I. Value of Systems Analysis to Conflict Dynamics?

Systems thinking helps to address or avoid several shortcomings of "traditional" frameworks for conflict analysis especially:

- List making without analysis, or prioritization of causes and interventions, leading many programs to "miss the mark" and have little effect on Peace Writ Large;
- Bias and narrow inquiry, based on one's own expertise (and the alleged need for it) or favorite approach or methodology, leading many programs to miss important factors outside their expertise or fail to consider how their engagement will be significant for Peace Writ Large.
- Gap between analysis and programming, leading many programs to "miss the mark" despite good analysis of the conflict.
- Finally, while most methods analyze causes of conflict and actors separately, systems analysis can integrate them. It examines the dynamics between the structural causes, proximate causes and triggers of conflict and integrates both causes of conflict and the actors and their agendas and behaviors.

Systems thinking therefore can help us to:

- see the dynamics of a conflict (interlocked conflicts) much more clearly;
- identify the nature of self-reinforcing vicious circles;
- be less reactive to changing circumstances and events, and address real underlying dynamics that cause those events;
- to figure out why, despite our best efforts, it is so difficult to induce change, and how we might more effectively induce change, to alter the conflict dynamics.

The systems analysis of the conflict(s) can be used as a basis for developing several important elements of an effective strategy, including the following:

- To identify important points for program intervention—ways to change the conflict system.
- To map who is doing what in relation to the factors indicated on the map. This will allow us to see areas of concentration and gaps;

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- To see where linkages or synergies between efforts need to be created to try and have stronger cumulative influence;
- To provide the basis for further actor analysis. In order to do programming, it is important to know who the key people and key constituencies are;
- To assess and monitor the validity and robustness of a theory of change, and anticipate potential roadblocks.

It is important to note that systems thinking does not replace other tools and methods of conflict analysis. Rather, it supplements the traditional conflict analysis methods and has the potential to provide several of the elements missing from them. It can simplify analysis and help identify key driving factors and underlying structures. While somewhat more detailed and complex analysis

may be necessary for program design and implementation, identification of key factors and structures helps to set priorities and identify important gaps in programming.

We would not suggest that systems thinking is a panacea. It does not provide the "answer," but rather helps us understand reality in a way that incorporates complexity without overwhelming. It also aids in priority setting and decision making in ways that traditional conflict analysis methods do not. Systems are only partially predictable, because they are composed of many and different complex interactions. Therefore, it is one thing to understand how a system works, or even how to alter it, and another to actually achieve positive changes. Systems-based analysis and planning does not mean that we control the various factors and how they interrelate with each other. Systems-based planning does not guarantee that we will achieve the desired outcomes of our interventions. But Reflecting on Peace Practice has found that it can provide the basis for a strategic discussion regarding potential points of intervention, theories of change and methods for addressing conflict dynamics. It can also be a valuable tool for strategic monitoring and adaptive management.

II. Some Core Characteristics of Systems.

Systems thinking is a way of understanding reality that emphasizes the relationships among a system's parts, rather than the parts themselves. The defining characteristic of a system is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, you just can't "add up" the parts to get a whole (e.g., Peace Writ Large). The parts together produce an effect that is different from what is produced by the parts separately. The way they interact and affect each other determines how the system as a whole behaves.

In systems thinking we therefore pay attention to

- *Interconnectedness.* A system consists of elements —things, tangible or intangible, and relationships or connections that hold those elements together. It is important to analyze not only the elements of a system (which generally are more easily noticed because they can be seen, felt or heard) but also the interconnections among them—how they relate to one

  another. Otherwise, as the saying goes, one might miss the forest for the trees.

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- *Dynamic causality and feedback.* An essential insight of systems thinking is that cause and effect relationships are not linear. In other words, the relationship between causes and their effects is neither linear nor always direct. When X causes Y, it is also possible that Y causes (or at least influences) X in turn. The chain of causation from X, how it connects to other elements in the system, will often lead (or "loop") back to X, and often in unexpected ways. The very simply example of an arms race between two players can illustrate this point.

The Arms Race.

If A feels threatened or insecure, A may purchase and build up arms to protect itself. This causes B to feel threatened, and to respond by building up its own arms. B's action in turn causes A to feel even more threatened and invest more in defense systems. And the story continues. This is a classic escalation loop—a reinforcing feedback loop, or vicious cycle, that is self-perpetuating.

- *Delays*. Systems are characterized by time delays—that is, the effects of various causes or elements often take a long time to play out (and therefore are not always visible). Delays can have big influence in a system, because they can cause decision makers to overreact or under react.

