

# Practice in Search of Theory: A UN Peace-BUILDER's Journey in El Salvador, Guatemala and Cyprus

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## **Abstract**

The article seeks to address the central theme of this issue from the perspective of a United Nations (UN) practitioner. It is based on my experience of working for the United Nations, initially in El Salvador. Later I served in positions of increasing responsibility in Guatemala, Cyprus, and the Western Balkans. The problem facing me and my colleagues when I began working in the field of international peace-building in 1990 was an apparent lack of theoretical frameworks to guide the programmatic work of international and local actors seeking to contribute to the consolidation of peace in post-conflict societies. Over the next two decades, through a mutually beneficial and continuous interaction between academics and practitioners, theoretical frameworks emerged—most notably the adaptation of the scenario planning methodology—to address broader societal changes in support of peace. From a very personal perspective, I discuss how this and other methodologies for inclusive dialogue (such as *democratic dialogue* and *Theory U*) have contributed to the design by international and local stakeholders of more holistic, integrated peace-building approaches, based on a more nuanced and shared understanding of the complex nature of the system in which they are operating. Finally, based on my own direct experience, I include some reflections on the nature of the relationship between practitioners and ‘theory builders’.

## **1. Introduction**

I am not an academic. I am and will always be a development practitioner. And yet, throughout my career, I have always been drawn to academic theory as a means of better understanding reality and to serve as a framework for personal and organizational learning. When I started working for the UN in 1990, the word ‘peace-building’ was not yet a part of our everyday vocabulary. Over the next two decades, beginning with former Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s Agenda for Peace (United Nations, 1992), the term has become an essential element of the lexicon of the international community and the subject of countless books, articles and academic theses. In this article I reflect on a few of the theories that influenced me the most as I have pursued a career with the UN in conflict and post-conflict situations around the world. Throughout this journey, I have—through the study of theory and regular reflection on practice—sought to better comprehend how international actors can play a more constructive role in building peace by pursuing holistic, integrated approaches, based on a shared understanding of the complex nature of the systems in which we operate, and to help my local partners to do the same. I also provide some modest reflections on the sometimes rocky relationship between theorists and practitioners.

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\* The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

## 2. Practice without Theory: El Salvador

Political theorists, professors and students have, for centuries, attempted to understand the complex nature of war and peace. But it was not until the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War that peace and conflict studies emerged as a specific field of study at universities. Beginning in the 1960s, researchers such as John Galtung and John Burton helped to define the academic disciplines of peace and conflict studies and conflict resolution as we know them today (Dunn, 2005). As lively as these academic debates were, they did not initially lead to the development of specific methodologies or tools for use by the UN or other practitioners in the pursuit of peace. The reason for this—at least from my own initial experiences—was likely more related to lack of demand from the practitioners than to lack of interest from the academics.

When I began working with the UN in El Salvador in May of 1990, it is fair to say that the UN development agencies, funds and programmes had no history of direct programmatic engagement in conflict prevention or post-conflict peace-building. Conflict was perceived as an issue best handled by diplomats and professional mediators. The standard UN development portfolio in a country like El Salvador was not thematically different from the one that you might have encountered in Barbados, despite the former country having been embroiled in civil conflict for most of the previous decade. Indeed, when the guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (in Spanish, Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN) launched an offensive in the capital, San Salvador, in the fall of 1989, it was not surprising that the response was to evacuate all international personnel and to set up shop temporarily outside the country until it was deemed safe to return.

So what changed? Perhaps, most importantly in the specific case of El Salvador, a dynamic new UN Resident Coordinator, Walter Franco, arrived on the scene in early 1990. Walter was convinced that the UN development agencies should not run away from conflict and should instead be willing to take calculated risks in order to be able to better serve the needs of individuals and communities most affected by violence. The flagship initiative for this new, more constructive programmatic approach was PRODERE, a regional, UN inter-agency effort funded by the Italian Government (Sollis and Schultz, 1995). PRODERE was launched as one of the results of commitments made at the 1989 International Conference on Central American Refugees, co-hosted by the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1994) and known by its Spanish acronym, CIREFCA. The Conference itself was the culmination of efforts over the previous decade to address what had become a region-wide crisis of refugees, displaced persons and returnees.

PRODERE was, at the time, the largest joint UN development initiative to date, and it created an unprecedented opportunity for the UN development agencies to work together in the heart of the ongoing conflict in rural El Salvador. It was also the first example of engagement by the UN in comprehensive, area-based development, based on the premise that, while the majority of the direct beneficiaries of the project were refugees, returnees and displaced persons, there were strong moral and practical reasons to design activities based on the expressed needs of the receiving communities as a whole.

