Embracing concurrent realities: Revisiting the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution

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Chapter 9: Conclusion & Implications: Embracing Concurrent Realities
Chapter 9

This study has focused on the interplay of human rights and conflict resolution in the practice of civil society organisations and independent state institutions, so as to enhance understanding of the relationship between these fields and contribute to improved practice. While it has been recognised for some time that human rights, justice, conflict and peace are closely linked, thus far the domains of human rights and conflict resolution have remained rather separate in conceptual, institutional and practical terms. By and large, the fields still have their own distinct sets of practitioners and scholars, frames of reference, range of methods, research centres, organisations, forums and constituencies. People working in these domains seldom consider whether and how their respective efforts interact and what the implications are of operating in the same context. At times, they have been known to perceive one another's actions as hampering their own initiatives. Rights activists and conflict resolution practitioners have occasionally vehemently disagreed about the most suitable course of action or the ends to be pursued in a given context; tensions especially arise when abuses are widespread and pressure to act is high.

Such polarisation detracts attention and resources from the actual problems practitioners seek to address. Even when there is no explicit acrimony between actors in the two fields, and they are merely oblivious of one another's efforts, the question arises whether their respective initiatives are as effective as possible. After all, human rights and conflict are inextricably linked. Violent conflict often manifests in human rights violations, while a sustained denial of human rights can contribute to such conflict. Hence, it is likely that failure to consider the two bodies of theory and practice in conjunction will negatively affect interventions in either realm. This study has sought to counteract the ongoing disconnect between human rights and conflict resolution and to contribute to more effective practice. It has done so by examining how the human rights/conflict resolution-relationship plays out in various concrete contexts, drawing extensively on practical experiences. It has focused particularly on actors and situations in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Zimbabwe and Nepal, and has made occasional reference to examples in other contexts. This study has thus blended lived experience and social investigation, and is written from the perspective of a reflective practitioner drawing on participant-insider insights.

This final chapter summarises the study's main findings and discusses its implications for practice and further research. It first engages with the research questions set out in the introduction through three themes that have emerged in the course of the study: lenses, fluidity and complexity. It then reflects on the study more generally (9.1). It considers a question lingering in the background of this study without being an explicit focus: how is it that the differences between human rights and conflict resolution tend to be so magnified, and that the perception of a clash has been so persistent, while the fields have many points of reference in common? Ironically, similarities may well be as much of a hindrance to greater synergy or convergence between human rights and conflict resolution as differences (9.2). Thereafter, the conclusion comments on the importance of framing and the possibility of remaking
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existing frames, outlining three possible ways for doing so (9.3). It also clarifies the
notion of concurrent realities (9.4), sets out implications for practice (9.5) and
suggests areas for further research (9.6).

9.1 Summary of Findings

9.1.1 Lenses on Social Reality

Part I (chapters 2, 3 and 4) revolved around the first set of sub-questions
underpinning this study: what constitutes the fields of human rights and conflict
resolution, how have these evolved as distinctive bodies of theory and practice, and
how do they differ and/or resemble one another? In general, the study has observed
that the human rights and conflict resolution fields each provide a distinct ‘lens’ for
perceiving social reality and identifying possible responses for problems faced by
people and societies. These lenses come with priorities, preferences, and demands as
they highlight certain aspects of reality and human coexistence, downplay or overlook
other features, and shape practice by encouraging some kinds of action while
invalidating others.

‘Human rights’ spotlight the extent to which the state affords or denies individuals
recognition as being worthy of freedom of choice, respectful treatment, and
participation; fact-finding, advocacy, codification and enforcement of legal standards
are central practices given the field’s focus on accountability, protection against abuse,
and law. In conflict resolution, on the other hand, dialogue facilitation, relationship-
building and third-party intervention are key strategies; these relate to the field’s
emphasis on identity groups as the primary unit of analysis, its concern with finding
mutually acceptable outcomes, its notion that collaboration between opponents is
possible, and its faith in the value of good process.

Clearly, human rights and conflict resolution represent particular ways of grasping,
being and doing in the world. Thus far, most attention in scholarship and practice has
been devoted to how these are different. Indeed, in some respects, the respective
emphases and approaches put forth by either lens diverge to such an extent that they
appear incompatible. This applies, for example, to the fields’ respective stance on
engaging with norm violators (including them in dialogue and problem-solving
processes or dissociating from them) or on expressing judgement in public (refraining
from publicly criticising parties or denouncing behaviour that flouts international
standards).

In other respects, however, field-specific ways of understanding and approaching
social reality do not necessarily preclude one another even if they are different. Thus,
the human rights’ emphasis on considering relationships between state and citizens
can complement and coexist with the conflict resolution concern with relationships
between and within identity groups. Similarly, the human rights emphasis on finding
solutions that are ‘right’ may also coexist with the conflict resolution focus on solutions that ‘work’.

In addition, surprising similarities exist between the fields, more so than has been noted to date. They share a concern with protecting human life, ensuring respect for human dignity, and rectifying systemic and unchecked power imbalances. Both seek to support and facilitate social change, and they have a belief in the agency of individuals and groups to shape their environment in common. The fields are also alike in how individuals and organisations operating in either domain have rapidly professionalised since the mid-1990s. Moreover, both experience similar contradictions or tensions. These relate, for example, to having the desired impact, challenging power dynamics, furthering long-term change, and relying extensively on technical approaches with little attention for the political dimension of actual efforts.

Terminology, metaphors and symbols are an integral part of the social construction of reality projected by either field, and to the constitution of the fields in and of themselves. The lenses are conveyed and reinforced through field-specific imagery and vocabularies that are hard to grasp for those outside a field; in that sense, 'human rights' and 'conflict resolution' constitute different languages, with most actors only being proficient in one or the other. Yet language is a device for both insight and blindness, as it facilitates seeing and understanding some things but usually at the cost of not perceiving other things. The study indeed shows that the conceptual perspectives and practical approaches put forth by the two fields have limitations; the identification of contradictions in each field and the later discussion of practical examples demonstrate as much.

Hence, both human rights and conflict resolution are subject to different forms of epistemological and ontological "blinkering" (Stammers 1999, 990); they come with blinders that prevent people in these fields from gaining a full understanding of a situation, causing a narrow or limited outlook instead. Put differently, the human rights and conflict resolution fields reduce the inherent complexity of reality to make it more manageable and comprehensible. Neither field can claim sole possession of 'the ultimate wisdom' about the world or how to create the desired future - if only because of the other’s very existence.

Yet many proponents tend to believe or pretend otherwise: despite such limitations, actors in both fields usually have great faith in the rightness and applicability of their respective lenses. As such, they have generally been eager to project the legitimacy of their interpretations outwards. Rising ambitions in each field reflect this tendency. The substantive issues of interest considered and the scope of activities undertaken under the header of ‘human rights’ or ‘conflict resolution’ have greatly expanded over time. As a result, working in isolation has become increasingly difficult, both conceptually and practically: with the broadening conceptions of human rights and conflict resolution, the distance between the two fields has narrowed, and the
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boundaries between human rights and peace work have become blurred (Mertus 2011, 128). This has increased the likelihood of human rights and conflict resolution actors clashing.