- Change – and steady state: Systems are dynamic (not static)—they respond to change as needed. Yet systems are also self-reinforcing and self-preserving and hence resistant to fundamental change. They can turn into vicious circles – but also into virtuous circles. They are dynamic but overall seek to maintain a 'steady state': efforts to change one factor in a system may be effectively countered by the weight of other factors that are connected to it.

- *Synergies between efforts to get cumulative impacts*: Given the self-preserving character of a 'conflict-system', one effort, however powerful, is rarely going to be enough. Multiple efforts, working on various of the factors that operate in a vicious circle, are likely to be needed. Different actors may be needed, as not all actors are equally well placed to work on every issue. But 'cumulative' impacts do not happen automatically – the various efforts will have to 'link' with each other and try and create synergies to do so.

- *Persistence*: A shorter term effort to effect change in a component of a system may temporarily unbalance it. But if the effort is not sustained, it may regain its origin position. Multiple efforts are often needed, but also sustained efforts to produce a more sustained change.

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III. Steps in Systems Analysis of Conflicts.

A systems analysis of conflict is an iterative process. You may not get at a result (visualization and the accompanying story/ies) you feel satisfied with in the very first attempt. There is however significant value in the discussions and reflections that drive the iterative process.

One way of proceeding is as follows

1. Determine the level and/or focus of analysis.
2. Get a diverse group to participate.
3. Identify driving factors of conflict.
4. Expand the understanding of the driving factors through causes-consequences analysis.
5. Connect the Various Elements into a Comprehensive Visualisation.
6. Test the visualization.
7. Allow and express conflicting analyses.
8. Add 'key actors'.
9. Repeat the same exercise for 'peace factors'.
10. Try a virtuous circle vision.
11. Open discussion about options for peacebuilding.

1. <u>Determine the level and/or focus of analysis.</u>

Determine, first, the level of analysis *you* are doing (local community, larger city/town, province, whole country, region, etc.), or if the focus is on a particular type of conflict (land issues, youth gangs, and so forth).

2. <u>Get a diverse group to participate.</u>

WHO participates in a conflict analysis is a crucial question. It is vitally important to include all important perspectives in some way and particularly to get the perspectives of the 'internal' actors. There is certainly no guarantee that a self-selected group of NGO or government or UN personnel will include all of the important perspectives!! If important people are missing, it will be important to add the other perspectives later.

An analysis can also be developed by talking with multiple individuals or small groups including a wide range of perspectives over a few days or weeks time—and then combining all of their information into an analysis as described in this exercise. A resulting draft conflict "map" should be validated and refined through a feedback process with individuals or groups.

3. <u>Identify Driving factors of conflict.</u>

A driving factor is "a dynamic or element, without which the conflict would not exist, or would be completely different."

Check the suggested factors for the following:

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- Factors are things that can increase and decrease. In other words, they are variables. For a systems analysis, “poor governance” may be a cause (although very general—you would want to know what aspects of good governance are problematic for conflict), but it is not a factor. “Governance” might be a factor (again, you would want to specify what about governance is a driver here); in a system, it might be part of a vicious cycle (in which things are going poorly) or a virtuous cycle (in which governance is good);

- Factors are not solutions. “Trauma healing” would not be a factor, but “traumatization of the population” would be;

- Factors are not things. “Land” and “water” are not factors—they are things. Unequal access to land or water, corruption in distribution of land, or availability of land might be factors. Ask, what about land or water that contributes to conflict? What happens to land or water that fuels conflict or peace? What does what with land or water? These questions can help participants become more precise about the conflict factor;

- “Lack of X”—be it rule of law, employment opportunities, human rights, etc.—is not a factor, but likely our favorite solution in disguise. Focus on the factor, not the lack. Ask, what is the problem to which rule of law, or employment or human rights (etc.) would be the answer?

There should not be more than five to ten such driving factors—otherwise, there is a risk of falling into the analysis trap of being too comprehensive without prioritizing or identifying factors that have greater influence on the system because they affect so many other parts of it. In a system, all factors play a part, and everything is connected to everything else in some way. The purpose at this stage is to identify those factors that are drivers of system behavior.

One analysis of the conflict factors in Liberia for example produced the seven which are listed in the box on the next page.

You can examine these factors along the lines suggested above. More substantively however, the respondents to a mid-term review (Snellen 2010) acknowledged that their list of seven conflict factors did not provide them with enough understanding of the issues, nor of their interconnectedness.

