

Root-Cause Conflict Management: Addressing Underlying Psychological, Emotional and Social Causes

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Root-Cause Conflict Management?: Addressing Underlying Psychological, Emotional and Social Causes

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the ideal of effective and appropriate conflict management can be achieved by tackling the root-causes of conflicts. The paper defines and identifies root-causes of conflicts. It notes that most conflicts are not effectively and appropriately managed since their underlying root-causes are usually ignored. The paper observes that failure to address the root causes of conflicts often creates the risk of conflicts reemerging in future with negative impacts on peace, security, stability, harmony and development. Consequently, the paper discusses how the idea of root-cause conflict management can be attained by addressing underlying psychological, emotional and social causes of conflicts.

1.0 Introduction

Effective and appropriate conflict management is necessary in order to promote peace, justice and development. Since conflicts affect Sustainable Development across all its dimensions, it is necessary to ensure that conflicts are effectively managed in order to promote sustainability. For example, it has been observed that escalating global, regional and local conflicts and climate-related emergencies have substantially affected progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹. If not managed expeditiously and effectively, conflicts can cause human suffering in terms of loss of lives and livelihoods, displacement of populations, destruction of social amenities and services including education and healthcare, and increased levels of poverty². In addition, it has been observed that conflicts are also fueling forced migration increasing pressure on the environment and natural resources, leading to competition and further conflicts between communities³. Armed conflicts happening all over the world also often fuel widespread environmental damage and degradation with severe impacts on people and planet⁴.

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¹ Taylor. R., 'Sustainable Development Goals and the Impact of Global Conflict, Extreme Poverty and Climate-Related Emergencies' Available at <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/sustainable-development-goals-and-the-impact-of-global-conflict-extreme-poverty-and-climate-related-emergencies/> (Accessed on 04/09/2026)

² Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency., 'Conflict Prevention: Opportunities and Challenges in Implementing Key Policy Commitments and Priorities' Available at https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2020/12/01125316/s209461_thematicoverview_conflict_prevention_webb_final.pdf (Accessed on 04/04/2026)

³ African Development Bank Group., 'Nexus conflict and sustainability: An African perspective' Available at <https://blogs.afdb.org/climate-change-in-africa/nexus-conflict-and-sustainability-an-african-perspective-363> (Accessed on 04/09/2026)

⁴ Ibid

Due to their impacts on people and planet, sound conflict management is necessary towards sustainability. Conflict management refers to the processes and techniques adopted towards stopping or preventing overt conflicts and aiding the parties involved to reach a durable and peaceful solution to their differences⁵. Conflict management involves handling all stages of a conflict as well as the mechanisms used in the management of conflicts⁶. Conflict management has also been defined as the process of using preferred strategies to handle a conflict with goals of limiting negative impacts and enhancing positive impacts of conflicts⁷. It has been observed that conflict management is an ongoing process through which conflicts are identified and addressed in a fair, efficient and expeditious manner⁸.

It has been observed that conflict management takes various styles and approaches including *avoidance* where some or all people involved in a conflict simply avoid the situation or ignore its existence⁹; *competition* which involves one party winning, and one party losing in relation to the issues in dispute¹⁰; *compromise* which involves parties sacrificing their positions in order to aid a resolution¹¹; and *collaboration* wherein all parties involved are brought together for a resolution through active listening and respectful communication¹². In order to achieve effective conflict management, there is need to tackle root-causes of conflicts with emphasis on strategies that promote collaboration¹³.

This paper discusses how the ideal of effective and appropriate conflict management can be achieved by tackling the root-causes of conflicts. The paper defines and identifies root-causes of conflicts. It notes that most conflicts are not effectively and appropriately managed since their underlying root-causes are usually ignored. The paper observes that failure to address the root causes of conflicts often creates the risk of conflicts reemerging in future with negative impacts on peace, security, stability, harmony and development. Consequently, the paper discusses how the idea of root-cause conflict management can be attained by addressing underlying psychological, emotional and social causes of conflicts.