Later, once a comprehensive set of peace accords had been agreed upon between the FMLN and the government, my colleagues and I also became acutely aware of a new set of potential beneficiaries for development assistance: the former guerrillas, who had suddenly found themselves disconnected from

their traditional sources of support as a result of the implementation of those aspects of the accords dealing with demobilization and disarmament. Something had to be done quickly to address their urgent needs for shelter, food and health care. Again, in his role as UN Resident Coordinator, Walter expressed willingness to tackle this sensitive issue head on, and soon we found ourselves engaged in designing and implementing a large-scale reintegration programme for ex-guerrillas.

To put it bluntly, we were 'winging it', without any template or guideline. We were wise enough, however, to immediately reach out for support to local and international civil society groups with prior experience of working in the geographic locations in question, either with the local community or directly with the FMLN. The Salvadoran government was also prudent enough to give the UN a lot of space to work with a completely new kind of beneficiary on projects that were, frankly, very different from anything we had ever done before. Soon we found ourselves directly engaged in the provision of food, shelter, education, training and even dental care, to a group of young men and women who, only weeks earlier, had been fighting a vicious civil war with our traditional counterpart, the Salvadoran government.

One of the things we learned then quite early on was the crucial role of Salvadoran civil society in creating bridges between the UN humanitarian and development agencies and our new beneficiaries. We badly needed civil society as partners for their operational reach in zones where we had little or no previous experience but also for the credibility that they enjoyed with local populations in those zones that had previously been under the control of the FMLN. Again, we had no specific model to work from, just a sense that if we were to benefit by association from the trust enjoyed by these local organizations, we first needed to earn their trust.

Probably the two most important steps taken in this regard were: (a) the recruitment of a senior UN advisor on national reconstruction, Anders Kompass, a Swede who was already well-known and respected by civil society leaders, based on his many years of active engagement in promoting peace and human rights in the country; and (b) the funding by the UN of the first directory of local civil society organizations in the country. The directory project provided an opportunity for the UN and civil society organizations to get to know each other, and it also allowed the organizations to learn more about each other's work.

One of my regrets from that period was that we did not invest adequately in codifying these early experiences. Those few project reports and evaluations of our efforts, written in the pre-Internet era, are presumably lost in dusty cabinets or, likelier still, slowly decomposing in landfills across the country.

The very first article that I encountered that tried to make sense of this early peace-building experience was one written for *Foreign Policy* in 1994 by Alvaro de Soto, who had represented the secretary-general in the Salvadoran peace negotiations, and Graciana del Castillo, who at the time was a senior officer in the office of the secretary-general and adjunct associate professor of economics at Columbia University (de Soto and del Castillo, 1994). While the article provided no theoretical framework for this emerging field of work, it left the reader with a powerful sense of the need for such a framework.

As the authors described it, the case of El Salvador "illustrated the lack of transparency and coordination within the UN system as the IMF and the Bank did not keep the UN abreast of the economic program they sponsor, and the UN neglected to inform the Bretton Woods institutions of the peace accords (de Soto and del Castillo, 1994: 74). In an image that resonated with many of us who worked on the Salvadoran peace process, they argued that "it was as if a patient lay on the operating table with the left

and right sides of his body separated by a curtain and unrelated surgery being performed on each side” (de Soto and del Castillo, 1994: 74).

What struck me most about this insight was this: If the international community was unable to come together in an integrated and coherent way around a shared vision for a stable and peaceful future in El Salvador, how could we possibly expect the Salvadorans, who had been fighting a divisive and bloody civil conflict for the previous decade, to do so? This was a doubt that I took with me to my next field assignment, as Assistant Resident Representative in Guatemala.

### **3. Emerging Theory: Scenario Planning – Guatemala (1)**

In Guatemala, the UN again turned to a Swedish activist and civil society leader, Lars Franklin, this time to serve as its Resident Coordinator. When Franklin arrived in 1995, the parties to the Guatemalan conflict were fully engaged in their own peace process, again under the auspices of the UN. This time, based on our experiences in El Salvador and inspired, in particular, by the publication of “Economic Policy for Building Peace: The Lessons of El Salvador” (Boyce, 1996), which had been sponsored by the UN, we attempted to take a more integrated and holistic approach. The UN reached out to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank for advice and guidance in the design of the Guatemalan peace accords, while the World Bank looked to the UN as a strategic partner in the design and implementation of conflict-sensitive social investment programming. We seemed to have collectively absorbed the primary thesis of the book, which was that economic policy during a post-war adjustment towards peace entails special challenges, including the need to simultaneously promote macroeconomic balance *and* political stabilization.

