5.2.3 | Systematic thinking

All the participants of this study confirmed that formal or intentional conflict analysis encouraged systematic thinking which helped improve their design of programs in conflict-sensitive contexts. Various participants noted that systematic thinking builds and strengthens their understanding of the local context and power dynamics. This helped them effectively devise strategies to connect with stakeholders in divided communities. Some practitioners noted the lack of systems thinking as they attempted to understand situation dynamics and serve as intermediaries between rival groups or individuals. One of them said,

> The local peace committees ... were established to de-escalate the violence among rival groups but it was not working as intended, because the conflict scenarios were not analyzed systemically [*sic*] before the establishment of committees. (ORG-13)

5.2.4 | Stakeholder engagement

Practitioners in this study reflected on their limited ability to make sense of information if they themselves were not local to the situation or did not share the cultural or religious belief systems of one or more of the parties in conflict. Several noted that in these cases, they must be extra careful as they reached out to the parties for conflict analysis purposes.

Several practitioners highlighted that those who are local to the context possess a better understanding of the conflict dynamics. Another participant noted that they needed to work closely with the key stakeholders in the conflict in order to understand what was going on.

> We tend to connect together with people in a way of indoor mobilization to understand the dynamics ... working closely with locals as they have adequate knowledge of what is happening and what is the history of conflict. (ORG-13)

5.3 | Practitioners' challenges in doing conflict analysis

Finally, as noted earlier, participants spoke at length not only about the work of gathering and making sense of the essential information that they need to inform their peacebuilding

decisions but also about the complex challenges that they face in general. The comments shared in this section arose in practitioners' stories of gathering and making sense of information, but these frequently grew into a discussion of challenges for peacebuilding in general. The comments shared here pertained to practitioner responses to questions about challenges for analysis.

5.3.1 | Lack of access due to fragile contexts

Fragile cultural contexts and destabilized political systems were referred to as hindrances for several practitioners in their peacebuilding efforts including how and whether they could collect information. The example below shows how in fragile contexts, powerholders from conflicting groups can control access to areas and thus to people and any needed information they might provide. In this example, the practitioner was ultimately allowed to enter the region because of a recognized acquaintance and was able to bring conflicting parties to the table of dialogue through traditional and informal means of community outreach.

> Being Christian, it was challenging to analyze the conflict in Muslim-majority areas... I was stopped by the military officers when entering the project location, ... I found one of the military officers was from my hometown. That helped me to get into the project area. (ORG-06)

5.3.2 | Lack of trust related to local versus foreign workers

Lack of trust, leading to a lack of access to people and information they could provide, was another problem practitioners had in gathering information for conflict assessment. Several participants in this study observed that in their contexts, field workers who are from the local area earn more confidence from communities than do foreign field workers. Due to in-person familiarity with local contexts and stakeholders, the local practitioners comparatively were preferred over foreign ones. For instance, in one example of an interview process for a project in one community, a local practitioner shared,

> My credibility among communities was the primary reason of my selection to work on a ... project on addressing the gender-based violence. (ORG-05)

Another practitioner talked about how local peacebuilders are often trusted more than outside interveners because of resistance by local people to outside interference in local issues. Non-local practitioners, hence, face additional layers of challenges to be able to analyze conflict situations. A practitioner added,

> It [having local peacebuilders] invites the conflicting groups to share their grievances with comparatively less hesitation, put their demands or expectations on the table, and further own the (conflict) resolution agreement with each group's authority (and willingness). (ORG-02)

5.3.3 | Lack of trust related to divided communities

Three examples where lack of trust contributed to lack of access to information occurred in communities divided by violence. One participant shared that people in such contexts do not trust practitioners who may represent (or be perceived to represent) rival parties or groups.

> The big part of [information gathering is the principle of] confidentiality which allows people to say what they need to say and not feel concerned about information being shared with rival parties ... (ORG-02)

5.3.4 | Difficulty in trusting information

A participant noted that because of the divided community, practitioners have to build trust in order to gain accurate information. In this example, rival groups supply misinformation to sources on the internet. Therefore, peacebuilding practitioners cannot rely on public information.

> The peace activists in [country] ... have to build trust in all the divided segments of society to understand grounded scenarios for further planning and interventions. There is the least reliability upon the information on the internet which is perceived to be constantly monitored and controlled with misinformation. (ORG-04)

In another case, the practitioner shared that they could not access needed information sometimes because they could not trust information sources provided by the government which frequently manipulated information.