⁵ Leeds. C.A., 'Managing Conflicts across Cultures: Challenges to Practitioners.' *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Volume 2, No. 2, 1997

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Wang. Q., 'Conflict Management' Available at <https://centerforinterculturaldialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/key-concept-conflict-management.pdf> (Accessed on 04/09/2026)

⁸ Institute of Directors., 'Conflict Management' Available at <https://www.iod.com/resources/business-advice/conflict-management/> (Accessed on 04/09/2026)

⁹ Ronquillo. Y et al., 'Conflict Management' Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470432/> (Accessed on 04/09/2026)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

2.0 Conceptualizing Root-Cause Conflict Management

Root-cause conflict management is an idea that seeks to address underlying psychological, emotional and social causes of conflicts towards effective and appropriate conflict management for sustainability. It has been observed that people and groups do not randomly fight each other, even if stark inequalities or other grievances prevail in a society¹⁴. Consequently, there are underlying issues which driver, motivate and worsen conflicts which are normally referred to as root causes of conflicts. Root causes of conflicts have been identified as long-term or systemic causes of both violent and non-violent conflict that are built into the norms, structures and policies of a society¹⁵. It has been observed that root causes of conflicts often interact with drivers of conflicts leading to an escalation of conflicts with negative implications on peace, development, security and stability¹⁶. Drivers of conflicts on the other hand refer to direct causes of conflicts including fight for political control, disputes over natural resources, negative ethnicity and religious tensions among others¹⁷.

The concept of root-cause conflict management acknowledges that conflict is a dynamic and contextual process that is driven by collective needs and fears rather than motivated by rational calculation and national interest¹⁸. Therefore, while conflicts often manifest in a similar manner including through loss of lives and livelihoods, destruction of property, displacement of populations, breakdown of political and social structures, and environmental degradation, their root causes vary across societies and nations¹⁹. Root causes of conflicts usually stem from deep and underlying issues that are often neglected in most conflict resolution approaches²⁰. It has been observed that most conflicts are usually protracted and often reoccur since their root causes are not effectively, adequately and appropriately addresses²¹.

Root causes of conflicts can include psychological, emotional and social needs and factors. In particular, it has been observed that root causes of conflicts involve interests, needs, identities or values that the disputants regard as critical to their survival²². For example, root causes of conflicts

¹⁴ Herbert. S., 'Conflict Analysis' Available at <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/conflict-analysis/core-elements/> (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

¹⁵ Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency., 'Root Causes of Violent Conflict- An Evidence Based Overview' Available at https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2023/05/02102900/Root_causes_of_conflict_Evidence_Brief_web.pdf (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Doucey. M., 'Understanding the Root Causes of Conflicts: Why it Matters for International Crisis Management' Available at <https://www.iar-gwu.org/print-archive/9w4e9g1kqj9n2ui95nfsjjbxbh876g> (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Identifying Root Causes of Conflict., Available at <https://nationaltraining.edu.au/identifying-root-causes-of-conflict/> (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

²¹ Ibid

²² Maiese. M., 'The Core Causes of Intractable Conflicts' Available at https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/underlying_causes (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

can be psychological and emotional due to collective fears, which are fueled by the denial of basic needs, which can lead to violent reactions, as an ultimate attempt of individuals and societies to secure the necessities of life and rectify perceived injustices²³. In addition, social factors can also be a source of root causes of conflicts. For instance, identity has been identified as a catalyst and a vector of mobilization through people and communities can express their deepest concerns and strongest collective fears²⁴. Identity has often been used as a tool of mobilization contributing to the protracted and recurring nature of violent conflicts stemming from issues such as political and economic marginalization²⁵. It has been observed that identity is a fundamental human need whose denial can dramatically increase the probability that social conflicts will become prolonged and violent²⁶.

Since conflicts usually have underlying psychological, emotional and social causes, addressing the root causes of conflicts is necessary towards peace, security and development. However, it has been observed that most approaches and strategies utilised in conflict management lack a comprehensive and holistic approach by failing to take into account the root causes of conflicts²⁷. Failure to address root causes of conflicts undermines effective conflict management. For instance, it has been observed that it is difficult to build and sustain peace in most conflict settings since the internal and external root causes of conflicts are not properly managed²⁸. According to the United Nations, addressing the internal and external root causes of conflicts beyond traditional responses which only focus on their symptoms is key towards promoting international peace and security²⁹. It is therefore necessary to embrace and utilise root-cause conflict management towards promoting peace, security, stability and development at all levels.

