



Essay

Futures for Dialogue in the Context of Hong Kong's Protests

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Abstract

In the context of widespread civil protests and polarisation of perspectives, this paper proposes that futures thinking can be used to initiate constructive dialogue within parties, before mediation and negotiation between parties can begin. It investigates how existing futures methodologies might be adapted for conflict situations, through reflections on a pilot workshop in Hong Kong which took place in January 2020. We learn that the process should be sustained, building trust to support the discussion of personal values, and that diversity among participants facilitates the consideration of a wider range of scenarios and strategies. Two important synergies between futures processes and conflict resolution techniques are identified: the potential to reframe perspectives, and the importance of a participatory process.

Keywords

Facilitation, Framework, Futures, Design, Dialogue, Diversity, Civil Engagement, Conflict Resolution, Collective Strategic Thinking, Methodology, Participation, Peace, Scenarios, Strategy, Values

The extent and duration of civil protests across the world in the past year (Noack, 2019), both reflecting and fuelling polarising tensions, highlight the need for processes that support people to embrace new perspectives within situations of conflict, laying the ground for constructive dialogue and eventual negotiation. These are necessary stages before a society can rebuild civil-governmental relations and establish pathways towards strong, stable and healthy communities. This essay explores the potential for greater use of participatory futures as a starting point for dialogue in conflict situations. While there are examples of futures processes being applied later in the conflict cycle - to support strategic thinking in the aftermath of a crisis, for instance, as with the 1991 Mont Fleur Scenarios in South Africa (Le Roux, Maphai et al. 1992) - there are few examples of futures as a means to initiate the transition from violent conflict to constructive engagement with multiple possibilities.

As a futures practitioner based in Hong Kong, I have been investigating how we might adapt futures methodologies to be an effective starting point for civil dialogue in conflict situations. In what ways should this context of conflict affect how futures tools and techniques are employed, in contrast to their use in other traditional contexts, such as strategic processes for government and corporates, or civil engagement in peacetime? What can futures practitioners learn from the field of conflict resolution, and what can they contribute? Where are there already synergies across the two fields?

My interest in adapting futures methodologies for civil dialogue in conflict situations has grown in response to what I perceive as an urgent need. In 2018-19, I went twice to Iraq as part of a team at the Economist Intelligence Unit supporting UNICEF to develop future scenarios for children and youth there. I was struck that many of the young people we interviewed, when asked how they envisaged the future, said they anticipated war (Simpson, 2019). I began to ask how futures tools and techniques might empower citizens who view themselves as victims of failing states and proxy wars, supporting them to adopt an empowered mindset through thinking strategically about

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the future they want.

As the protests developed in Hong Kong, my enquiry became local. I decided to structure it around the development and facilitation of a pilot public workshop in Hong Kong, which took place in January 2020, inviting participants to engage in a futures process as a means to initiate dialogue about ways forward. Prior to this, in November 2019, I had helped to facilitate a public forum by the Hong Kong Forward Alliance which explored approaches to dialogue and offered an introduction to change processes. This forum included talks from experts, including the independent conflict and community consultant Clem McCartney, who went on to support the design and evaluation of this enquiry through frequent interactions. Following this forum, I joined forces with a dialogue platform called Let's Talk Hong Kong, created in response to the social unrest by a group of Hong Kong individuals committed to finding a path forward through citizen-driven dialogue. (This platform is no longer operating.) Let's Talk Hong Kong agreed to support a pilot futures workshop, with the aim of developing open source tools and resources to enable such workshops to scale through distributed networks of trained facilitators.

I therefore designed a pilot workshop, 'Horizons for Hong Kong', to test out an approach with a small group of potential facilitators with Cantonese, Mandarin and English language skills. In the design of this workshop, I drew on a combination of futures and peacebuilding methodology, namely: the Three Horizons Framework (3H) first developed by Bill Sharpe of International Futures Forum as part of the UK Foresight Program's Intelligent Infrastructures Project (Sharpe, 2013); the technique Causal Layered Analysis, pioneered by Sohail Inayatullah (Inayatullah, 2004); and the 'Collective Strategic Thinking (CST) approach and methodology for addressing intractable conflicts' developed by Oliver Ramsbotham, Emeritus Professor of Conflict Resolution at the University of Bradford (Ramsbotham, 2017). I discussed the design with Ramsbotham as well as McCartney, and drew on their valuable experience and advice. The workshop took place on 20 January 2020, under the Chatham House Rule, and the design process, findings and feedback inform this report.