Yet this narrowing distance has also expanded the prospects for collaboration and synergy, as there are now many more points of connection than used to be the case before the 1990s. Contemporary notions and practices of human rights and conflict resolution are increasingly paying attention to concerns that have long been primarily associated with the 'other' field. For example, in the human rights field, 'process' considerations – long stressed mostly by conflict resolution – have gained weight with the emergence of the human rights-based approach. In conflict resolution, issues of justice and governance have become more important due to a growing emphasis on transforming underlying structural conditions giving rise to conflict and violence.

Overall, appreciating the distinct nature and content of the two lenses – in their own right and in comparison – thus sheds light on the very fact of human rights and conflict resolution, in general terms, connecting and disconnecting at the same time. The next section (9.2) will pick up on this thread when considering possible reasons for the persistent perception that the fields clash despite various common features.

9.1.2 Fluidity between Human Rights and Conflict Resolution

How does the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution manifest in practice? This second sub-question was explored in Part II (chapters 5 and 6), through a discussion of practical experiences of two field-specific civil society organisations in South Africa (one human rights NGO and one conflict resolution NGO), one civil society actor not associated with any particular field (an ecumenical network of churches in Zimbabwe), and a few independent state institutions. The theme 'fluidity' has emerged in this context, to capture how human rights and conflict resolution are interwoven in the daily practice of these various actors. The boundaries between the two domains turn out to be very permeable.

The study shows that practitioners in the two field-specific organisations, while seeking to protect human rights or facilitate conflict resolution at local level, encountered the other field in various ways, by choice and inadvertently. Human rights lawyers realised that legal means were not sufficient to conclusively resolve rights issues manifesting themselves as legal problems. They also had to take relationship dynamics and larger contextual constraints into account if the rights of indigent people were to be respected, prompting the use of interest-based negotiation and mediation. Such conflict resolution methods were no panacea, however; the rights practitioners had to develop a good understanding of the various strategies at their disposal – power-, rights- and interest-based (Ury, Brett, and Goldberg 1988) – in order to be effective in their human rights work by switching between these strategies as appropriate.
Meanwhile, conflict resolution practitioners found themselves facing human rights questions and human rights actors when intervening in various conflict situations. They were seldom attuned to such rights aspects, which meant that they tended to overlook them and/or be frustrated by them. They hence might ignore the responsibility of the state, fail to take relevant standards into account, or perceive rights actors as disruptive. Still, over time, some practitioners came to appreciate human rights – in both a legal and moral sense, as legal entitlements and powerful moral claims – as an additional ‘tool’ they could use when addressing conflict situations, and as setting the parameters within which conflict resolution interventions must take place.

The examples recounted reflect considerable variation in the degree to which connections between human rights and conflict resolution are purposefully pursued or rather stumbled upon by practitioners working from a particular perspective; the degree to which they are recognised or ignored; and the degree to which they are capitalised on as providing additional strategies and insights or rather perceived as unwelcome interference. Yet these differences do not detract from the observation of fluidity, i.e. the interconnectedness of human rights and conflict resolution. Fluidity stems from the nature of the work undertaken by the actors considered here, the context in which they work, and the type of problems they seek to address. However useful, a human rights or conflict resolution ‘lens’ on its own is unlikely to capture all the facets of a situation such actors try to address; both are necessary but insufficient by themselves (cf. Beirne and Knox 2014, 14).

Thus, human rights actors generally operate in contexts defined by conflict, and are constantly dealing with conflict when taking action to protect and protect human rights. In the same vein, human rights seem to be inescapable for conflict resolution actors. This is due to various factors: the causes and symptoms at stake in conflict situations often pertain to human rights, legal standards exist that have a bearing on the possible solutions that can be negotiated, and/or parties may couch their positions in rights language. The observation that human rights actors may work ‘in’ conflict and that conflict resolution practitioners tend to work ‘in’ human rights, has implications for practice that will be commented on below.

For now, it reflects a manifestation of the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution in practice: while seeking to impact primarily on one domain – protecting human rights or seeking to resolve conflict at local level – field-specific organisations are likely to find themselves engaging with the phenomenon that is central to the other domain, by conscious choice or accidentally. They will also probably encounter the other frame given its relevance to the context or situation at hand. This prompted the use of metaphors such as ‘branching out’, ‘crossing over’, or ‘running’ and ‘stumbling’ into the other domain, in chapters 5 and 6.
Fluidity also came to the fore when considering the experiences of one non-field-specific civil society actor and independent state institutions. The metaphor of 'operating on the interface of human rights and conflict resolution' was used to describe their experiences, as these actors may perform functions commonly associated with both fields. This was first demonstrated in the case of a network of churches in a highly politicised province in Zimbabwe. Clergy from these churches began working towards rights protection, violence mitigation, and peaceful resolution of conflict through dialogue in the face of rapidly rising political violence. Various independent state institutions also often have to engage with both realms when implementing their mandate. These bodies may thus also operate on the interface as well, even if their formal title or mandate may only emphasise or refer to one field (or to none). Yet such state institutions seldom seem to give much thought to the way in which human rights and conflict resolution come together in their work. In the practice of these various actors, the interconnectedness of human rights and conflict resolution especially emerged as they responded to concrete situations faced on the ground.

In general, the discussion of empirical experiences and concrete situations has shed more light on how the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution manifests in practice. It showed that they can both contribute to one another and be in tension as well – just as the review of the two fields in general terms suggested that they connect and disconnect at the same time. Human rights and conflict resolution can enhance one another when it comes to analysis and identifying appropriate practical approaches, especially because they call attention to different aspects of the same complex reality and encourage different kinds of action.

Thus, for example, considering human rights in the context of conflict resolution practice highlights the role of public authorities and calls into question how their action – or inaction – may fuel conflict in a given context. It also highlights identifying existing governance structures that can help to address conflict constructively and emphasises the importance of institutional solutions. Conversely, conflict resolution brings to human rights practice an awareness of the larger social, political, economic and cultural context in which conflict and associated rights abuses take place. It further underlines the importance of engaging with actors that are not perceived as natural allies in the fight for human rights and of paying careful attention to process.

Yet the review of practical experiences also shows that the fluidity between human rights and conflict resolution offers not only opportunities to practitioners – in terms of additional insights, tools and approaches – but also challenges. Considerable ground for frustration exists when actors from the two fields interact directly or find that their activities affect one another when operating in the same context (see chapter 5). Yet, while it can be challenging to link human rights and conflict resolution in practice, the study finds that not doing so may be even more problematic. For field-specific actors and actors working across both fields, working ‘around’ the
relationship of human rights or conflict resolution is likely to have adverse effects, as important aspects of reality that contribute to rights violations and/or conflict dynamics are not taken into account and relevant strategies are ignored.