So with the international actors now talking to each other and coordinating on a wide range of issues, including demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants, resettlement of uprooted populations and the socio-economic roots of the conflict, we now turned to the other side of the equation. Was it possible to create a durable framework in which local, Guatemalan institutions from all sectors could create a common vision of a peaceful, stable future for the country, even when many of them had been on opposite sides of the conflict or even engaged directly in it?<sup>1</sup>

Here I can only say that, from my perspective, we literally stumbled upon what would become a powerful theoretical framework for the UN’s work in peace-building, not just in Guatemala, but in a number of similar contexts throughout the world. It began with a discussion in 1997 by the UN senior managers and senior government officials responsible for planning with the former Guatemalan Minister of Finance, Richard Aitkenhead Castillo, who had recently participated in a scenario planning exercise in Canada that had been facilitated by a young Canadian management consultant named Adam Kahane.<sup>2</sup> What was striking to all of us from his description of the process was the notion that this

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<sup>1</sup> A description of the UN’s **strategy for supporting broad**-based civic engagement in the Guatemalan peace process is provided in my article “Reviving Civil Society in Guatemala: Learning from Experience” (Russell, 2000: 54-68).

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian scenario planning process is described in *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (Kahane, 2004: 54-56). Scenario planning is a strategic planning methodology that was

methodology – originally created for military purposes and later adapted and adopted for the purposes of internal strategic planning by private sector companies like Royal Dutch/Shell – could also be utilized as a powerful tool for building multi-stakeholder consensus and commitment around a common vision of the future.

Later, the UN sponsored one of the first efforts to explain how scenario planning could be used in this innovative way. In their article, *Dialogue as a Tool for Peaceful Conflict Transformation*, Bettye Pruitt and Katrin Käufer explain that any methodology that aims at social change must take the participants through the “deeper levels where they become aware of and reflect on their own thinking, and where they can build commitment for social change” (Pruitt and Käufer, 2004: 10). By focusing their attention on the co-design of plausible stories of the future, participants who hold starkly opposing perspectives on the past and the present could nonetheless experience increased levels of trust and learn how to listen to and even collaborate with former enemies.

Our initial conversation with our counterparts focused on whether it might be possible to design a more sustainable national strategic planning process by inviting a diverse group of Guatemalan leaders from all walks of life to contribute new and different perspectives to the analysis. These discussions led to the design of a completely new type of UN project, one that was based solely on creating a safe space for dialogue amongst local actors. The project, known as Visión Guatemala, included academics, business and civil society leaders, former guerrillas and military officers, human rights activists, journalists, politicians, clergy, trade unionists and young people.

Together, this highly diverse team went on ‘learning journeys’ that helped participants develop a shared and more sophisticated understanding of Guatemala’s current reality and future possibilities. One participant described this coming together of local actors from all walks of life as a process of “collective dreaming, which is intoxicating” (Kahane, 2004: 119). The participant further elaborated:

The fact that you can sit and begin to converge on a series of issues in which you are not just making it up but you are actually trying to root it in reality. To be able to not only root it in reality but also to grasp it up with all of your strength so that you can in fact envision what you sense. (Kahane, 2004: 119)

This convergence helped the team to be able to imagine stories of the future such as the ‘Illusion of the Moth’, about the risks of relying on authoritarian leadership (like a moth buzzing around a flame) and the ‘Flight of the Fireflies’, a scenario of an increasingly inclusive and diverse Guatemalan society. This last scenario provided the team with both inspiration and a broad road map to collaborate on specific actions aimed at changing the future of their war-torn country for the better.

Lars Franklin described the scenario construction process in Guatemala as one that “can best be understood by looking at the many seeds it planted and nurtured”, including changes to political party platforms, new alliances on issues from poverty reduction to education reform and the establishment of a comprehensive fiscal pact (Kahane, 2004:120). And, perhaps more importantly, the sense of connection and commitment amongst these participants from across various sectors has endured over

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originally adapted from classic military strategy by private sector companies as a way of better planning for and adapting to multiple scenarios of the future.

time. As one participant stated years later, “When things go badly here, we all dig our trenches deeper. Visión Guatemala gives us bridges across our trenches” (Kahane, 2004: 120).

#### **4. Advancing Theory: Democratic Dialogue and Theory U – Guatemala (2)**

In the spring of 1998 I was reassigned back to UN Headquarters, but I continued to pay close attention to the Visión Guatemala project in my new role as programme manager for Central America. My Regional Director, Elena Martinez, was also impressed by how the project had been able to bring together a microcosm of Guatemalan society to create a common vision of the future, and suggested that we organize a regional workshop to analyse and share lessons learned from what we were now calling ‘civic scenario’ projects.