A brief note on the current context: since the workshop and the first draft of this paper, China has enacted a new national security law which criminalises separatism, subversion of state power, terrorism, and collusion with foreign or overseas forces to endanger state security. Under this law, the advocacy or creation of channels for civic engagement can be penalised, particularly if foreign parties or funders are involved. Prominent pro-democracy advocates, young and old, have been arrested. Does this enquiry remain valid, under such circumstances? I maintain that it does: firstly, while the new law affects avenues for civil engagement in Hong Kong, methodologies for constructive dialogue have applications in many other contexts. Secondly, even if direct political engagement is constrained, participatory futures practices can still play a constructive role in the way individuals make choices in their personal and professional lives.

Practising Futures in Conflict Situations

What lessons might futures practitioners draw from peacebuilding practice to create effective futures tools for transformation within conflict situations? First of all, it is important to understand the place and role of dialogue within a peacebuilding process. There is a consensus among conflict resolution theorists that dialogue comes before mediation, negotiation, and problem-solving: its aim is not yet to resolve, but to inform and to support learning. Ronald Fisher, Professor of International Peace and Conflict Resolution at the School of International Service at American University, puts it like this:

Dialogue is primarily directed towards increased understanding and trust between participants, rather than the creation of alternative solutions to the conflict. (Fisher, 1997, p. 121)

The dispute, therefore, can continue after a dialogue process, becoming the focus for further constructive action or negotiation, thanks to some level of shared recognition of the differing interests and ambitions.

In addition, as Oliver Ramsbotham argues in his 2017 book "When Conflict Resolution Fails", in the most intransigent cases, where attempts at dialogue *between* conflicting parties do not yet work, it is best to begin *within* them, by promoting what Ramsbotham calls Collective Strategic Thinking (CST). Start where the parties are, not from where third parties may want them to be:

It means promoting a sustainable process of inclusive Collective Strategic Thinking in which strategy groups ask where they are, where they want to be, and how they get there. This can be pursued even in the most intense phases of conflict, and it can then feed into and accompany other conflict resolution approaches by opening up extra space for them. (Ramsbotham, 2019)

Within this context, Ramsbotham continues, dialogue is characterised by “an emphasis on questions, enquiry, co-creation and listening, the uncovering of one’s own assumptions and those of others, the suspension of judgment and a collective search for truth.” (Bojer & Kay, 2006, p. 9)

Futures practitioners will find this a familiar description of the environment of enquiry that they, too, aim to create. However, whereas in a non-conflict context or a strategy process the transition from enquiry to planning can be straightforward and integral to the process design, in conflict resolution other factors are critical and there can be no assumption that the dialogue will result in the resolution of tensions upon which new ways forward can be established. A narrower definition of ‘conflict resolution’ is helpful here: the aim, Ramsbotham clarifies, is “to prevent or end *violent* conflict, but not *‘constructive conflict’*”. (Ramsbotham, 2017, p. 10) Non-violent conflict can therefore be seen as the basis for transformation, while creating a safe space for collective enquiry is the essential precursor to this. For this reason, Ramsbotham advises that a dialogue process must have the possibility to be sustained in order to become a safe space for enquiry and build possibilities for transformation. (Ramsbotham, 2019)

To achieve a sustained approach to prepare the way for conflict transformation, I designed the workshop ‘Horizons for Hong Kong’ with the aim to prepare a network of facilitators to support dialogue processes at a community level, supported by open source methodologies. A workshop toolkit might include a detailed facilitators’ agenda, slides and worksheets that would enable insights collected in different workshops to be shared and compared easily online, without revealing participants’ identities– this anonymity being key to a safe space for discussion. The pilot workshop was therefore targeted at a small group of 16 potential facilitators, who worked in three sub-groups of five or six. However, this intention to make the methodology open source and encourage a series of subsequent workshops is not sufficient to constitute a sustained approach. Feedback from the workshop showed that several participants would have liked more time to explore their discussions and develop their ideas, ideally meeting multiple times. A more effective approach could be to produce an open source toolkit for a short series of workshops, and to invite participants to consider forming a sustained and engaged community thereafter.