Overall, the practical examples put forth in the study confirm, on the one hand, the existence and relevance of the two lenses or fields: different analytical frameworks and ways of engaging with problems can be noted, and the practices of civil society organisations and independent state bodies can be understood in terms of these lenses. On the other hand, the practical examples also highlight the main shortcoming of the ‘lens’ and ‘field’ metaphors: in reality, their boundaries are far less strict than these notions imply, and there is great fluidity between human rights and conflict resolution. A paradoxical situation thus exists, as an ongoing disconnect between the fields can be observed and yet there is also considerable overlap and fluidity.

9.1.3 Complexity - Beyond Binary Frames

Part III explored the remaining sub-questions, focusing on challenges regularly arising for actors working on human rights and conflict resolution (chapter 7), and on factors that may affect how the fields’ relationship unfolds over time (chapter 8). A theme emerging from these chapters relates to the limitations of binary frames, which construe social reality in rigid ‘either/or’ terms. Such frames are readily present when human rights and conflict resolution are considered in conjunction. However, they do not do justice to the complexity of the social world nor provide actors involved in human rights and conflict resolution with much space for manoeuvring or identifying creative solutions.

In chapter 7, the discussion of specific challenges highlighted the fact that actors navigate the complexity of the context in which their human rights and/or conflict resolution takes place in various ways. Reframing and reflection are important strategies in this regard, enabling actors to go beyond dualistic frames that project two mutually exclusive options for action. Chapter 8 took issue with a long-standing discussion in the literature about whether the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution is complementary or contradictory. Arguing that the relationship between the fields contains the possibility of both manifestations, it showed that this relationship is better understood as being highly dynamic and contingent.

The study probed some challenges that regularly arise for actors in these realms, derived from the empirical material. These related to balancing short- and long-term goals, addressing conflict in a context of serious power imbalances between parties or engrained injustices, managing tensions between facilitator and advocate roles, and raising human rights abuses in conflict resolution interventions. Challenges such as these resist easy solutions because they involve conflicting objectives and different values. Moreover, they imply various courses of action, each of which tends to have some unfavourable consequences. Hence, they are easily positioned and experienced
as dilemmas that capture the choices available to practitioners in a simplistic binary frame, as if only two – mutually exclusive – options for action exist. Yet real-life situations rarely allow for only two possible courses of action; they are more complex than that.

Indeed, the study shows that in practice, actors working on human rights and/or conflict resolution navigate the complexity of the social world in various ways. They may combine the two evident options for action or identify alternatives that were previously not obvious. Such strategies essentially entail a process of reframing the challenge at hand in a way that recognises the inter-dependence of various alternatives and creates space for manoeuvring. For example, when faced with the question of whether or not to raise allegations of human rights abuses in a mediation process, Cape Town-based conflict resolution practitioners understood that either course of action was likely to affect their credibility as perceived by one or the other party to the conflict. Hence, rather than getting stuck in a frame of ‘should/should not’, they effectively reframed the challenge and focused on the question of how they could refer to these and other human rights concerns in the course of the mediation while retaining their credibility as impartial interveners in the eyes of all parties. They ended up raising human rights issues in terms of human needs rather than relying on explicit rights language, so as to defuse defensiveness amongst those allegedly responsible for abuses and make the parties aware of common ground between them.

The challenge of pursuing short- and/or long-term goals readily arises for human rights and conflict resolution practitioners. They generally aspire to support long-term structural change, but often use strategies that are primarily geared towards achieving short-term goals: ending violence and abuses, providing redress, etc. While the challenge of what goals to pursue is easily construed in ‘either/or’ terms, the study shows that in practice, several actors find ways of working in a way that is both ‘short-term responsive and long-term strategic’ (Lederach 2003, 50). Interestingly, human rights actors appear to achieve this by paying attention to the relational and institutional context in which rights violations take place and by creating spaces where diverse groups or parties can discuss human rights concerns. These strategies – relationship-building, facilitating dialogue and joint problem-solving – are more commonly associated with the conflict resolution field. For conflict resolution actors, on the other hand, strategies that hold particular promise are geared towards clarifying and institutionalising ‘rules of engagement’ and enhancing accountability mechanisms – in other words, strategies generally associated with the human rights field. Thus, reframing the dilemma from ‘either/or’ into ‘both/and’ terms highlights how actors in these fields devise creative solutions. In turn, these solutions point to the scope for synergy and illustrate the interdependence of human rights and conflict resolution approaches.

Such interdependence also came to the fore when considering the challenge of dealing with conflict in contexts characterised by severe power imbalances between the
parties or where injustices are embedded in the way the state is organised and society functions. Both the options for action that immediately present themselves have unfavourable consequences: facilitating dialogue may stabilise a situation but will probably reinforce the status quo, while confronting the more powerful party may be more suitable in calling injustices into question but is likely to escalate conflict and can generate more violence. The study has however found that both imperatives are important and in fact interdependent, which raises the question of whether and how conflict can be intensified to exert pressure on the stronger party to rectify imbalances without more violence, and how polarisation between parties can be reduced without perpetuating injustices. This focuses attention on the relevance of human rights activism in the context of addressing conflict; important strategies in this regard are not just litigation and advocacy but also mobilisation of marginalised people; as such, this discussion highlights the significance of recognising human rights both as law and as moral claims. In addition, the discussion finds that conflict resolution actors may side with the weaker party to strengthen its ability to engage effectively and strategically with the stronger party. In other words, the role of such conflict resolution actors may shift, which limits their ability to serve as an intermediary in future.

Finally, the study has found grounds to qualify the notion prevalent in the literature, that actors should not combine roles with conflicting principles and objectives, notably those of facilitator and advocate. It has demonstrated that this combination of roles, while not ideal, cannot always be avoided; actors seeking to impact constructively on a conflict situation may get caught up in both. Actors handle the tension between these roles in various ways. Thus, the network of Zimbabwean churches laid more emphasis on playing other relevant roles (such as advisor or educator), while a Nepali human rights organisation developed an internal division of labour between staff based in different geographical locations and at different levels of authority. Comparison of these cases highlights that the context, the specific conflict- and power dynamics at stake, and the way the organisation is perceived by its external environment influence how actors handle this thorny role combination and the space they have to perform both roles concurrently. It is also clear that some forms of advocacy are more easily compatible with facilitation than other forms.

In sum, the study stresses the relevance of approaching challenges in a 'both/and' manner rather than maintaining a binary 'either/or' frame. Yet it has also transpired that such reframing does not necessarily solve any particular challenge, as tensions remain. In this regard, it is worth noting that what appears to be particularly useful is when actors are willing and able to surface and grapple with the contradictions, ambiguities, and questions arising in their practice. As such, chapter 7 points to the value of processes of reflection to help actors working on human rights and/or conflict resolution figure out how to address each situation appropriately.
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The need to go beyond binary frames and appreciate complexity and to recognise the absence of clear-cut solutions and standard responses, has also clearly emerged in relation to understanding the relationship between the human rights and conflict resolution fields more generally. The study has argued that this relationship is best understood as being both dynamic and contingent, rather than being either contradictory or complementary. This observation has highlighted the importance of examining what factors may affect the way human rights and conflict resolution interact in practice.

