INFOCORE Definitions

Conflict phases

© *Marie-Soleil Frère & Nina Wilen*
Université libre de Bruxelles
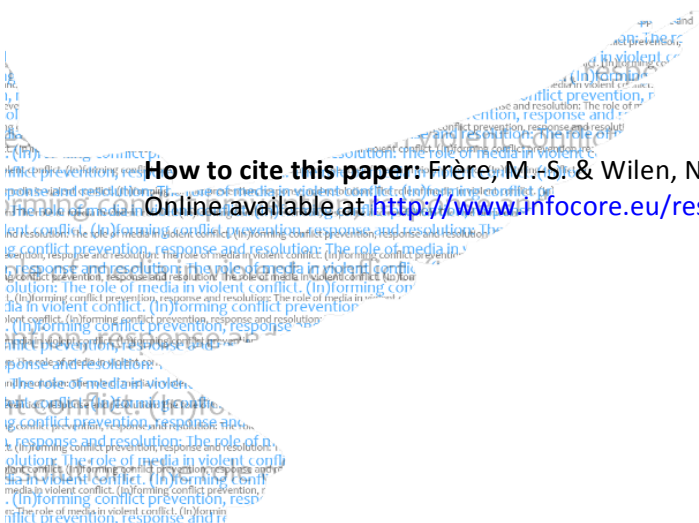
INFOCORE DEFINITIONS

CONFLICT PHASES

All conflicts have their own dynamics, which are shaped by their particular context. Yet, the dynamics all tend to escalate and recede over time. By dividing the "life time" of a conflict into different phases we can deconstruct the dynamic of the conflict. This way it becomes possible to visualize how conflicts typically evolve over time and how the different phases of a conflict relate. The deconstruction of the dynamic of a conflict also seeks to enhance the understanding of the conflict so that it can be handled in the most efficient way. Actions in the shape of prevention, management or resolution of a conflict may for example profit from the classification of the conflict into phases in order to facilitate identification of which action that is most appropriate to introduce when and how.

Whereas the labelling of the different phases or stages of a conflict differs depending on authors, most use the image of a conflict curve, shaped as a bump in the road (see image) to depict the development of a conflict. The starting point is often the 'no conflict' point, to show the difference with the following phases. Thereafter latent conflict signifies the beginning of turmoil, although it has not yet produced any visible effects. Here, preventive diplomacy is usually the most effective method to hinder a continuation of the development towards a conflict. The emergence of the conflict arrives when the latent conflict has transformed to become visible in the sense that it is 'out in the open', which is also called the phase of dispute. At this point the conflict can either be settled or resolved, or escalate/transform into a crisis. The escalation process is complex and unpredictable as new issues or actors to the conflict can emerge which can alter objectives and strategies along the way (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall, 2011, p.13).

The actual crisis phase is sometimes divided into phases as well, depending on the intensity of violence, ranging from limited violence to massive violence. During the period crisis, external actors may attempt crisis management or active peace making to stabilize the situation. Yet escalation may only go on a certain time before the conflict either ends or turns into a stalemate where neither side is able to win. If there are more disadvantages of continuing the conflict than of maintaining it, the parties may be considered as part of a hurting stalemate. This stage is receptive of negotiation efforts and even settlement proposals, as there is no longer any incentives to continue fighting (Zartman, 2000, p.228). At a certain point into the conflict, a de-escalation phase will commence whereby the most urgent and violent phase of the conflict is (at least momentarily) over. The de-escalation or abatement phase is often closely related to the agreement of a settlement or negotiations leading up to a peace accord. This stage is prone to the deployment of traditional peacekeeping operations. If the peace accord survives the first phase the conflict moves into the recovery and reconciliation phase, which often is accompanied by peacebuilding initiatives to avoid, relapses into conflict. The final stage differs again depending on

authors, while some end the deconstruction of the conflict phases after the settlement, others continue to the achievement of a stable and durable peace.

It should be noted that conflicts rarely follow the conflict phases in a linear mode, and that many conflicts repeat certain phases several times, or stop for a longer period in the hurting stalemate phase without moving forward to any settlement. The division into conflict phases can still be useful though, as most conflicts pass through these stages at some point in time during the conflict, thus by identifying the phase, the observer can increase understanding and improve analysis of the conflict.
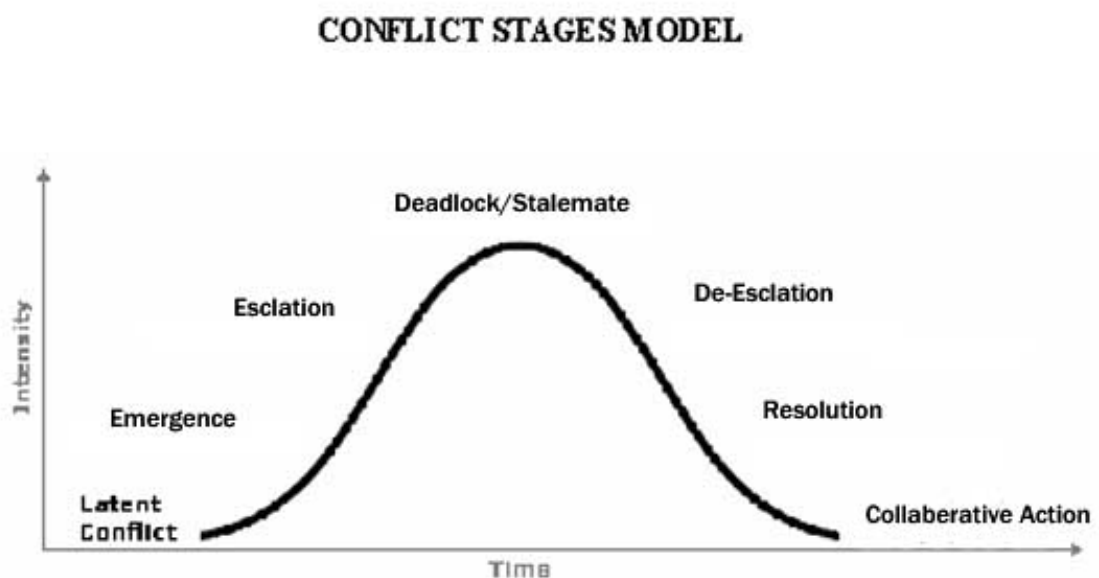
CONFLICT STAGES MODEL

image from: http://www.ohioconflictsolutions.com/conflict-life-cycle.php, accessed 10 March 2014.

References:

Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., Miall, H. (2011). *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*, 3rd ed., Polity Press: Cambridge.

Zartman, I. (2000). "Ripeness: the Hurting Stalemate and Beyond", in Stern, P., C., Druckman, D. (eds). *International Conflict Resolution After the Cold War*. National Academy Press: Washington DC.

www.infocore.eu