The civic scenario workshop, hosted in late 2000 by the UN in Guatemala, brought together former participants from three scenario processes that had been facilitated by Adam Kahane over the previous decade in South Africa, Columbia and Guatemala. Interest in the workshop from the UN colleagues was high, and we ended up adjusting the workshop approach to accommodate more than 100 participants from across Latin American and the Caribbean, as well as from other regions. We left the workshop with a profound sense that we were entering uncharted territory, one where the simple, ancient practice of dialogue, if managed well, could create positive changes at the individual, group and, ultimately, societal level. We were also convinced that we had to do more, that we were being called to not only apply this approach in other contexts but that we had an obligation to help codify and disseminate this emerging theory.

We decided then and there to create a regional UN project to build a practitioners’ network and a handbook for the practice of what we now were describing as ‘civic’ or ‘democratic’ dialogue. We shifted to the broader concept of ‘dialogue’ partly in recognition of the fact that scenario planning was just one of many ways of creating a safe space for local actors to define a common vision of the future.

We developed the project in collaboration with the corporate UN policy units dealing with democratic governance and crisis prevention and recovery, and also went looking for other international organizations that might be interested in joining our effort. A wide variety of partners were eager to join the emerging community of practice, including traditional UN partners such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), private foundations such as Rockefeller and Hewlett-Packard and regional and global organizations such as the Organization of American States and the Carter Center. The network remains active today, more than a decade since its establishment (<[www.democraticdialoguenetwork.org/app/en](http://www.democraticdialoguenetwork.org/app/en)>).

The most striking aspect of this regional project was that its own activities were designed through a process of inclusive dialogue, involving both many of the same practitioners that had joined us for the first workshop and representatives from international organizations that were keen to work with us in this emerging area of work. In other words, from the beginning, we tried to practise what we preached.

At these workshops, Adam Kahane and his fellow facilitators worked with us to flesh out various aspects of the proposed handbook. One of the articles that we commissioned for the project that influenced me the most was “Learning from Civic Scenarios Projects: A Tool for Facilitating Social Change?”, written by Dr. Katrin Käufer of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Käufer, 2004). This article captured

for me a number of important emerging insights, including how inclusive, multi-stakeholder dialogue around perceptions of the future – when successful – can create change at three levels. Dr. Käufer describes these three layers of results as follows:

The scenario work had an impact on three levels: (1) on the participants, (2) on those with whom the participants engaged, and (3) later, on decisions and actions that affected the future of the country in which it took place. (Käufer, 2004: 10)

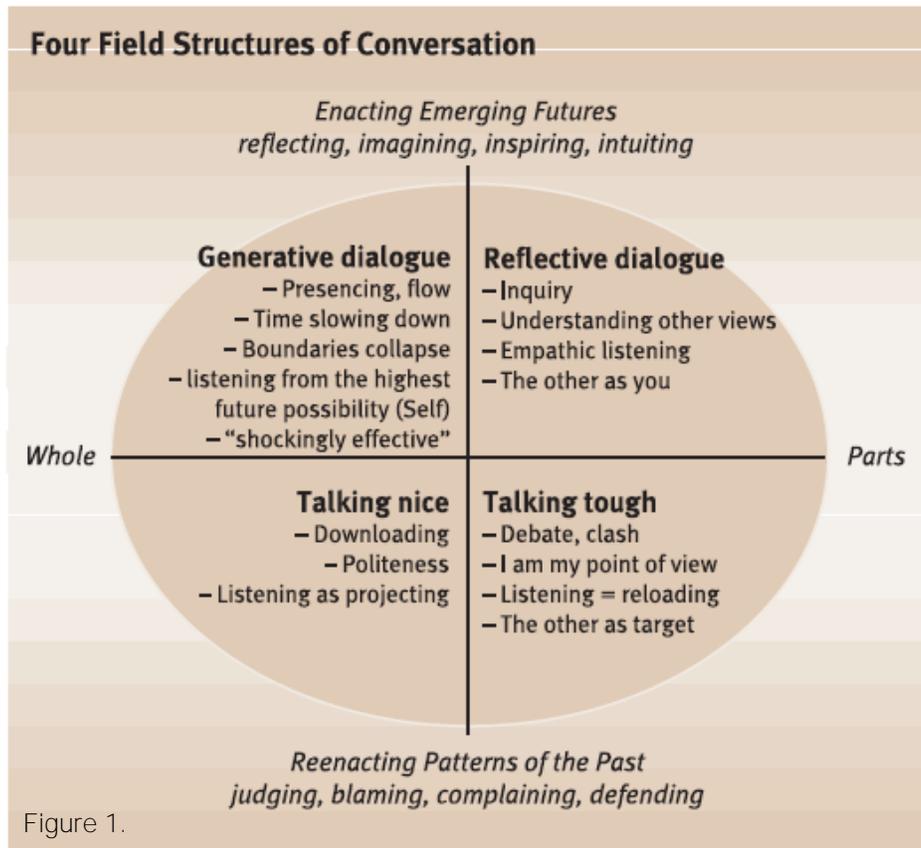
I now had the beginnings of a theory that seemed to be tailor-made for the programmatic work of the UN in conflict situations, and, later, I saw indeed how providing the right individuals at the right time with the opportunity to transform themselves and their colleagues could affect the future of the country as a whole. Indeed, the small group of Guatemalans who worked together on *Visión Guatemala* now includes a former president, three other presidential candidates and the leaders of a large number of national reform efforts over the past 15 years<sup>3</sup> (Kahane, 2012: 73).

