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the Scholar/Practitioner
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INTRODUCTION

For some years, I have been actively engaged in the development and application of an approach to the resolution of international conflicts for which I use the term ‘interactive problem solving’. The fullest – indeed, the paradigmatic – application of the approach is represented by problem-solving workshops, although it involves a variety of other activities as well. In fact, I have increasingly come to see interactive problem solving as an approach to the macro-processes of international conflict resolution, in which problem-solving workshops and similar micro-level activities are integrally related to official diplomacy. The approach derives most directly from the work of John Burton. While my work follows the general principles laid out by Burton, it has evolved in its own directions, in keeping with my own disciplinary background, my particular style, and the cases on which I have focused my attention. My work has concentrated since 1974 on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and particularly on the Israeli-Palestinian component of that conflict. I have also done some work, however, on the Cyprus conflict and have maintained an active interest in several other intense, protracted identity conflicts at the international or intercommunal level.

INTERACTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Interactive problem solving – as manifested particularly in problem-solving workshops – is an academically-based, unofficial third-party approach, bringing together representatives of parties in conflict for direct communication. The third party typically consists of a panel of social scientists who, among them, possess expertise in group process and international conflict, and at least some familiarity with the conflict region. The role of the third party in our model differs from that of the traditional mediator. Unlike many mediators, we do not
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propose (and certainly, unlike arbitrators, we do not impose) solutions. Rather, we try to facilitate a process whereby solutions will emerge out of the interaction between the parties themselves. The task of the third party is to provide the setting, create the atmosphere, establish the norms, and offer occasional interventions that make it possible for such a process to evolve.

Although the distinguishing feature of the approach (in contrast, for example, to traditional mediation) is direct communication between the parties, the objective is not to promote communication or dialogue as an end in itself. Problem-solving workshops are designed to promote a special type of communication – which I shall try to describe below – with a very specific political purpose. Problemsolving workshops are closely linked to the larger political process. Selection of participants and definition of the agenda, for example, are based on careful analysis of the current political situation within and between the conflicting parties. Moreover, the objective of workshops is to generate inputs into the political process, including the decision-making process itself and the political debate within each of the communities. Most broadly stated, workshops try to contribute to creating a political environment conducive to conflict resolution and to transformation of the relationship between the conflicting parties – both in the short term and in the long term.

Practically speaking, this emphasis usually means that problem-solving workshops are closely linked to negotiation in its various phases, although negotiation does not by any means fully encompass the process of changing international relationships. In our work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the years, problem-solving workshops have in essence been designed as contributions to a pre-negotiation process: to creating the conditions that would enable the parties to move toward the negotiating table. Thus, in planning and following up on workshops, our focus has always been on the barriers that have stood in the way of opening negotiations and on ways of overcoming such barriers – for example, through mutual reassurance. Despite the close link between workshops and negotiations, we have been very clear in emphasizing that workshops are not to be confused with negotiations as such. They are not meant to be negotiations, or simulated negotiations, or rehearsals for negotiations, nor are they meant to serve as substitutes for negotiations. Rather, they are meant to be complementary to negotiations.

Binding agreements can only be achieved through official negotiations. The very binding character of official negotiations, however,