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CONFLICT FACTORS IN LIBERIA – ONE LIST

1. ***Poor leadership and the misuse of power*** (both central and local levels). The failure of previous leaders to create inclusive, transparent, accountable governance, political mobilization along ethnic lines, and the absence of trust of leadership.
2. ***Weak justice systems:*** Constraints on the formal justice system with a lack of infrastructure, materials and an acute shortage of qualified personnel and general capacity; undue delay or no prosecution of matters and a need to regulate traditional dispute resolution mechanisms; especially those involving gross violations of human rights.
3. ***Lack of shared vision:*** Social and economic inequality between identity groups, competition over resources, exclusion and deep-rooted hostilities – aggravated by contradictory customary, statutory and historical claims to land ownership.
4. ***Poverty and food insecurity:*** Both drivers and consequences of conflict, this factor is aggravated by disruption to agriculture and livelihoods during the war, resulting in children being exposed to abuse to support family food needs and a reduced education.
5. ***Mismanagement of natural resources:*** The illegal exploitation of natural resources, coupled with the lack of real dividends for communities, has been at the heart of conflict in Liberia. This requires transparent resource management founded in sound environmental management practice and good governance. Land is also considered a natural resource and disputes over it are wide-ranging.
6. ***Pressure on reintegration / Lack of absorption capacity in areas of return:*** With limited infrastructure, services and job opportunities, the return of the displaced adds pressure and exacerbates tensions. Gender Based Violence (GBV) is increasing, as is a perceived threat to the physical security of adolescents - particularly girls.
7. ***The regional dimension:*** Instability in neighbouring countries that exacerbated and facilitated conflict within Liberia's borders in the past, and current unaddressed political issues in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire remain a source of concern. Ethnic group contiguity across national boundaries, poor to non-existent border security, and the movement of displaced populations in and out of bordering countries may also pose risks.

Source Snellen 2010: Mid-Term Review

4. Causes-Effects Analysis.

Some further analysis of each of the conflict factors can be undertaking with the help of causes-effects. This can be done with the help of a simple table with 3 colums, with the 'conflict factor' in the center column, the causes in the left and the consequences/impacts in the right column.

The broad questions are

- What consequences or impacts does that factor have? Why is that factor important?
- What led to the factor? Where does the factor come from?

About 4-6 major causes and consequences are generally enough. More tend to list aspects of the same and begins to render the result too complex. The following table is one analysis of the driving factor of high communal tensions in Lebanon (2010).

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CONTRIBUTING FACTORS	DRIVING FACTOR	CONSEQUENCES
Reproduction of communal identity (through family and schooling prior to university)	Communal tensions	Communal identity dominates over national Lebanese identity
Compartementalisation of communal relations		No common (recent) national history or unified history book
Exclusionary spaces of social relations (only banal spaces are shared)		Separated residential spaces
		Broad rejection of intermarriage
Clientelistic political system		Every community feels grievances and has fear towards other
		Negative stereotyping of the other and superior self-image
		Generally high level of distrust to other community members even if colleagues, acquaintances, friends

Annex 1 shows one example of a possible causes-consequences analysis of a conflict factor in Timor Leste (2010) i.e. frustration and anger over non-recognition of different actor's contribution to the resistance against the Indonesian occupation.

You may want to go a step further and begin to identify some of the feedback loops between the various elements. Sometimes you may need to identify another intervening factor in order to make a credible feedback loop.

Annex 2 shows an example of a causes-consequences analysis that is being rendered more 'systemic' through the introduction of feedback loops. This one concerns another conflict factor in Timor Leste (2010) i.e. the perceived inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of the justice system, effectively encouraging impunity.

What we begin to see here is a self-reinforcing sub-system around the issue of 'justice and impunity'. In the end the various elements all create one overall 'circle' – a vicious circle.

5. Connect the Various Elements into a Comprehensive Visualisation.

Try now to bring the various separate analyses together into one graph. This is technically done again through creating 'loops' between the factors. One important rule: loop lines cannot cross each other. To avoid that happening, you may have to re-arrange or reduce the various elements in your graph. Too much visual complexity reduces the value of the visualization. You can always add and expand in the accompanying narrative. Sometimes the loops will be clearly 'directional' i.e. one factor is influenced by another. Sometimes it is no longer clear what causes what – a not unusual occurrence

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once something has become a vicious and self-reinforcing circle. If in doubt, do not give the loop any 'arrow'.