> We have to make sure the source of information is accurate and reliable since often the governments try to manipulate the information. We must determine which sources are dependable and who has organized the information. (ORG-16)

5.3.5 | Inadequate time for analysis

A quarter of the participants viewed the limited timeframes of peacebuilding projects as another primary challenge that did not allow practitioners to engage in an in-depth analysis of conflicts. They stressed that conflict analysis is not an overnight activity, because it requires a longer time to understand the dynamics of conflict in changing contexts. They were keen to see more resources and more universities and academics doing conflict-related research at grassroots levels, as they saw this as more sustainable over time.

> The shorter-term projects pretend to aim for conflict analysis and further interventions. Looking at the long years of trying to do this process is much better than having a project on peacebuilding for only 6 months. Time is needed for understanding local governance structures. (ORG-14)

Another practitioner noted a similar challenge in their professional setting where parties in the conflict say they do not have enough time to be engaged in conflict analysis. This practitioner was disappointed that the parties prioritized their business engagements, rather than prioritizing conversations with mediators or practitioners to help in better analysis of the conflict.

And on the other hand, sometimes analysis was not prioritized by the organization.

> "Sometimes we have conflict analysis sessions with our partners from a specific area to learn from them about grassroots issues but that happens usually after every three years or so." (ORG-12).

5.3.6 | Limited capacity or training for conflict analysis

Two-thirds of the practitioners acknowledged the lack of conflict analysis capacity including training in analysis skills. Two samples are provided here:

Regarding understanding the situation through analysis: "I always felt like I am missing something ... I felt that I didn't know how to handle those kinds of conflicts, I could not figure out who is telling me the truth when I am trying to mediate a conflict situation between families and youth with disabilities." (ORG-03).

Regarding analysis skills: "[Local peacebuilding practitioners] have great capacity, skills, excellent exposure, good networking, and connections with the community, but sadly they score quite poor in terms of data collection and analysis." (ORG-07).

5.3.7 | Limited learning practices and knowledge management within organizations

Four participants noted that there are limited practices within their organizations to learn from their own resources, such as including field staff in the design of new programs. As a result, design teams may rely on assumptions or secondary data. For example:

> I have always been in the implementation side of the project. I have not been engaged in the design or received any opportunity to share my experiences at the design stage of a project at the organizations I have worked with. (ORG-03)

While there are many more possible challenges, those most discussed were instability or violence in the context, lack of trust, inadequate time, inadequate training or capacity in conflict analysis, and organizations not prioritizing the learning from the analysis.

6 | DISCUSSION

The participants in this study were all peacebuilding practitioners who were working to address conflicts in their contexts at the time of data collection. Some of the situations were urgent due to violence, others were situated in deeply divided societies, and some were latent where there was inequity or consequences of structural violence. In centering these stories of individual

practitioners, it became clear that doing the work of conflict analysis was yet another of the challenges they were facing in their peacebuilding work.

Whether and how participants employed conflict analysis measures was dependent on three primary conditions: their education or training, their exposure to multiple geographic locations, and the size of their employing organization. Work experience in third culture contexts was an additional factor that shaped practitioners' approaches to conflict analysis in the field. Though there were only a few, practitioners with a conflict or peace studies background demonstrated their ability to engage stakeholders in conflict analysis.

Regardless of education or experience, participants seemed to value the idea of conflict analysis and all participants understood what was meant when they were asked about it. And yet, for some of the participants in this study, analysis was non-existent or not systematic. The findings confirmed the concerns of the research team and some scholars, that some practitioners might not be doing any analysis at all (Julian et al., 2019).

6.1 | Data collection

Participants readily responded to questions about information gathering. Not all were aware of systematic options for organizing these, however. The findings show that the practitioners who mainly relied on informal and nonmethodical ways of collecting information also reported few means of systematically organizing or evaluating it.

However, the data was rich and diverse and included things like conversations with networks in the field, news updates, personal knowledge or understanding of the situation, and other informal channels including the novel idea of using radio programming. This suggests that a focus on localization and engagement of grassroots stakeholders is vital to getting access to information about conflict situations. Schirch (2013) reinforces this point. Herbert (2019) also notes that it is important to focus conflict analysis and peacebuilding programming on relationship building, as communication, trust, and improved ability to work together follow.