The article also introduced me to the concepts that would eventually be codified by Otto Scharmer as ‘Theory U’.<sup>4</sup> One of the core concepts that we helped to develop and test and that I have applied almost every day in my subsequent fieldwork is that of ‘fields of conversation’. Figure 1 is an early version of the diagram that we used as a reference during the initial dialogue workshops (Pruitt and Käufer, 2004: 12).

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<sup>3</sup> Kahane explains how what we were actually doing in Guatemala was to take the existing adaptive scenario planning technology that had been in use for decades by the military and the private sector and “turn it on its head—so that we construct scenarios not only to understand the future but also to influence it”. The participants in *Visión Guatemala* did not realize it at the time, but Kahane helped us to later understand that what we were actually trying to do was change the future, rather than just to adapt to it (Kahane, 2012: XV).

<sup>4</sup> Scharmer describes Theory U as a method for addressing the core question: “What is required in order and act from the future as it emerges?” and for learning how to strengthen our ability to move from “reacting and quick fixes” to “profound renewal and change” (Scharmer, 2009: 13-14).



The diagram tries to capture the evolution of conversation within diverse groups, starting with ‘Talking nice’ in the lower left quadrant, moving through ‘Talking tough’, ‘Reflective dialogue’, and, finally, ‘Generative dialogue’. The bottom two quadrants are the most common fields of conversation and are primarily concerned with ‘re-enacting patterns of the past’. Another way of describing these kinds of conversations is that the participants are simply ‘downloading’ their standard points of view. Movement up through the other two fields of dialogue is far less common and depends on the ability and willingness of participants to let go of existing mental models and become open to new opinions and possibilities. The upper two quadrants are thus less about defending past positions than about thinking about future possibilities. In addition, the creators of the diagram had realized that the two left-hand quadrants share a common emphasis by the group on the primacy (and well-being) of the group as a ‘whole’, while the two right-hand quadrants both represent fields of conversation that give preference to the primacy of the ‘parts’, *i.e.* to the opinions of the specific individuals within the group.

What I found most familiar from my own experiences was the idea that individuals with different perspectives tend, in general, to follow a path that begins with politeness and then, if the process goes any further, often gets stuck in unfruitful debate. Participants end up either trying to force others to agree with his/her point of view or withdrawing from the conversation altogether. But if they are willing to stick with the process and work through their differences, then a more reflective dialogue can emerge.

It was around this same time that I also became aware of the work of the physicist David Bohm. I was intrigued by the fact that the academics assisting us with the design of technologies for social change often made reference to a theoretical physicist primarily known for his contribution to quantum theory. This scientist's lifelong search for meaning at the atomic level had also led to a number of fascinating insights into human behavior and the nature of human systems. His descriptions of the purpose of dialogue provided me with further understanding as to why dialogue methodologies like scenario planning could help individuals to break free of old patterns:

The objective of dialogue is not to analyze things, or to exchange opinions. Rather it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions – to listen to everyone's opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means....If you don't have dialogue, I don't think meetings between people are going to be creative; they are just going to be attempts to make one view prevail. (Bohm, 2008)

In other words, it is not just about persevering with the conversation through politeness and debate, but also about being willing to let go of the need to 'win' the argument.

