Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum
September 11, 2007
Reflective Practice and Institutional Learning in Organizations: Are we learning from ourselves and how?

This month’s forum explored the role of reflective practice in organizations and institutions that are willing to learn from their experiences in the field, as well as to institutionalizing the knowledge gained. The panelists were Carole Frampton, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), Paul Miller, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Wallace Warfield, Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR), George Mason University (GMU), and Peter Woodrow, Collaborative for Development Action. Melanie Greenberg from the Cyprus Fund for Peace and Security facilitated the forum.

The main points addressed in the presentations of the four panelists were: the key elements of reflective practice; the importance of fostering a culture of reflective practice within the organizations; and effective policies in implementing reflective practices and ways of institutionalizing the knowledge. Panelists also spoke about some of the challenges they encountered in different contexts and settings.

Wallace Warfield, Associate Professor at ICAR, GMU, presented a reflective practice model pointing out that practice and theory are not divided, and that practitioners in the field use theory all the time. Often practitioners are engaging theory without being conscious of it, even using it to inform practice. According to Professor Warfield, theory helps practitioners figure out what resolutions can be expected. The reflective practice model implies that theory first helps us organize thinking. In addition, theory influences the institutionalization of a practice and informs the assessment phase of the process. Reflecting on operative theories helps practitioners understand “which gods we honor and which gods we fear”. This works in two ways: 1) there are so called guiding theories which offer the much needed transparency in the practice, and 2) theory helps practitioners see the pattern of action around them. Reflection happens both “in action” and after, the latter being labeled post-action reflection.

There is, according to Professor Warfield, no hierarchy between theory and practice – in fact, he stated, “practice is a foundation of good theory”. He also mentioned the internal dialogue that takes place in practitioners’ minds; this dialogue is a constant struggle between the “outside” theory and individuals’ instincts. The two sides are an important part of reflective practice.

Peter Woodrow, Co-Director of Reflecting on Peace Practice Project at CDA, spoke about his professional experience with the Reflecting on Peace Practice project as a
framework for the exchange and sharing of knowledge and experience. The goal of the project is to help improve practice and to find out whether people are learning from their own work; people may not even be aware that they are working with a theory and the recognition of this is a part of the work. He stressed that theories are often implicit and not explicit.

Mr. Woodrow explained that there exist two phases of reflective practice: the cross-case analysis and the utilization phase. These phases are not clearly defined and merge into one another. Reflective practices across agencies, Mr. Woodrow mentioned, help find lessons that can be generalized. The process starts with fostering reflection and generating knowledge through case studies. What follows is packaging knowledge – establishing new theory. Another possible consequence is training. The next component is the dissemination process, from where individual learning springs. Applying this to institutions, i.e. implementing the knowledge, bringing it into the institutions’ strategies and routines is more challenging, but should eventually occur. In this way what Mr. Woodrow labeled as “tectonic changes” would come into being – changes from the individual to the macro level. The problem lies here: how to make those changes become usual practice. One of the positive examples is the adoption of the “do no harm” principle, which has been developed upon reflection and is now widely accepted. Woodrow briefly mentioned some of the constraints related to reflective practice: 1) time, 2) incentive structures, 3) staff turnover, 4) procedures/ format and meeting donors’ requests, and finally 5) leadership – who provides it and makes sure that implementation takes place.

Paul Miller, Africa Advisor at CRS, related his presentation to the work of his organization in the field, as well as to the recent joint publication of CRS and the Kroc Institute - Reflective Peacebuilding: A Planning, Monitoring, and Learning Toolkit. Mr. Miller described the publication as a measuring work and an effort to be more proactive and creative in relation to conflict and ways to resolve it. Mr. Miller echoed the others in the belief that reflection is critical, especially in protracted conflicts. In addition, there are many ethical issues involved with the work, e.g. the protection of people. The objective of reflection is creating a learning community where there should be no embarrassment on the side of organizations to make adjustments in their projects. Particular attention, according to Miller, should be paid to unwanted consequences.

An additional intention of the Toolkit creators was to demystify theory while remystifying practice. Mr. Miller stated that storytelling is a part of the process - it is not just anecdotal evidence but a means to show where learning actually takes place, as well as a way to acknowledge it. The effort behind reflective practice should lead to becoming or learning how to become a better partner and how to bring experiences form other areas into peacebuilding. Small offices and projects can have big impact because of their flexibility to changes or adjustments. According to Mr. Miller, large organizations are often hindered by excessive data etc.

Carole Frampton from SFCG pointed out that reflective learning and creating links between the micro and the macro level present enormous challenges in organizations. This process implies that the organization is taking charge of its own culture and learning, as well as channeling the energy or the entrepreneurial spirit. The
question that should be asked is what are the means to institutionalize knowledge. SFCG has experience in this process, but some of the efforts have been more successful than others. The organization’s current approach includes integrating institutional learning into programming. It always begins with the people involved in a project and asking them to reflect on their work in the field. An additional point mentioned by Ms. Frampton is the need to include the person responsible for institutional learning in the management. At the same time, this leader needs to bring with her/him field experience and must get back to it repeatedly in the process of reflecting.

For SFCG, the internal website and newsletter have been ways to express what has been done and tools to have that promote learning. Other tools are modules, glossaries and reports. Crucial for the process is a team approach – viewing the whole organization as a team. The objective is to connect the field offices with the main office and to encourage exchange, i.e. create a flow of information, people and experience. Institutional learning also has within its mandate the responsibility to synthesize information and to develop frameworks in order to make sure that there is alignment between offices. However, this alignment should not be too rigid.

In Ms. Frampton’s words, the culture of learning is about good management, about reviewing structures and processes, as well as about maximizing the knowledge and increasing effectiveness. Some of the challenges Ms. Frampton talked about are funding for such projects, technology issues, overstretched staff and the particularity of the field.

After concluding remarks by Melanie Greenberg on the importance of reflective practice, several questions came from the audience. The first related to the inclusion of all stakeholders in the reflective process. All panelists agreed on the importance of listening to communities. Carole Frampton added the need to include more anonymous ways to get feedback. Peter Woodrow spoke about the difficulties of getting feedback from the mid-to high-level officials. Wallace Warfield mentioned that a stagnant phase is a good time to ask for input. Paul Miller mentioned that transparency and accountability are crucial to his organization’s work and that participatory approach is good but it remains a challenge.

Another question referred to small offices and the possible recommendations for them in relation to reflective practice. The question was also about the danger of creating more problems by introducing reflective practice. The answer was that in some cases reflective practice can be problematic due to cultural issues – in some cultures it implies a sort of a threat, it resonates among staff like fault-finding, and in this case can be a tool of managerial tyranny. Other examples were given where something similar already exists in the culture and in this sense can be incorporated into the reflective practice in organizations or their offices.

The final question was about practices and strategies of sharing knowledge and cultivating cooperation among agencies. In this regard, the panelists spoke mainly about the obligation to coordinate, but also about challenges related to it. Some of the challenges mentioned were the lack of time and getting caught up in one’s own work. Meetings can be a way to coordinate, but there are better ways, such as case studies, which provide safe space for mutual analysis and enable bringing in different perspectives. The best moments to discuss mutual learning are times of crisis – when
nothing seems to be working one can take the time to reflect on the reasons and come up with new strategies.