Chapter 8 has demonstrated the usefulness of this line of enquiry by considering how the following four specific factors affect the relative convergence of human rights and conflict resolution: the dominant conceptions of ‘human rights’ and ‘conflict resolution’ in a given context; the political and economic environment that shapes the discourses and practices of human rights and conflict resolution; the strategies used by actors to promote and protect human rights and/or pursue the peaceful resolution of conflict; and, finally, the extent to which practitioners working in one of these areas are exposed to and develop an appreciation for insights and practices from the ‘other’ field.

A comparison of the situation in Northern Ireland and South Africa has highlighted that the way in which the relationship between the fields plays out depends partly on how human rights and conflict resolution are understood in a certain context and put into practice there. In particular, narrow conceptions of human rights and conflict resolution are more likely to fuel divergence in the sense of generating outright tension between the fields; these point practitioners into different – sometimes opposite – directions in terms of concerns to be addressed and strategies to be utilised. They also make it hard for practitioners to understand how their respective priorities interrelate, inducing instead a sense that these priorities are mutually exclusive. This increases the likelihood that human rights practitioners and conflict resolution workers fail to grasp the value of any approach or insight falls outside their own scope of vision and action.

At the same time, it has become clear that conceptions of human rights and conflict resolution do not exist in a vacuum but emerge and function in a wider context. With reference to Colombia, South Africa, and Northern Ireland, it transpired that analysing the political perspective or ideology underpinning the use of these bodies of thought and practice can shed light on how the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution plays out. It was further demonstrated that where human rights and conflict resolution get entangled in the general polarisation between political opponents, this does not bode well for convergence; this was the case in Northern Ireland, with human rights being largely perceived as a ‘nationalist’ project and conflict resolution as a ‘unionist’ one.

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Funding practices by donors constitute another part of the wider context impacting on the relative convergence or divergence of human rights and conflict resolution. These practices also tend to be driven by a certain political perspective or analysis of what generates rights violations and violent conflict in a certain setting. Recipients of donor funding may thus adjust their focus and activities to be in line with the priorities put forth by funders and the latter’s take on what human rights or conflict resolution efforts ought to entail. The associated competition for funds is likely to fuel divergence between human rights and conflict resolution actors in a given context. This is especially so if the conceptualisation of one field as encouraged by funding practices excludes concerns or strategies considered crucial by the other field.

The strategies adopted to further human rights and conflict resolution goals can also allow for more or less convergence between the fields. Divergence is especially likely when one field or frame discredits a specific course of action that is accepted and possibly even encouraged in the other field. Even so, strategies differ not only between but also within the fields of human rights and conflict resolution; far greater diversity of approaches can be found within each field than is generally recognised. It was further noted that time may play a role in how strategies affect the interaction between human rights and conflict resolution, since different strategies may be justified at different times in a conflict’s life cycle. It was noted too that the way in which human rights concerns are articulated can influence how the relationship between the fields unfold. For example, invoking human rights as moral values may facilitate convergence more easily than invoking them as legal standards. Framing rights concerns in terms of interests and underlying needs – rather than in the form of positions or demands – may have the same effect; as might invocations that recognise the reciprocal nature of human rights and that are inclusive, in terms of conveying the message that the benefits associated with rights accrue to everyone, not just one specific group. Effectiveness considerations also come into play: when practitioners do not consider existing approaches sufficiently effective, they are more inclined to look to the other field to ‘borrow’ techniques.

Finally, the study has found that exposure, and other forms of learning or interaction between actors across the fields, can contribute to convergence. It cannot be assumed that any interaction will have this effect; much depends on the nature of the interaction and the tone with which ‘human rights people’ and ‘conflict people’, as several interlocutors put it, engage. Encounters become less beneficial as they get more competitive, for example when policy influence, public profile, or allocation of funds is at stake. Relevant in this regard are also the strong professional identities of practitioners in both fields. Harbouring considerable pride in and commitment to their respective body of thought and practice, practitioners seldom take kindly to having either questioned. Instead, they are keen to have the validity and legitimacy of their analysis and approach recognised.
In other words, in the interaction between human rights actors and conflict resolution practitioners, subjective (psychological, emotional and cultural) elements tend to be interwoven with contested issues of substance and objective conditions related to power and resources – just as is the case in protracted social conflict itself (Fisher 2011, 166). Still, the discussion on convergence and divergence has not meant to suggest that divergence of human rights and conflict resolution is problematic per se. It can serve a useful function when actors appreciate their own and others’ respective strengths, and when they do not perceive the latter as a threat nor are fearful of their perspective and approach being submerged or overtaken. In that sense, the two chapters of part III point to surprising paradoxes, finding that contradiction may still be complementary and that divergence may be part of the movement towards convergence.

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Thus far, this concluding chapter has summarised the study as a whole by noting the findings in relation to the research questions underpinning the research. The remainder of this conclusion contains more overall reflections. It identifies larger insights emanating from the study, and devotes special attention to the study’s implications for future practice and research.

9.2 The Clash Revisited

The study begs the question why the mutual stereotypes about human rights actors and conflict resolution practitioners remain so strong. Given the fields’ common points of reference, the fluidity between them, and the increased recognition of the close links between human rights, conflict and peace, how is it possible that the perception of a clash between human rights and conflict resolution persists? Also, how can interaction between actors in the two fields about their relative contributions to a better world become so vituperative? This is not just a theoretical puzzle. It has practical relevance in terms of lost opportunities for effective collaboration between actors working from different perspectives and for maximising impact in a specific context – key concerns driving this research. Even though this study did not set out to examine why the fields’ differences have become magnified and solidified in both the literature and perceptions of many who work on human rights and conflict resolution, its findings shed some light on what may explain the durability of the ongoing perception of a ‘clash’ and the continuing disconnect between human rights and conflict resolution that results from it – and sustains this perception in turn.

Clearly, various factors can fuel the sense of a clear-cut dichotomy, such as competition for resources and protection of professional turf and identity, especially for actors operating at an international policy level. The way in which ‘human rights’ and ‘conflict resolution’ manifest and play out in the empirical world may exacerbate tension between (actors in) the fields; we saw that this can be the case, for example,
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when either 'lens' is associated with a specific party in conflict. Conceptual differences are also likely to come into play, such as the conception of justice prevailing in either field or the relative weight attached to international norms. The different disciplinary roots of the fields matter too: these shape how practitioners view social reality and perceive the 'blinkers' in other understandings of and approaches to reality. It is evident that the strategies emphasised in either field can be at odds at times – even if, as noted, this need not be so when strategies differ. Finally, this study provided several examples of limited understanding amongst actors working from one perspective about the other perspective. As such, simplistic interpretations remain, and caricatures of both constituencies are hard to eradicate.