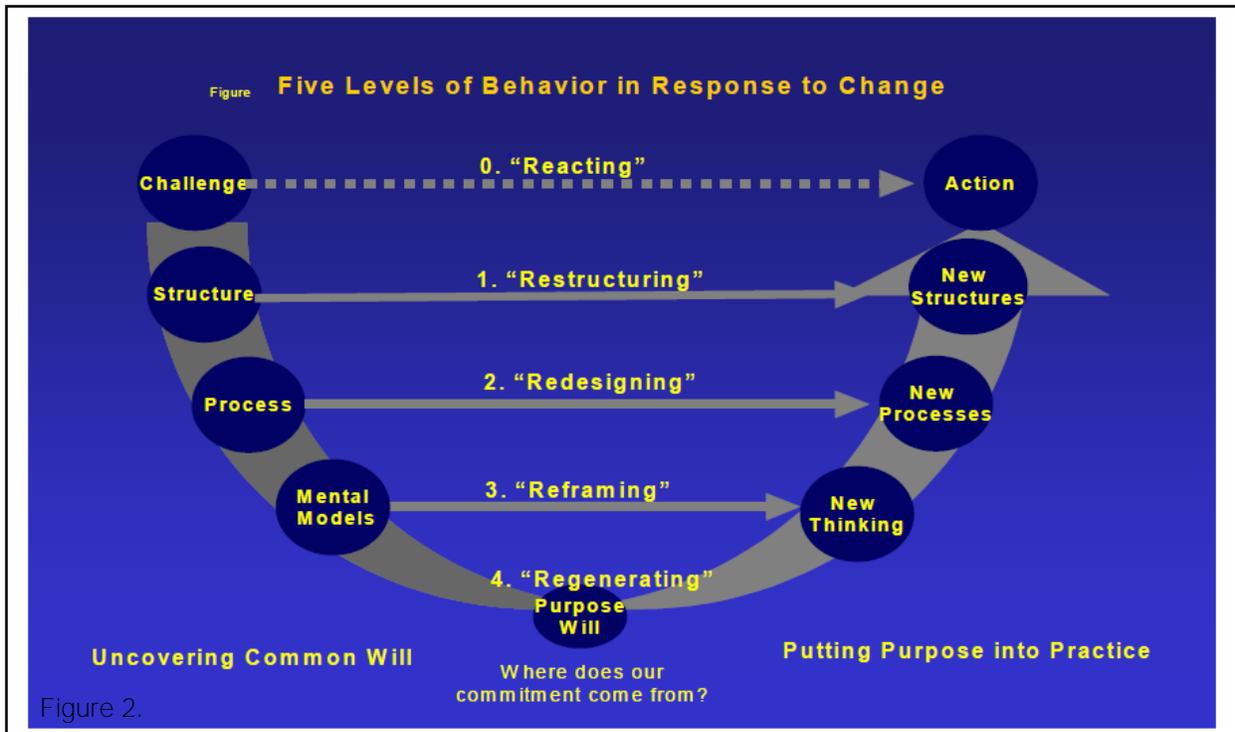
The interaction between practitioners of dialogue and academics through our regional project also highlighted the importance of moving beyond superficial 'fixes' to deep-rooted problems to allow for a more profound and sustained reflection on the complex nature of the system under analysis. As mentioned above, our work to try to make sense of real-life dialogue experiences in Guatemala and other contexts contributed eventually to the elaboration of the 'Theory U' social technology, as described in books like "Theory U," "Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future" and, more recently, in "The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges"<sup>5</sup> (Scharmer, 2009; Senge *et al.*, 2005; Hassan, 2014).

Figure 2 is another diagram showing an initial version of the 'U' process provided to us by Otto Scharmer that we used as a reference during our democratic dialogue practitioner workshops<sup>6</sup> (Käufer, 2004: 12).

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving Our Most Complex Challenges*, Hassan – a colleague of Adam Kahane from Reos partners – describes how the U process has been applied in recent years by social and environmental activists working collectively to address some of the most complex global problems of our time, such as food insecurity and child malnutrition (Hassan, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Our working definition of 'democratic dialogue' evolved over the years. Eventually, **we agreed that it included "inclusive processes that are open, sustained and flexible enough to adapt to changing contexts..., (as) a complement to, not a replacement for, democratic institutions such as legislatures, political parties and government bodies"** (Pruitt and Thomas, 2007: 1).



The basic premise of the diagram is that most groups tend to remain at the level of reacting to challenges and lack the willingness or ability to engage in a deeper process of reflection. In this early version of 'Theory U', the objective of the group is to first move down the left-hand side of the 'U', setting aside the temptation to simply react to challenges (corresponding to the 'downloading' fields of conversation shown in the lower two quadrants in Figure 1). The group arrives at the bottom of the 'U' only when it is willing and able to challenge existing structures, processes and individual mental models. It is only by reaching a deeper level of shared understanding that the group can then start to move up the right side of the 'U' (corresponding to the two dialogic fields of conversation shown in the upper two quadrants in Figure 1). This part of the journey then begins with a sense of joint commitment and common will and includes the reframing of mental models and the design of new processes and structures. Only then does the group spring into action, putting its new sense of purpose into practice. As described above, in the case of Guatemala this final phase of the dialogue process included a flurry of actions that challenged the status quo based on new coalitions and alliances that could never have been imagined before.