Substantively look at: Where do the cycles overlap or connect? Where do they influence each other? Are there common elements that link major factors? Is there a central dynamic around which the others seem to organize themselves?

You can now ask which are the most important of the factors that you have identified. 'Key drivers' are those which, if absent or altered, would significantly change the whole dynamics of the system. These can be highlighted as the central elements.

For Guinea Bissau for example, the key factor that was identified in a collective analysis, turned out to be 'elite power struggles' (the civilian-military elite). Most of the other driving factors, such as 'military intervention', 'favoritism and exclusion', 'low incentive to put justice system in place', 'instability, insecurity & violence', although they have a wider set of contributing causes, were themselves almost 'consequences' of this one core driver.

Annexes 3 and 4 show a systemic conflict analysis for Guinea Bissau and for the chieftainships conflict in Ghana.

Note that it is not important to develop the perfect conflict map. The purpose is to identify the major factors and how they interact, in order to develop appropriate program strategies and/or policies.

While it is important to strive for general agreement here, it is also fine to leave the analysis as a draft only. More refinements can be made later—we don't have to make it perfect or totally comprehensive. Concentrate on the really important elements.

6. Test the visualization.

Review as a group your visual product:

- Are there any ***important*** elements missing that must be added? (Try not to add unnecessary elements, as the analysis is usually quite complex already!!)
- Can anything be eliminated, as of less importance?
- Is the central dynamic the right one? Is something else more important or central?
- Is anything incorrect, distorted, or stated wrongly?

An effective way of further testing your visual product is to see what 'story' the systems map tells. Ask different participants to come near the chart and tell the story – starting from different points on the chart. Does the story make a good description; does it resonate with the rest of the group?

7. Conflicting analyses.

Conflict is not only an issue of perceived different interests; it also generates different narratives or stories, that 'explain' the conflict and that tend to provide 'justifications' of the behaviour of the holder of a particular narrative. It is to be expected therefore that there will be 'conflicting analyses'.

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It would be a mistake to try and force 'one' narrative. This will alienate certain people, and is likely to reduce their trust in you as a peacebuilder. But it would also negate an important component of the conflict given that the respective narratives serve a purpose for those who hold them and are hence part of the dynamics.

Different narratives may play out as different stories of the same systemic visualization, but may also require different visualizations. Allow different visualizations to stand.

8. Add key actors.

The visual conflict map can now also be used to begin identifying the key actors around its various elements. Key actors are people or groups of people who are critical to the continuation or the resolution of the conflict; hence progress cannot be made towards resolving the conflict without their involvement. Who is 'key' depends on the specific context! It are not automatically or only the 'authorities' or the visible 'leaders'.

9. Repeat the same exercise for 'peace factors'.

Peace factors correspond to the same characteristics as the conflict factors but evidently they generate a constructive or virtuous rather than destructive or vicious dynamics. You can get at peace factors by asking the participants, first what the elements are that they 'share', that provide some 'common ground' that can 'bind them together'.

One rapid such exercise in Guinea Bissau in 2008 yielded the following:

- Solidarity out of the collective national liberation struggle
- Creole as common lingua franca
- Spaces for debate do exist
- Ethnic inter-marriages
- Traditional authorities' role in resource management and conflict resolution
- No major violence of sectors of the population against each other
- No targeting of civilian populations and major massacres during 1998-99 civil war
- No extreme poverty in the rural areas

But several of these may be more 'latent' or 'passive' elements. A situation of tension and conflict of course indicates that the negative dynamics is stronger than the positive dynamics.

The discussion can then be taken further by asking more specific questions such as: What are the forces in the situation that exist now that can be built upon to promote movement towards peace? What currently connects people across conflict lines? How do people cooperate? Who exercises leadership for peace and how? (These are not things you *want* to exist or that you would like to see—they must be true *now*.)

10. A virtuous circle vision.

Interesting 'vision-type' discussions can also be generated by taken the conflict system and rephrasing its factors into their 'opposites'. That transforms a vicious into a virtuous circle. You can then if there is general consensus about such 'vision' or where there might be subtle or bigger

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differences. It also invites the crucial question of how you can get from the negative dynamics to the positive dynamics.