All in all, there is probably no single definitive explanation of the persistent strength of the 'clash' perception and of why interaction across the fields can become so polarised that it becomes dysfunctional. Yet the study points to an additional factor that may fuel this dynamic, which has seldom, if ever, been noted thus far. Besides the differences that do exist, the fields' similarities are likely to get in the way of effective and constructive engagement. For one, Freud's notion of 'the narcissism of minor differences' may be relevant – the idea that the small differences between people who are otherwise quite alike constitute the very basis for feelings of hostility between them, as details of differentiation assume great weight in identity- and boundary-formation (Blok 1998). Yet the similarities between human rights and conflict resolution matter in other, perhaps more important, respects too. The strong normative character of these fields, and the passionate belief of human rights and conflict resolution actors in the rightness and applicability of their respective frames, spawn proselytising tendencies and impede openness to other perspectives.

The increasing professionalisation of both fields exacerbates this. As actors become more specialist and technique-oriented, they are prone to interpret situations and contexts only in terms of their specific lens. Put differently, they develop 'tunnel vision'. Professional identities become entrenched, and the need to prove one's own relevance – and sustain one's identity, skill set, and perspective – increases too, as does the need to safeguard future work opportunities. And while most are quick to perceive and expose the flaws in another understanding and approach, they seldom appreciate their own 'blinkers' being pointed out. Fear of 'the other field' overpowering one's own way of thinking, being, and doing – with the associated loss of identity, status, influence, and access to resources (see chapter 8) – does not facilitate owning up to one's own limitations either, especially when the proponents of the other field are considered to be plainly wrong on several counts.

Hence, defensiveness easily ensues. I have come to believe that this also arises because the human rights and conflict resolution fields, much as they have the potential to complement one another, can tap into each other's 'soft' spot. In essence, human rights thinking and practice perceives the world in terms of right and wrong, black and white, while conflict resolution highlights and capitalises on the areas of
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grey that exist in reality. Acknowledging and working with such grey areas is difficult for human rights actors, since doing so creates a slippery slope of morality. This has to be denied or avoided as much as possible in a human rights frame. Meanwhile, in conflict resolution thinking and practice, practitioners are inclined to refrain from making hard judgments, certainly in public – in other words, from taking the very stance a human rights frame demands, which affords credibility and legitimacy in the human rights field. The fields thus challenge one another fundamentally, on ideas and practices that are integral to their self-conception.

In addition, each field may touch the core of what actors in the other field struggle with or feel sensitive about. For example, while the human rights emphasis on tackling structural, under-lying conditions of injustice is generally accepted in conflict resolution (certainly in theory), this is an area where conflict resolution actors have trouble developing effective strategies and showing real results. Yet with the fields containing similar contradictions (e.g. the human rights field experiences its own challenges in addressing structural problems), a certain ‘pot calling the kettle black’ dynamic can also be observed: at times actors in one field criticise elements in the other field that they themselves also struggle with. As such, human rights and conflict resolution can as it were trigger one another’s ‘shadow’: what they denounce in ‘the other frame’ may be something that is equally contentious within their own frame and which they would rather wish away.

Overall, this discussion reflects how the similarities between human rights and conflict resolution can be as much of a hindrance to greater synergy or convergence between the fields as their differences. It also highlights how the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution contains its own conflict dynamics. In fact, without actually intending to do so, this study – and the practical approach I have developed over the years – reflects some core tenets of conflict resolution.

This study did not set out to establish the inferiority or superiority of one or the other field. Rather, it has come to recognise that each frame has useful and legitimate points to contribute to our grasp of social reality and the rights- and conflict-related problems people and society face. It has assumed that there is value in engagement; despite instances of confrontation between the fields as alleged opponents, it did not rule out the possibility of mutual accommodation (or, in this specific context, complementarity or convergence). It has stressed the need for greater interaction and more dialogue between human rights and conflict resolution actors, assuming that this will facilitate appreciation of their interdependence. It has also highlighted the importance of gaining more understanding of the fields’ conceptual perspectives and practical approaches, and of calling into question existing stereotypes and prejudices.

Finally, the study has been especially concerned about the negative ramifications when ‘conflict’ between human rights and conflict resolution turns destructive, i.e. when actors’ attention turns to contesting one another’s perspective and approach.
rather than tackling the actual issues at hand. Thus, rather than considering the possible conflict between the fields as problematic in itself and as something to be avoided or eradicated, it has emphasised the need to prevent or mitigate such negative effects so as to not undermine rights protection and conflict resolution efforts. By and large, the findings of this study attest to the relevance and validity of these principles – although, as the author of this study, I am of course biased.

The above is not to argue, however, that all tensions or contradictions between human rights and conflict resolution proponents, perspectives, and practices, can be conclusively resolved by more interaction and understanding between the fields. As noted before, while subjective dynamics – perceptions, misunderstandings, fears, identity concerns, desire for recognition – are important in the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution, objective factors matter too. Hence, however valuable and necessary enhanced dialogue and cross-fertilisation may be, some ‘meta-conflict’ between human rights and conflict resolution is likely to remain. This is simply because substantive differences – in how human rights and conflict resolution interpret social reality and what solutions they consider most suitable – will continue to exist (Bell 2006, 356-357). These will also continue to be exacerbated by the allocation of power and resources in a given context.

Nevertheless, rather than seeing such differences as insurmountable, and as evidence of human rights and conflict resolution being incompatible after all, this book implies that it is more appropriate to understand them for what they are: different takes on the world, specialist frames and vocabularies, each of which may be good for some purposes, but ‘pretty bad’ for others (Koskenniemi 2012). Hence, when they arise, such differences can serve as a warning signal that some salient features of reality may be overlooked or that there are additional or alternative courses of action to consider.

9.3 Framing Revisited

In general, the study has highlighted the notion and the importance of framing – the significance of ascribing specific concepts and categories to social reality – as well as the selection, salience, and silence that framing involves: certain features of a problematic situation are selected, and are accorded relative salience, while other features are silenced, treated as matters of course, ‘the way things are’. A reduction in the complexity of reality is thus inherent in such a process of grasping, being, and doing in the world. This study has also shown how this process of sense-making differs between the fields of human rights and conflict resolution, how it may separate them, and how it influences the ability of actors in these domains to interact.¹

¹ I have benefited from an email exchange with David Laws in writing this section (December 2012).
In that sense, the study points to the risks involved when practitioners do not reflect on their own frame but mainly act from it (Schön 1983, 312). They then elevate their own point of view to be the only – and complete – view, leaving little space for alternative understandings of reality as they defend their own position and attack the positions of those who think otherwise. The parable of the four blind men and the elephant comes to mind here: in seeking to learn what an elephant is, each touches a different part – a leg, the tail, the trunk, the belly – and they share their findings thereafter. As these differ radically, they end up arguing, each insisting that he alone is right. With all being so focused on their specific body part, they completely disregard the possible existence of other parts. Inevitably, a definitive conclusion evades them because no one has been able to examine the animal in its totality and grasp how the parts connect (Nyamnjoh 2012, 64-65). As such, the study echoes Adichie’s warning about the ‘danger of the single story’, which serves as its motto: “the single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the whole story”.2

Yet with blindness being both competing and complementary (Nyamnjoh 2013, 136), the study points to the potential that lies in combining various frames when it is recognised that these, while different, all say something meaningful about social reality and possible strategies to change it for the better. The study also points to the possibility of remaking existing frames. Clearly, the frames that exist in human rights and conflict resolution and that practitioners espouse cannot be changed easily. Reframing requires reworking deeply held beliefs, routines (both individual and organisational), terminologies, and images of self, others, and the world; it involves taking risk. It seems that such remaking of existing frames can happen in various ways, which can be termed the domination route, the reflection-on route, and the in-action route.