In our practitioner workshops we came back again and again to this simple, U-shaped diagram as a way of visualizing the benefits of letting go of the need to 'win the argument' and to be open to a deeper (and sometimes even uncomfortable) process of reflection.

How to get to the other side of the 'U' ? What we found in the Visión Guatemala experience and other scenario planning exercises is that the act of collective storytelling is the key that allows a group of diverse individuals to move through fields of conversation and, ultimately, reach the other side of the 'U.' As Adam Kahane has described it:

Multiple stories generate possibilities for new futures... I have repeatedly been struck by how dramatically suspending and storytelling unlock the door to collaboration, creativity, and forward movement. (Kahane, 2012: 94)

In other words, it is not just about telling stories, but also about ‘suspending’ our deeply held opinions, examining them and, ultimately, creating the possibility for moving beyond disagreements of the past by acknowledging that our own opinions may be getting in the way of imagining a better future.<sup>7</sup>

I continue to be inspired by the power of thinking about the future as a way of transcending old grievances and current realities, and I have returned to this ‘U’ image again and again since those early days. For me, it speaks of the importance of not rushing to ‘fix’ problems and of the vital importance of trying to dig deeper into the nature of the programme and of taking whatever time is necessary to move beyond old thinking and old ways of doing things. And while I have taken the time to read much of the theory and guidance that my former academic partners have written over the years, what still excites me the most is the simple promise that lies at the bottom of the ‘U’ image: that highly diverse individuals can – if they are willing to work together – discover the necessary purpose and energy to create a more positive future.

## 5. Challenges to the Theory: Cyprus

I left UN Headquarters in 2004 to take on a new role as manager of the UN’s community-level peace-building activities in Cyprus. I was keen to apply what I had learned during the four years that I had worked on the regional democratic dialogue initiative. I was in for a surprise.

I found that Cyprus was a very different place from Central America. During my experiences in El Salvador and Guatemala, I was in awe at the courage and persistent engagement of civil society actors in fighting for positive change during both times of conflict and times of peace. In contrast, the peace process in Cyprus was distinguished by a more high level, political approach, one that had been led for decades by the respective leaders of the two communities, with limited direct participation in the peace process by society at large.

This fundamental difference in approach was strongly reinforced after the failure of the 2004 Annan Plan, which had been brokered by Alvaro de Soto (who, a decade before, had stimulated my interest in integrated approaches to dealing with complex systems). Although 65% of Turkish Cypriots endorsed the Plan, it was rejected by 76% of Greek Cypriots and, hence, was never ratified. Civil society in the Greek Cypriot community, not strong to begin with, came under criticism during the post-referendum period, accused by politicians and the media of being “willing accomplices of international organisations in bankrolling the ‘yes’ campaign” (Jarraud *et al.*, 2013: 15). In other words, not only was civil society excluded from the peace negotiations, but any attempt to promote acceptance of the accords by the public was viewed by some as equivalent to collusion with foreign powers.

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<sup>7</sup> Hassan describes moving to the right side of the ‘U’ as a process of “letting come”, a “uniquely difficult point in the U-process, because it represents a shift to action, and all action is a commitment of some sort” (Hassan, 2006: 4).

In this context, the conditions did not exist for the UN or any other international actor to support an inclusive and participatory process of dialogue amongst diverse sectors of the Cypriot society. More basic work was needed to strengthen the credibility and confidence of Greek Cypriot civil society organizations so that they could eventually make a stronger case, on their own, for playing a role in a future peace process as a legitimate representative of the wider Cypriot public.

While shifting the focus of the UN's programming towards creating a robust network of self-reliant civil society organizations on both sides of the Green Line in Cyprus, I did not completely give up on the possibility of inclusive dialogue. Many of the positive dynamics that I had associated with dialogue – analysing a problem together, coming to a shared understanding of the problem, etc. – simply did not seem to be part of the vocabulary of local leaders in Cyprus in 2004. My UN colleagues and I found, however, that we were able to get people to sit down together only if we emphasized the benefits of collaboration on a specific technical issue (such as animal health, environmental degradation, etc.) to each community separately. So, for example, on the issue of the environment, we would say, "Look, this is an issue that affects the island as a whole. It makes sense for you to work on this particular problem. So, it is in your self-interest, as Greek Cypriots (or Turkish Cypriots), to collaborate with the other community, because you will have a greater impact by tackling this problem together."<sup>8</sup>

While less exciting than the kind of deep, transformative dialogue I was exposed to in my earlier assignments, this practical approach, after many years of application, in conjunction with broader efforts to forge a broad, resilient coalition of civil society actors acting together for peace, (Jarraud *et al.*, 2013: 54) has, a decade later (and seven years after my own departure from Cyprus), finally begun to make some headway. Civil society actors have begun to join forces to increase their influence on the Cypriot peace process through Cypriot-owned and -led platforms like the Peace It Together network (<<http://peace-it-together.net/>>). There is now modest but growing support for reconciliation efforts outside of the traditional political framework<sup>9</sup> and in parallel to more traditional, 'top down' approaches to peacemaking (Harris, 2014).