11. Options for peacebuilding interventions.

The visualized systems analysis invites interesting reflections on possible peacebuilding interventions. Some of these questions will be:

- Can, should one try to work directly on the key driving factor(s) or approach them more indirectly through first working on other elements that contribute to their continuation?
- If we work on one contributing element to a driver of conflict, but other contributing elements are not engaged with, how likely is it we might effect some change in the driver? Are there other peacebuilders that are or could be working on other contributing elements?
- If we work on the 'consequences' of a driver of conflict, and we look at feedback loops in our visualization, how likely is it that this will affect that driver of conflict?
- Should we try to alter an element, or rather try to cut the 'link' between elements? Are there 'weaker' elements, are there 'weaker' links?
- Multiple peacebuilding efforts may already be taking place. Try and map the important ones on the conflict graph. Is there a concentration on certain elements and a relative neglect of other, important, ones? Examine also more deeply the strengths of particular peacebuilding efforts: are they going to be sustained or short-term efforts, do they mobilize quite a diverse lot of people or are they driven by a small group?
- Who is best placed to work –in this particular environment- on what aspects of the conflict dynamics? Who has political clout, who has much perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the local actors, who has the human (and financial) competencies and resources, who has a strong network in this society that cuts across divides etc.

In short the broad analysis is good for figuring out priorities, points of intervention, and where various groups are working. In order to develop a program to address a specific area on the larger map, it is usually necessary to do a sub-analysis of that factor/point of intervention.

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References:

Much of this note is taken –literally- from 2 Reflecting on Peace Practice documents (2009-2010) but some points have been added or slightly rephrased and some other examples added. While this note acknowledges the original source, RPP is not responsible for the changes introduced here.

Reflecting on Peace Practice 2009: Training of Consultants & Advisers Manual, Boston, CDA Inc.

Reflecting on Peace Practice 2010: Examples of Conflict Analyses using Systems Thinking. Compilation. Boston, CDA Inc.

Snellen, R., O. Bloh & J. Togba 2010: Peacebuilding Fund Liberia. Mid-term review.

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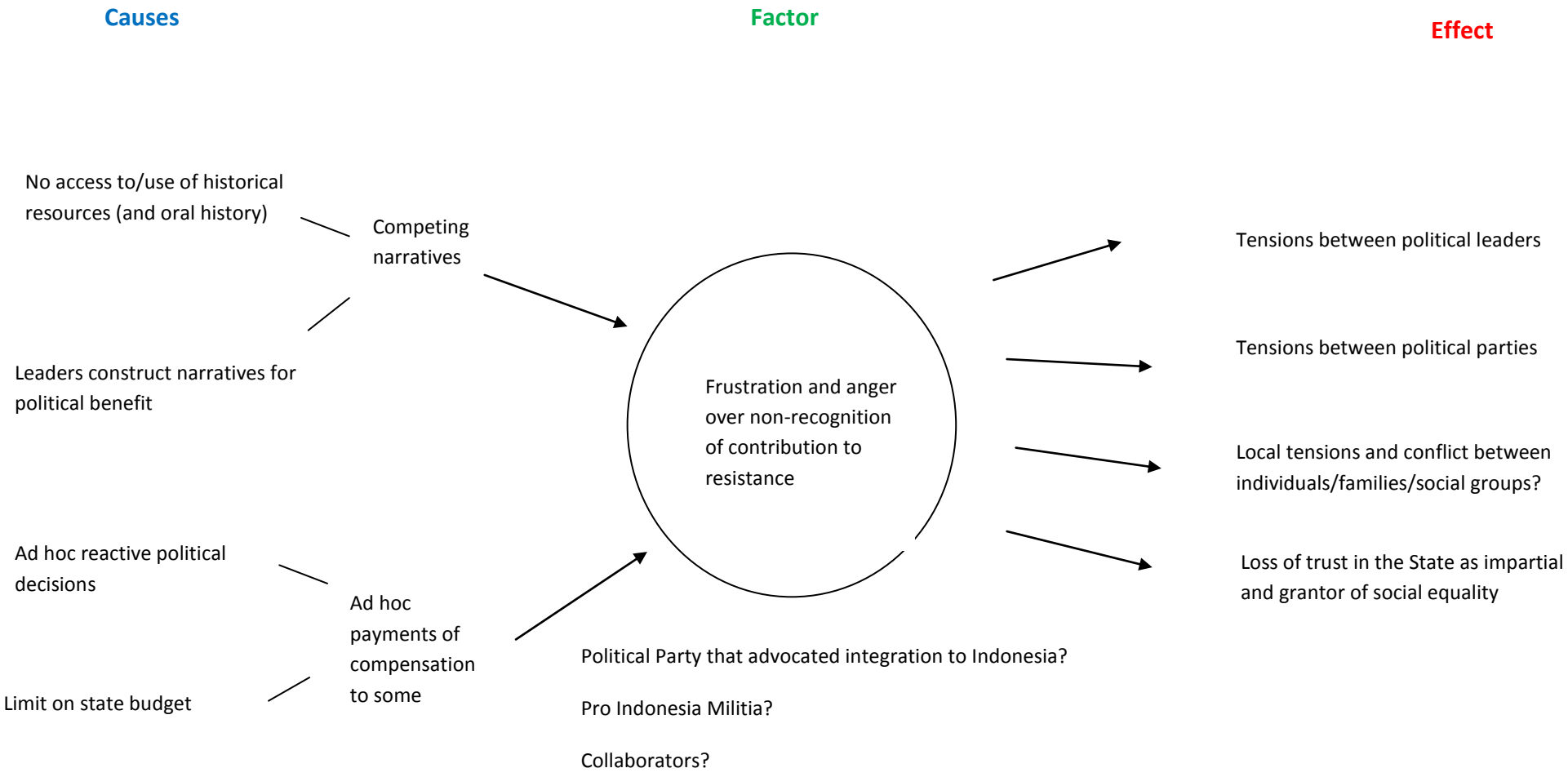
Annex 1. A conflict factor in Timor Leste (2010)