Reframing through domination

A first way, only alluded to in this study, is when one frame gains supremacy in a struggle for dominance. This is probably what has happened – at least in the view of some senior conflict resolution practitioners – with competing human rights and conflict resolution frames concerning high-level peace negotiations. This relates to the increased attention for human rights in peace processes in general, and in particular to questions of accountability, as policy and practice have evolved to the extent that it is no longer legitimate for international brokers to sign off on peace agreements that contain blanket amnesty for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and gross human rights violations. While the study did not extensively examine the ‘domination’ route to reframing, it is clear that fear of one’s frame being superseded is a concern for several practitioners encountered in the course of this study, although not necessarily consciously. Paraphrasing Adichie, when a frame gains supremacy, it gains the ability

to not just tell the story of a certain problem or situation, but to make it the definitive story; it is, as she notes, “impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power” (2009).

**Reframing through reflection**

A second way in which existing frames can be remade is through reflection: controversy about process or outcome, definition of the problem or solution, and/or absence of desired results then prompt actors to reflect on their own commitments and to review whether they still make sense or warrant adjustment. A case in point is the shift made by leading rights practitioners working at LHR’s Security of Farmworkers Project in the late 1990s. Realising that established, adversarial, methods for defending farmworkers’ rights were not delivering the desired outcomes, they started using interest-based conflict resolution, in the hope of this being more effective in the changed context of post-apartheid South Africa.

The country’s 2008 xenophobia crisis – and the questions it raised about the role and relevance of human rights – also triggered such reframing through reflection. At least, it seems to have done so for the senior public official who oversaw the provincial government’s conflict resolution intervention and for various practitioners involved in it. Whether individual reframing has institutional ramifications, however, remains to be seen, as the example of the Northern Ireland Parades Commission shows. Reflection events with the Commission’s fieldworkers, prompted by their concern about the polarising use of human rights arguments in parading disputes, may well have changed their personal understanding of and approach to human rights. Yet it is doubtful whether this affected the frames prevailing in the institution at large.

**Reframing in action**

A third way in which existing frames may be remade that emerges from the study can be called reframing in action. While the boundaries between reframing through reflection and reframing in action are blurred, significant in the latter process are small openings and instabilities of framing that are raised by practical problems, and people’s inventiveness in responding to these changing and uncertain circumstances. The situation described at the beginning of this book (and in chapter 5) – about an intervention in two informal settlements outside of Cape Town by CCR practitioners, including myself – exemplifies this ‘in-action’ route to reframing. The experience of Churches in Manicaland constitute another example: while acting against political violence, they increasingly came to understand their activism – initially framed in biblical terms – in terms of ‘human rights’ and ‘conflict resolution’. The clergy’s reframing in action continued as they sought to combine both rights advocacy and dialogue facilitation.
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These and other examples mentioned in the study, demonstrate how reframing in action happens in a process that is partial at any moment and accrues over time, evolving in and through interactions: knowledge and practices become subject to renegotiation with every new experience, each new encounter or relationship (Nyamnjoh 2013, 134). The case material also shows the sense of confusion and degree of discomfort that practitioners may experience in the process. As such, it is likely that reframing in action only occurs if practitioners manage to be patient and comfortable with the cognitive dissonance and vulnerability that can result from facing multiple "interpretive horizons" (Shutt 2008, 30). Resisting the temptation to ensure the stability of their beliefs by ‘managing’ empirical evidence or dismissing certain information, is important too. The study suggests that other helpful factors include strong personal relationships between actors holding different frames, individual and organisational commitment, and practitioners' willingness to move beyond their comfort zone and to be guided by the situation and context, rather than by established beliefs and routines.

9.4 Concurrent Realities

Considering the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution thus highlights the existence of multiple realities that exist simultaneously. Concurrent realities have emerged in this study in several ways, starting with the specific realities constructed by the fields through their respective frames, practices, and vocabularies, and which exist at the same time. The notion of concurrent realities captures too how the 'human rights' and 'conflict resolution' realities connect and overlap in some respects yet are very disconnected and different in other respects. It also reflects the study's complementarity and contradiction discussion: recognising the complementary nature of human rights and conflict resolution does not preclude the possibility that in certain respects or situations real tensions may arise.

In the same vein, it is possible to appreciate that these fields have come closer together, yet remain as far apart as ever and may even at times be more separate than before. The former – coming closer together – relates to human rights and conflict resolution as general bodies of thinking and practice evolving over time, with broadening understandings of the fields’ core concepts. The latter – remaining apart – relates to human rights and conflict resolution as institutional practices and when narrowly construed as concluding a settlement and seeking accountability for serious crimes.

Engaging with the relationship between human rights and conflict resolution entails accepting such concurrent realities. This goes beyond embracing the abstract theoretical notion that reality is socially constructed, the constructivist perspective that underpins this study. It involves recognising – and working with – the simultaneous validity of these concurrent realities, and acknowledging that, even if they are conflicting, in general, they are interdependent.
Ultimately, this study is thus about both the imperative and the challenge of holding, embracing and acting on the concurrent realities presented by human rights and conflict resolution and shown up by the interplay between these fields. This conjures up those ambiguous pictures that contain two images in one, for example both a young girl and an old woman or the rabbit/duck illusion made famous by Wittgenstein.3 Usually, one only sees one image at first, but it is possible to make out the other one after some time. Once you have perceived both, you can flip back and forth between them. Your own mind determines the image you see; there is no objective reality in which the distinction lies (Koskenniemi 2012, 3). Put differently, one can practice the ability to switch – and to even hold the varying images simultaneously, something I will return to below.

9.5. Implications for Practice

What, then, are the implications of this study for future practice? Occasionally, in the context of a reflection event, training workshop, or more informal interaction, other practitioners ask me to explain what the human rights/conflict resolution relationship means for their work in concrete terms. When probing more deeply, I often get the impression that they are looking for a blueprint that will help them to link human rights and conflict resolution in practice. What ‘tool’ will set out what they should do? What are the steps to ‘harvesting the potential at the interface between human rights and conflict resolution’ as someone put it at one event?

By and large, the findings of this study highlight that there is no blueprint. The desire for one is not surprising given the professionalisation and technification of the human rights and conflict resolution fields, the belief in the make-ability of the world, and practitioners’ need to establish a clear direction in the midst of complexity. Yet any blueprint for linking human rights and conflict resolution will become a frame in its own right with strengths and weaknesses, its own vision and blindness. If anything, this study shows that the interface between human rights and conflict resolution will probably look different from case to case.