## 6. Reflections on Practitioner–Theorist Relations

While this article has addressed what I consider to be mutually beneficial collaboration between practitioners and theorists, I have found this kind of interdependent relationship to be much more the exception than the rule. Over the past two decades I have also participated in encounters between academics and UN development managers that seem more like dialogues of the deaf, each side firmly confident that the other side 'just doesn't get it'. One reason why I think that the democratic dialogue project worked so well was that the methodology applied by our 'theory builders' began from the premise that there was inherent value in weaving the theory out of the analysis of lessons as recounted by practitioners in their own words. This approach took a lot of patience by the academics, but the pay-

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<sup>8</sup> This quotation is taken from my interview with Katrin Käufer (Pruitt and Thomas, 2007: 72).

<sup>9</sup> Support for civilian-led peace movements now hovers above 50% in both Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities (Jarraud *et al.*, 2013: 55).

off was high for both practitioners and theorists.<sup>10</sup> The secret to our success, I believe, lay in the shared belief by the theorists and the practitioners that the only way to write a book on democratic dialogue was to actually do it via a collaborative process between practitioners and theorists.

When I think of my own personal encounters with academia over the years, I am also struck by two ironies. I had, as a student, gone into development studies because I considered it less academic and more practical than other fields of study. In other words, I wanted to spend my life with real people and not with mathematical equations or hypothetical constructs. And yet, once I began my career, I found it far too easy to get lost in the details of the bureaucratic process and lose track of the ultimate purpose of my actions. In the end, it took academics like Katrin Käufer and John Paul Lederach to help me to understand that, in fact, individual transformation lies at the heart of any successful development project.<sup>11</sup>

A second irony is that while my former academic partners have been highly successful in designing and testing more and more sophisticated theories and approaches over the years, I have found that the capacity of international organizations to continuously build on past knowledge is less certain. Recently, less than a decade after the publication of the *Democratic Dialogue – A Handbook for Practitioners*, I waved my frayed and well-used copy in front of a large group of fellow UN practitioners at a workshop on peace-building, only to discover that no one knew it existed.

## 7. Conclusion

When I started working in the emerging peace-building field with the UN in El Salvador in 1990, we were unaware of any practical methodologies or tools for transforming conflict through programmatic activities. We were, essentially, ‘winging it’. Later, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I readily participated in practitioner-led learning activities that have contributed to the definition by experts of simple but powerful methodologies for social change and conflict transformation, such as scenario planning and ‘Theory U’. In turn, I have been inspired by these writers to apply and adapt the codified versions of these theories and approaches in new and very different contexts.

I still have much to learn, but I can say with certainty that this two-decade interplay of practical experience and theory has so far taught me at least three important lessons. First, there is no such thing as a peace-building process that is ‘too inclusive’.<sup>12</sup> Second, there is no societal change without

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<sup>10</sup> My copy of *Democratic Dialogue – A Handbook for Practitioners* – the final product of this symbiotic collaboration between theorists and practitioners – stays on my desk, and I consult it frequently (Pruitt and Thomas, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> In particular, Lederach has helped me to appreciate the value of applying differentiated approaches to engagement with individual leaders at all levels. Whenever possible, I try to incorporate individual perceptions as success indicators in project design, monitoring and evaluation (Lederach, 1997: 39).

<sup>12</sup> Adam Kahane recounts that “Bill Torbert of Boston College once said to me that the 1960s slogan ‘If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem’ actually misses the most important point about effecting change. The slogan should be: ‘If you’re not part of the problem, you can’t be part of the solution.’ If we cannot see how what we

individual change.<sup>13</sup> And, lastly, it is always better not to ‘wing it’, if you can. In other words, intervening without any kind of theory for change, as we did in the early 1990s, is a risky activity and not one for amateurs (as we were back then). I remain convinced that individuals and societies can indeed find positive change through dialogue, but I now understand that it requires a lot of practice (and theory) to make it happen.

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are doing or not doing is contributing to things being the way that they are, then logically we have no basis at all, zero leverage, for changing the way things are -- **except from the outside, by persuasion or force**" (Kahane, 2004: 83-84).

<sup>13</sup> It may be a cliché, but I continue to be inspired by the quotation (rightly or wrongly) attributed to Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I also firmly agree with Harold Saunders' assertion that "Only human beings can transform hostility into relationships of peace" (Saunders, 1999: 4).

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