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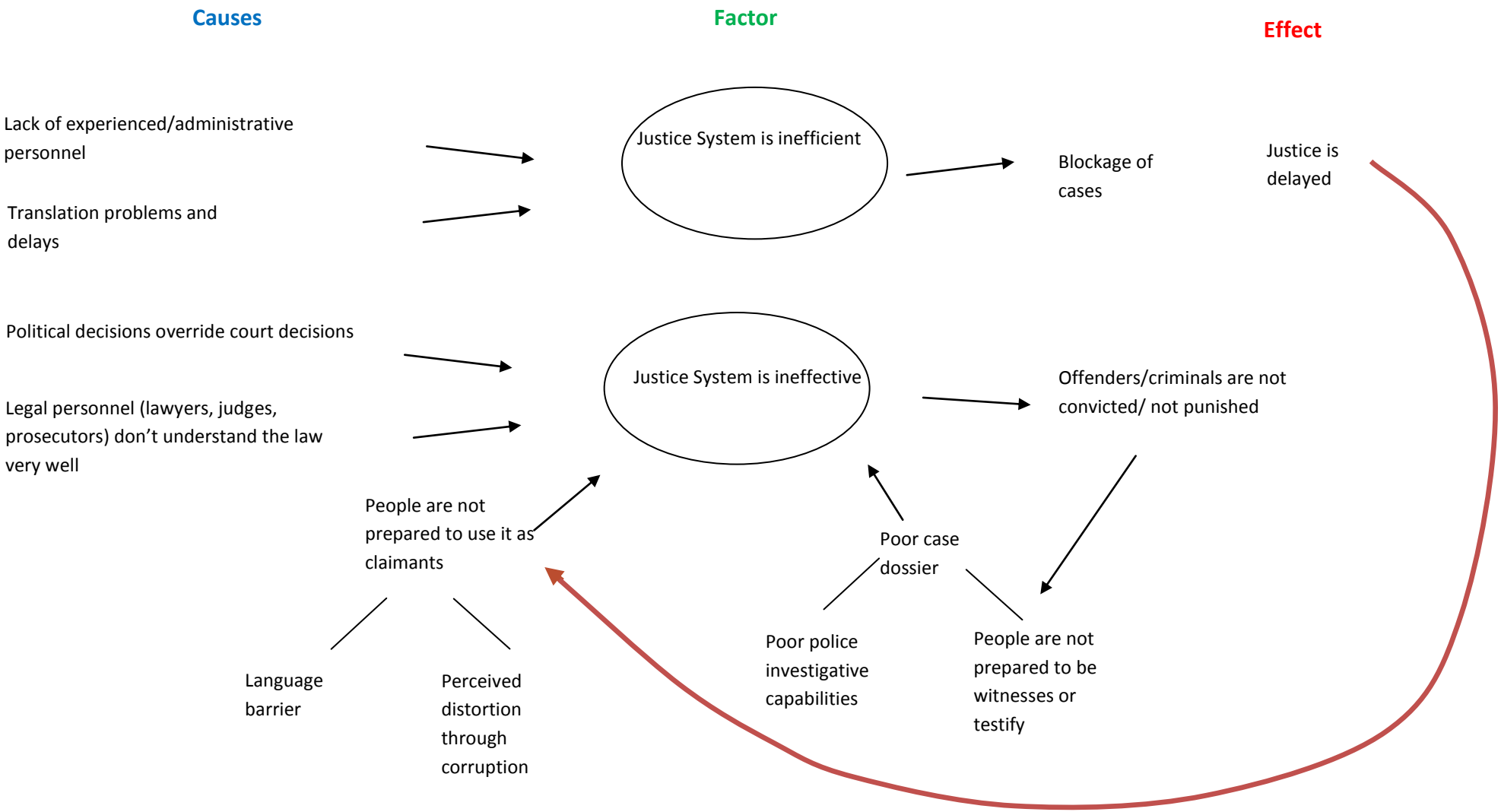
Annex 2. Possible analysis of a conflict factor related to justice & impunity in Timor-Leste 2010