Beyond that, the study does give an inkling of what to avoid: holding an unwavering belief in the primacy of one’s own frame, dismissing the possibility that reality may have facets one tends to overlook, interacting with others merely to prove one’s own right, getting stuck in rigid either/or-frames, or questioning the legitimacy of other frames without really grasping or engaging with them. Problems arise when we insist that the fields interact in just one way or another, when one policy or analytical perspective seems to leave no room for any other, when approaches from one field are presented as superior without recognising their limitations, or when one imperative, be it peace or justice, is construed as automatically trumping the other. Aside from these ‘negative’ pointers, it is possible to outline three implications that are fairly

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general in nature. These are set out below in an effort to “tread the fine line between coming up with a new blueprint and helpless paralysis”.  

9.5.1 Being Attentive to Human Rights, Conflict Resolution, and their Interplay

Actors working in these fields need to recognise that, even though they may be mostly focused on one specific phenomenon (e.g. human rights or conflict), they generally work in contexts where the other phenomenon is somehow present too, and where the other frame could also be relevant. As such, they need to realise that they cannot get ‘around’ this other phenomenon or the other frame: human rights actors cannot avoid or ignore conflict and conflict resolution, while actors focused on conflict resolution cannot steer clear of human rights as phenomenon and frame.

Consequently, human rights and conflict resolution practitioners need to reflect on how the phenomenon that has traditionally been outside their frame of reference may affect their efforts, and how their actions might interact with it. They must do so both before taking action and while in action, so that they can modify their strategies or adopt additional ones as appropriate, to enhance the impact of their efforts. Furthermore, if they do so after taking action, future interventions can benefit from any insights gained. It is also useful for actors to review their intended and actual efforts through the lens of the other field or to draw on others who can assist in this regard.

However, this is not a call to ‘do no harm’, urging actors to refrain from initiatives that make sense in their own frame of reference but that could be perceived as ‘problematic’ or even ‘harmful’ from the other perspective. The flaws of the ‘do no harm’ notion have been noted (see chapter 7). Human rights actors will not desist from promoting human rights simply because calling for accountability or exposing abuses runs the risk of escalating socio-political tensions. Conflict resolution actors may still want to engage with a conflict party suspected of rights violations despite human rights opposition warning off glossing over abuses and fortifying the party’s position.

The point is not to shy away from actions that may be contentious, but to anticipate possible negative consequences and critical reactions, and identify ways of addressing these to the extent possible. The purpose of doing so is to enhance the relevance of one’s efforts, facilitate more support for them, and to contain or mitigate potentially adverse effects. In this way, actors can check whether they have failed to notice any important issues or dynamics that can undermine what they seek to do (Parlevliet

2011a, 70-75). It may also assist in noting opportunities to draw on insights and approaches from the other domain – and/or to contribute to addressing issues focused on by the other domain, even if only indirectly.

In sum, what is being argued for here is greater alertness and susceptibility to conflict and conflict resolution amongst human rights actors, and to human rights (as legal standards, moral claims, and frame) amongst conflict resolution actors. This is a fairly minimalist approach to linking human rights and conflict resolution in practice, in that there is no intention or effort to develop initiatives that truly draw on both fields. Even so, it is a starting point. A more maximalist approach will mean making a conscious and sustained effort to harness insights and methods from both human rights and conflict resolution, so as to develop a more integrated, comprehensive approach. This brings us to the next implication, which relates to the way ‘human rights’ and ‘conflict resolution’ are to be understood when considering these in conjunction and looking to draw on both fields.

9.5.2 Recognising Multiple Dimensions in Human Rights and Conflict Resolution

When working on human rights and conflict resolution, it is important to bear in mind that narrow traditional notions of ‘human rights’ and ‘conflict resolution’ are both limited and limiting in terms of analysing situations and identifying options for action. They do not do justice to the evolution of thinking and practices in these fields. They also do not suit the nature of contemporary asymmetric, protracted social conflict, nor do they heed the close linkage between human rights, justice, conflict, and peace. Overall, this study has highlighted the value of understanding human rights and conflict resolution in a broader way, especially in light of the relationship between these domains.

With a more holistic understanding of human rights and conflict resolution being in order, it is useful to conceive of pursuing human rights and conflict resolution as having multiple dimensions, namely rules, structures and institutions, relationships, and process (explained further below). All must be addressed when trying to alter actually and potentially violent conflict into processes of non-violent social and political change and ensure the realisation of human rights. The dimensions pertain both to each domain in its own right and to the interface of human rights and conflict resolution. This means that on the one hand, the dimensions can be recognised as existing in human rights and conflict resolution separately; practice in either domain should pay attention to them. On the other hand, they can be understood as the points where the fields meet in practice and theory, and where they have something to contribute to one another. These dimensions thus comprise the interface of human rights and conflict resolution:

5 See Parlevliet (2010a; 2009) for a more extensive discussion of these dimensions and Galant and Parlevliet (2005).
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- **The ‘rules’ dimension** refers to the legal aspect to be considered in human rights and conflict resolution: the standards that outlaw certain behaviours and actions and demand others, as contained in international instruments and domestic legislation. It stresses that addressing conflict, whether latent or manifest, has to take place in a framework of international law and national standards that sets parameters for solutions. Even so, some scope for variation exists in how specific rights are realised in a specific context, taking into account political, cultural, and historical conditions (Gready and Ensor 2005b, 11; Parlevliet 2002, 24-26). Attention must also be paid to potential conflicts between rights. This dimension highlights the importance of identifying the substantive rights and obligations of all conflict parties, rights-holders and duty-bearers and of designing conflict resolution processes that abide by rights standards. It points to the need to grasp the strengths and weaknesses of human rights norms, how these have been translated in national and international law, and their relevance to and impact on a particular conflict and conflict resolution process (Babbitt 2009a, 627).

- **The ‘structures and institutions’ dimension** relates, on the one hand, to the structural division of power, resources, and opportunities in society, and on the other hand, to the absence or presence of effective and legitimate mechanisms to handle conflict (between state and citizens and between individuals or groups) and help provide redress. It emphasises the need to address structural conditions of injustice, insecurity, inequality and inequity that give rise to violence and abuse, i.e. the underlying causes of conflict and human rights violations; to support the development of capable, legitimate, and independent institutions and processes that support non-violent approaches to conflict and the realisation of rights and secure remedies; and to institutionalise respect for human rights by adopting, implementing and enforcing relevant legislation. Still, it is useful to remember that, “the question is not only whether particular laws or institutions exist or how they appear, but rather how laws and institutions relate to people and how people perceive, use, change and develop them” (Tomas 2005, 172).