6.2 | Sense-making

Practitioners often relied on their own intuition, the local stakeholders or experts, or conversation with colleagues rather than systematically analyzing their data/information through the use of frameworks, guides, or tools. While there is significant evidence in both scholarly and professional literature to support the idea that systematic conflict analysis or assessment is critical in making good decisions about the programming (GPPAC, CDA, 2015; Mason, 2005; Sandole et al., 2009; Team ISSAT, n.d.), practitioners in the study were making sense of their situations in less structured ways.

While not systematic or formal, most of the practitioners were making sense of their situations in ways that contributed to their planning and implementation of peacebuilding action. Levinger (2013), in his textbook on the subject, seems to suggest that conflict analysis is most naturally done in this way. He says, "Conflict analysis should be a habitual activity for all practitioners working in regions at risk of violence or instability. People naturally draw on their personal experience and cultural knowledge to analyze their environment and inform their decisions."

6.3 | Challenges to doing conflict analysis

The findings confirmed that practitioners found that conducting systematic conflict analysis was very challenging. The findings are consistent with both scholarly and professional literature that describe some of the specific challenges of doing analysis in the field (Autesserre, 2014; Julian et al., 2019; UNSDG | UN Conflict Analysis Practice Note, 2016).

The literature documents deficiencies in analysis because of lack of resources or training (Herbert, 2017), lack of good quality and reliable data (Autesserre, 2014), and the lack of prioritization of analysis by peacebuilding organizations. These themes were also reflected in the findings here. Participants frequently named lack of resources, lack of capacity, and training as key reasons that they did not carry out the systematic analysis.

Regarding urgency and timing: In the *Conflict Analysis: Topic Guide* produced by the GDSRC, Herbert (2017) highlights concerns that practitioners too often take "immediate action in response to the conflict situation, and this keeps actors from looking at longer-term issues and trends that may require long-term action." He later adds that "Donors, peace practitioners, and local organizations have to deal with time and resource constraints." They may ask, therefore: "What is the least amount of analysis I can do and still develop credible and effective programming?" On the other hand, is the concern that longer, costly, or more engaging analysis processes may fail to address situations in timely ways. The findings of this study showed that organizations with the financial ability and technical capacity tend to carry out formal analysis of conflict situations but time limitations at the project level restrict such practices in full capacity.

6.4 | Practitioner identity

One of the most important concerns about peacebuilding assessment or analysis raised in the scholarly and professional literature is *who* is doing the analysis (Hendrick, 2009; Lederach, 1998; Levinger, 2013). Among these concerns are whether the practitioner is an insider (person who shares physical location or social identity and works for a local organization), or an outsider (someone working for a peacebuilding organization located outside of the physical context and/or someone who does not share other social identities with people involved in the conflict) (GPPAC, CDA, 2015).

The GSDRC Topic Guide (Herbert, 2017) suggests guidelines for conflict analysis, and these include the guidance that "local knowledge and information is paramount, but can be enriched by questions and observations from outsiders." It is highlighted however that those outsiders must respect the culture of the local context and that analysis should be "based on information from a full range of stakeholders in the conflict area; efforts should be made to seek information from all perspectives."

Levinger (2013) shares an interview with Koenraad van Brabant, head of Reflective Practice at Interpeace at the time. Brabant stresses the "vital importance of robust and diverse participation by members of the affected society in the conflict assessment process." In the absence of such participation, he notes, conflict assessments may devolve into "external actors chattering among themselves." These concerns about practitioner identity are echoed in the literature (Conflict Analysis Tools, n.d.; FEWER et al., n.d.; Lederach, 1998; Sandole et al., 2009; Schirch, 2013). The GSDRC Topic Guide (Herbert, 2017) alerts practitioners that whoever the

individual is who conducts conflict analysis has a direct impact on the "reliability and credibility of the final product."

Some practitioners highlight the importance of analysis to reduce bias and provide multiple points of view. Scholar-practitioner John Paul Lederach (2003) describes conflict analysis as "seeing the conflict through multiple lenses." In a study of conflict resolution and cultural responsiveness by Parker (2015), practitioners reported that conflict analysis "encourages perspectivism, or multiple ways of viewing a phenomenon, and engages with core tenets of intersectionality."

Conversely, if the person who conducts the analysis is not doing it in ways that encourage multiple points of view, it can perpetuate power differences and contribute to concerns about diversity, equity, and inclusion of voices impacted directly by conflict. Many sources note that in doing analysis, it is important to listen to many different stakeholders, especially those often without a voice or power (GPPAC, CDA, 2015). For example, some authors note a concern that women and children are sometimes not included in the analysis and as part of peacebuilding processes (Anderlini, 2006; Rigual, 2018).