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Annex 3. Systems Analysis of Conflict Dynamics in Guinea Bissau (Reflecting on Peace Practice)

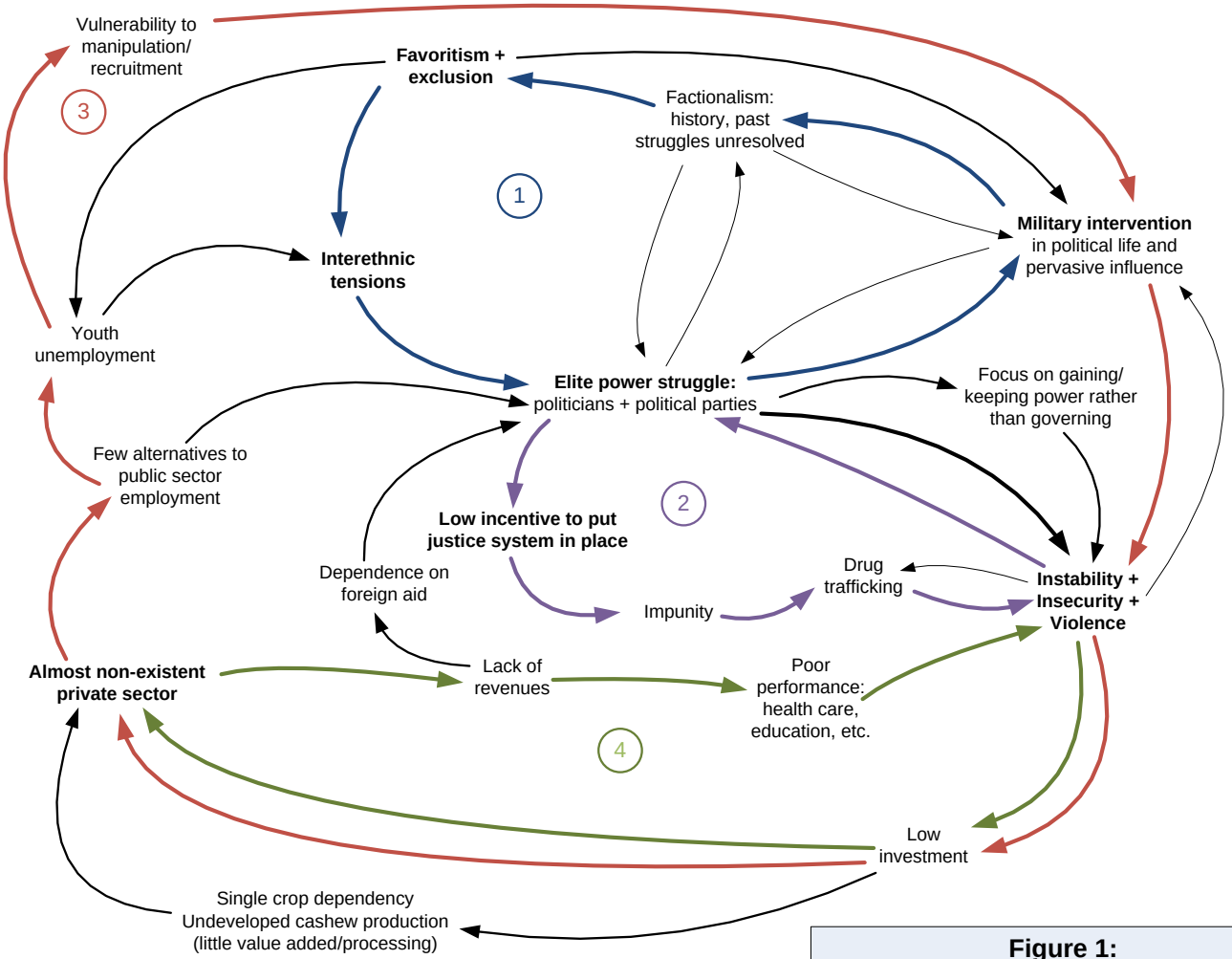

Figure 1:
Conflict Analysis of Guinea-Bissau