- **The relationship dimension** highlights the importance of considering the relationship context in which human rights, conflict, and conflict resolution manifest. It points to the need to review the (patterns of) interaction and communication existing to date, and the need to develop respectful relationships vertically (between public institutions and citizens) and horizontally (between individuals and groups, and within groups). Vertically, the responsibility and responsiveness of the state towards citizens is key, as is the extent to which citizens can raise their voice and demand accountability. Horizontally, it is important that people realise that they also have responsibilities, in how they relate to others, how society functions, and how discontent is handled. Their actions and beliefs affect whether others can exercise their rights and address their interests and needs. Overall, this dimension stresses the relevance of building strong connections between people at different hierarchical levels and from different political, religious, social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, so that they recognise others’ humanity and their interdependence with them. It recognises that human rights exist in a social context and are reciprocal, and that ‘recognition of the other’ is a core value of these rights (Douzinas 2000).
The process dimension reflects how concerns related to human rights, conflict, peace and justice, are addressed. It recognises that the impact, legitimacy, and sustainability of efforts to advance human rights and conflict resolution depend both on what is done (the actual substance of efforts) and on how it is done (the process used to carry out efforts). When people deem a process fair, this generally increases their willingness and commitment to participate and uphold its outcome. If they consider it flawed, however, they are likely to question its validity and reject both the process and the outcome (Parlevliet 2002, 22-24). This dimension thus highlights that actors working on human rights and conflict resolution need to pay careful attention to what they do and to how they do so. It points to the need to pursue human rights protection and conflict resolution through processes that reflect values such as dignity, inclusion, participation, ownership, and protection of divergent or marginalised voices – all of which are highly relevant from both a human rights and a conflict resolution perspective.

9.5.3 Honing the Ability to Hold, Embrace and Act on Concurrent Realities

Finally, there is great value in learning more about the ‘other’ field, especially for actors – organisations and individual practitioners – that are mostly oriented towards a specific one, be it human rights or conflict resolution. This is not to argue that human rights actors should become conflict resolution experts or vice versa, but to recognise that specialisation carries risks which can damage actual efforts to improve rights protection or facilitate durable solutions to conflict. Greater insight into other ways of grasping, being, and doing in the world enhances actors’ versatility to probe, observe, and act. They become more able to grapple with complexity and uncertainty, to choose the language, frame, or course of action to use at a given moment, and to collaborate with actors whose perspective and methods differ.

A corollary to this is that actors need to reflect more on the scope, substance, and limitations of their own frames. They need to become aware of their own blindness and to practice suspending judgment on ideas, analyses, or approaches that are foreign. Once more, this is not to dismiss or downplay one’s own field-specific expertise, but to accept that it is partial by definition, as is all knowledge. Blindness is a fact of the human condition (Nyamnjoh 2013, 135). Moreover, as Louise Arbour, who now heads a leading conflict analysis think-tank but previously served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has noted, “it is only by acknowledging the inadequacies of our own approaches that we have any chance of improving them” (2013, 5). In this regard, actors also need to take their cue from the situation or context at hand, from ‘where people are at’ in their daily lives (Beirne and Knox 2014), rather than from what they know best, are most familiar with, or what ‘usually works’. As we have seen, practical problems create small openings for creativity in dealing with uncertain circumstances.
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In sum, the overarching implication of this study is the importance of sharpening our ability to hold, embrace and act on concurrent realities. This involves engaging in reflective practice, grappling with the contradictions that arise, carefully observing what is happening and emergent in the context in which we work, and “honoring our perceptions to respond with quality and care to each situation with its inherent dynamics, vulnerabilities and demands,” in the words of one practitioner interviewed for this study.  

9.6 Suggestions for Further Research

Undertaking this study has been both exciting and challenging, not least because it has generated many additional questions and areas for further research. I outline a few here, starting with an obvious one: more qualitative research will be helpful in considering how the issues raised here play out in relation to specific groups of actors, specific countries, and/or particular problems. For example, besides the present study, only limited research has been done thus far on civil society actors that do both conflict resolution and human rights work (e.g. Babbitt 2009a, 624-625).

This study has also noted how efforts to address certain complex problems (e.g. integration of refugees or displaced persons, land reform, use of contested public space) provide an arena in which human rights and conflict resolution perspectives and approaches tend to meet. Such arenas warrant further inquiry: they can shed more light on the scope for (and limitations of) an approach that combines human rights and conflict resolution, and clarify what ‘an integrated approach’ may actually entail in various settings. The context of development cooperation constitutes a meeting space too, even if the fields have mostly, to date, manifested there in the form of separate, parallel, tracks – namely, human rights-based approaches to development and conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding in development. Still, the growing emphasis on human rights, peace, and conflict in development policy and practice offers an opportunity to study whether and how human rights and conflict resolution come together in this context, and under what conditions this is for better or worse (and of course, what is perceived as such and why). Many focus areas are relevant, including transitional justice, support for media, natural resource management, justice sector- and security sector reform, as well as local governance and decentralisation (e.g. Parlevliet 2011a, 26).

In general, the larger political and economic context in which human rights and conflict resolution work takes place, merits more attention than I could devote to it. Funding priorities and power dynamics in relation to resource allocation can be explored further, given the amount of money going around in the business of protecting human rights and addressing conflict and the direction in which funds flow – from multilateral and bilateral donors, mostly based in a relatively affluent and

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6 Email correspondence from Undine Whande, 27 November 2013, quoted with permission.
peaceful ‘North’, and put to use in a more conflict- and poverty-affected ‘South’ (the limitations of such labels notwithstanding). What are the distributive consequences of the human rights and conflict resolution conceptions and strategies promoted, and is there a structural bias in this regard? What does the nature and scope of funding mean for the fields’ ambition to challenge power and seek social change?

These questions point to more critical research à la Koskenniemi (2011; 2005) and others. They also feed into the long-standing debate on peace and justice, as the current emphasis on (and approach to) criminal accountability for serious crimes comes with a woeful neglect of socioeconomic drivers and symptoms of large-scale violence. It also diverts attention and resources away from much-needed institutional reform and redistributive justice, required to address patterns of structural violence and societal complicity. This applies not only to the national level but also to the international realm, as global power arrangements continue to facilitate double standards.

Another area of further research flows from the recognition that some ‘meta-conflict’ between human rights and conflict resolution proponents may continue to exist. This could be considered in light of Ramsbotham’s theory of ‘radical disagreement’ (2010) and his emphasis on promoting ‘dialogue for strategic engagement of discourses’ when parties radically disagree – rather than the ‘dialogue for mutual understanding’ usually stressed in conflict resolution. While its applicability remains to be seen, the theory may hold some promise in instances where discussions on human rights and conflict resolution, or peace and justice, become intractable and the prospect of mutual accommodation is forcefully rejected.

Finally, while writing this book, I have become aware that my thinking on holding and embracing concurrent realities and harnessing insights from various lenses tallies with writing in other fields (business, organisational development) on engaging with opposites, ‘thinking ahead together’ and ‘being attentive to emerging futures’ in complex and dynamic environments where people do not agree on the problem let alone the solution (e.g. Kahane 2012; 2010; Scharmer 2009; Senge and others 2005; Kaplan 2002). Such literature underlines the validity of the arguments put forth here and could be a fascinating source of future contemplation.

Overall, the study is a call for nuance and further engagement between people and organisations from different backgrounds concerned with peace, conflict, human rights and justice. It has revealed the relevance – and necessity – of considering human rights and conflict resolution in conjunction more than has been the case to date, in theory and practice. While the fluidity, dynamism and interdependence inherent in their relationship may at times be challenging for practitioners to deal with, this study has shown that there is much to gain from engaging with it seriously.