3.0 Embracing Root-Cause Conflict Management for Peace, Justice and Development

Since conflicts usually have underlying psychological, emotional, social and identity causes, it is imperative to ensure that these among other root causes are effectively addressed in order to promote effective and appropriate conflict management. Root-cause conflict management is an approach that requires an understanding of what fuels conflict and what drives long-term, positive change by examining emotional, psychological, economic, social, political and environmental factors that drive and worsen conflicts³⁰. It has been observed that at the root of each conflict are structural factors which keep the state and societies weak and fragmented and

²³ Doucey. M., 'Understanding the Root Causes of Conflicts: Why it Matters for International Crisis Management' Op Cit

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ United Nations., 'Root Causes of Conflicts in Africa Must Be Addressed beyond Traditional Response, Special Adviser Tells Security Council Debate on Silencing Guns' Available at <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15249.doc.htm> (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency., 'Root Causes of Violent Conflict- An Evidence Based Overview' Op Cit

which cause tensions between the state and its citizens, thereby creating conditions of conflicts and violence³¹. These structural factors include weak governance mechanisms, poverty, inequitable access to and distribution of natural resources including land and water, and conflict multipliers such as availability of arms³². Root-cause conflict management requires conflicts to be analysed and understood as factors that are contextual and dynamic and that in combination with other factors, can lead to and sustain violent conflicts³³.

In order to promote root-cause conflict management, there is need to emphasize techniques and approaches that focus on *collaboration* at the expense of other conflict management techniques such as *competition, avoidance and compromise*³⁴. In the context of conflict management, collaboration is a more appropriate approach since it encourages individuals and teams to work through disagreements through empathy and listening, towards mutually beneficial solutions³⁵. Collaboration is a powerful approach to conflict resolution which is built on cooperation, open communication, and finding win-win outcomes³⁶. Collaborative approaches towards conflict management aim to preserve relationships, build trust, and promote long term positive change³⁷.

Utilising collaboration is therefore key towards tackling the root causes of conflicts for peace and stability. For example, it has been observed that collaborative techniques are ideal when it is necessary to maintain all parties' relationships or when the solution itself will have a significant impact on a large group of people³⁸. Therefore through collaboration, it is possible to maintain and preserve relationships towards peace and harmony. In particular, Appropriate Dispute Resolution (ADR) techniques such as negotiation, mediation, conciliation and traditional justice systems are ideal in addressing the root causes of conflicts through collaboration. These processes provide a pathway to unlock collaboration and transform conflicts into opportunities for peace building, growth and understanding³⁹. In particular, it has been observed that mediation,

³¹ Finnbakk. I., 'Addressing Root Causes of Conflict: A Case Study of the International Security and Stabilization Support Strategy and the Patriotic Resistance Front of Ituri (FRPI) in Ituri Province, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo' Available at <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/norcap/nordem/documents/un-experience-paper-finnbakk.pdf> (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

³² Ibid

³³ Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency., 'Root Causes of Violent Conflict- An Evidence Based Overview' Op Cit

³⁴ Ronquillo. Y et al., 'Conflict Management' Op Cit

³⁵ Miroslavov. M., 'Mastering the Collaborating Conflict Style In 2024' Available at <https://www.officernd.com/blog/collaborating-conflictstyle/#:~:text=It's%20one%20of%20the%20strategies,their%20underlying%20needs%20and%20interests>. (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Isenhardt. M.W., & Spangle. M., 'Summary of "Collaborative Approaches to Resolving Conflict"' Available at <https://www.beyondintractability.org/bksum/isenhardt-collaborative> (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

³⁹ Mediation: The Art of Collaborative Conflict Resolution., Available at <https://legalservicesdubai.com/mediation-the-art-of-collaborative-conflict-resolution-understanding-its-processes-and-advantages/> (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

conciliation and negotiation among other ADR techniques encourage active listening, voluntary participation, cooperation, open and respectful cooperation, and empathy thus providing a platform for parties to work together towards win-win, mutually satisfactory and durable outcomes⁴⁰. The United Nations observes that mediation, negotiation and conciliation can enable parties to transform conflicts by moving towards collaboration and cooperation⁴¹. It is therefore necessary to embrace ADR techniques such as negotiation, mediation, conciliation and traditional justice systems in order to promote root-cause conflict management through collaboration.

4.0 Conclusion

Root-cause conflict management is a key and appropriate approach towards ensuring that underlying psychological, emotional and social causes of conflicts are addressed for sustainable and durable peace. In order to achieve this goal, there is need to embrace techniques that focus on collaboration due to their ability to promote dialogue, open and respectful communication, trust, empathy and win-win outcomes. In particular, utilising negotiation, mediation, conciliation and traditional justice systems is key towards promoting root-cause conflict management through collaboration in order to preserve relationships and build and sustain long-term peace and stability.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ United Nations., 'Guidance for Effective Mediation' Available at https://unrcca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/dpa_msu_guidance_english_web.pdf (Accessed on 05/09/2026)

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