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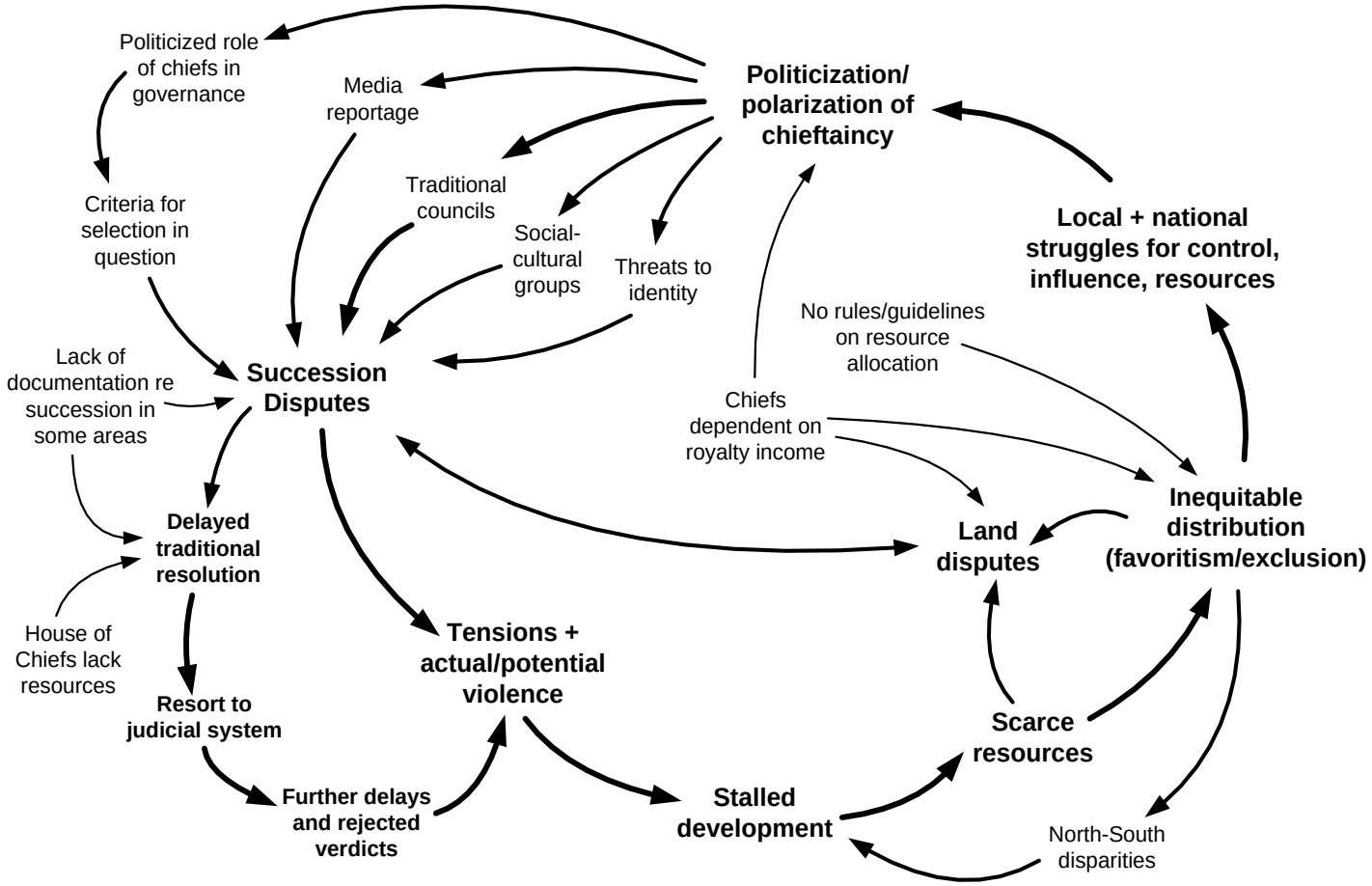
Annex 4. Chieftainship conflict dynamics in Ghana (Reflecting on Peace Practice)



Chieftaincy Conflicts in Ghana

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