Given all of these challenges, some practitioners are moving toward "Good Enough" conflict analysis. World Vision (n.d.) provides a case in point with its GECARR protocol, literally named "Good enough conflict analysis for rapid response." Development of tools like this are a step in the direction of preparing practitioners to do systematic analysis even when the situation is difficult, and resources or capacity are limited. Simple checklists and tools can allow for a quick but systematic analysis (GPPAC, CDA, 2015; Search for Common Ground, n.d.).

7 | IMPLICATIONS

As noted earlier, this study was conceived to find out if practitioners in the field were doing systematic conflict analysis in preparation for action, and if so, how they were doing it. This peek at the analysis practices of 20 peacebuilding practitioners showed that very few were doing systematic analysis (e.g., following a checklist, using a consistent framework or set of questions, or using any of the visual and conceptual tools for conflict analysis). This should concern all who promote conflict analysis for improved planning and implementation of peacebuilding projects at any level (GPPAC, CDA, 2015; Herbert, 2017; Levinger, 2013; Sandole et al., 2009; Schirch, 2013).

Additional practice implications include the necessity of prioritizing resources and training for doing systematic analysis, and of providing guidance for addressing practitioner identity challenges. On the lack of systematic analysis, but the use of informal processes, Levinger (2013) argued that whomever the practitioner is, "We can build on [their] intuitive process when we engage in a more formal inquiry into a conflict." Put another way, there is room in systematic analysis for informal and unconventional ways of knowing, for innovative information gathering methods, and contextually appropriate data.

The implications of the study for those who train practitioners, whether in peacebuilding practice organizations or in the academy (including the authors of this study), is that they should continue to expand concepts of systematic analysis to include nontraditional sources of information, promote easier, perhaps less expensive, information gathering and recording methods such as through the use of new technologies, and develop easier and more intuitive sense-making approaches for organizing, prioritizing and making decisions about data collected for analysis.

The study invites expanded scholarly inquiry into and documentation of the experiences and knowledge of peacebuilding practitioners in the field. Debate is welcome on how practitioners can more easily collect information in a systematic way, and how they can gain access to sense-making tools. Further research could examine organizational patterns that restrict systematic analysis of conflict situations before peacebuilding programs or actions are launched.

8 | CONCLUSION

The peacebuilding practitioners interviewed for this study shared their experiences with conflict analysis centered on three broad themes: their methods of collecting data from communities, various approaches they apply to make sense of that data, and further challenges they encounter in attempting to conduct conflict analysis.

The findings confirm that most practitioners in this snapshot were not conducting conflict analysis systematically, and a few were not doing analysis at all. Nevertheless, practitioners in the study gathered information from their communities and networks in many creative ways. They made sense of the situations through their intuition, experience, and sometimes with the help of local advisers, stakeholders, and experts. Though they faced many challenges, they all carried out their work based on the information they gathered, even when it was not analyzed systematically.

The findings highlight that if the peacebuilding field values systematic analysis as a foundational aspect of planning and carrying out action, work is needed to better prepare and resource field-based practitioners. Peacebuilding organizations and any organization doing peacebuilding work can prioritize systematic analysis by incorporating it into field-based practice in contextually sensitive ways, supporting this through capacity building for staff, incorporating analysis priorities in programming plans, and reserving resources for these efforts. Finally, there is room for innovation in the ways organizations and individual practitioners could more easily include systematic analysis in their work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest concerning any section of this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

We can provide the interview transcripts if required at any stage of this peer-review process.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See Goetze for a historical and critical analysis of peacebuilding as a professional field of practice.

[2] This list was compiled for a review of analysis frameworks described in the article: *Model or Straitjacket? Doing context analysis on fragile or conflict-affected states* (Bolling, 2015a).

[3] Various criticisms exist. For example, Ricigliano (2015) argues that "there is a growing recognition of the limits of linear models, such as the "log frame" (or logical framework), that treat a social system, which is complex and chaotic, as though it were predictable and controllable." In recognition of this criticism, others call for a systems approach to analysis (Brusset et al., 2016; Danielsson, 2020).

[4] For a discussion of the varied uses of the term *local* in peacebuilding practice, see Mac Ginty's *Where is the Local? Critical Localism in Peacebuilding* (2015b).

[5] www.temi.com.

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