Besides the possibility for sustained enquiry, an effective futures process within a conflict setting requires the careful creation of a safe space. While arguably this can be said of any strategy workshop, additional measures are advisable. For instance, Ramsbotham uses what he terms ‘Chatham House *Plus* rules’, in which not only is content not attributed, but it is not divulged at all, except with permission granted collectively by those involved. (Ramsbotham, 2019) ‘Horizons for Hong Kong’ was offered on the basis of subscribing *at least* to the Chatham House Rule (where “*neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed*”), and began with a group-based exercise inviting participants to first discuss whether they agree to this Rule, and then to design their own group dynamic by adding other elements, agreed rules or actions. In their feedback, participants said they had appreciated the establishment of ground rules at the outset, the encouragement for listening and collaborative format, and the atmosphere of openness and respect.

Methods to develop trust must also be incorporated into the workshop design, through processes to surface and recognise important values. As McCartney says:

People have a sense of identity, culture, values, and this has to be protected and looked after. For instance, if we are isolationist, then the assumption is that isolation is the best way to protect ourselves. We can find alternative ways to protect ourselves in a wider sphere, but first we need to identify and verbalise the value of protection. (McCartney, 2019)

In response to this, I began ‘Horizons for Hong Kong’ with a two-stage exercise designed to bring to the surface those values that participants would like to protect or strengthen, as part of the collective exploration of current paradigms, representing the First Horizon in 3H. The first stage was to encourage discussion first of the various aspects of Hong Kong’s foundations that are under strain today. In this exercise, participants were asked to consider the analogy of the foundations of Hong Kong, and to identify which ‘bricks’ are under strain in group discussions, completing a worksheet by adding their responses to the following prompts: “Trust in...; Structures for...; Relations

between...; Freedoms to....”

Structural strains identified by the participants included government accountability and leadership, the rule of law and just treatment under it, and the capacity for business to operate in apolitical ways. Elements of trust under strain included: trust in the government to act in the best interests of citizens; trust in the police to act humanely and lawfully; trust in the continuation of Hong Kong’s special status, and trust in the economy. Freedoms to express individual views and identity were seen as restricted. And relationships were considered under strain between families, friends, colleagues and communities; between youth and authorities; between people of different political affiliations, and between society and government.

This group exercise was followed by an individual-level enquiry - ‘*How are you personally affected by this strain?*’ - to support participants to explore their own values and aspirations today, before discussing these as a group and drawing on them as the basis for a shared future vision. This emphasis on verbalising personal experience, values and aspirations as part of the first horizon, or the present day, contrasts with traditional 3H processes, in which the exploration of ‘current paradigms’ typically recognises external conditions such as infrastructure, governance and data (International Training Centre, 2020). Values discussed by participants at ‘Horizons for Hong Kong’ as desirable for the future included equality, trust, openness, civic participation, responsibility, accountability and socio-economic justice.

While the participants in this group embraced the discussion of values, it is important to consider that both culture and emotional attachment to the issues at hand can make this a difficult topic to broach. While emphasising the importance of finding ways to recognise values, McCartney acknowledges that verbal discussion has its limitations, particularly where there are emotional hurdles. However, he adds, if values are named they can be addressed, while if they are ignored they continue to operate in the background. (McCartney, 2019) In another context, therefore, it might be helpful to build in exercises to enable visual expression of values, or to use illustrated flash cards depicting emotional responses - such as ‘Stones have feelings too’ (Deal, 2003) or ‘Funky Fish Feelings’ (Deal & Northover, 2011) - offering more creative or playful ways to prompt participants to reflect on and discuss their personal experience of the First Horizon. Playful approaches can help to make the discussion of difficult emotions feel safe (Simpson, 2017. pp. 102-106).

What Synergies Are There Between Conflict Approaches and Futures Methodologies?

As well as differences between the established practices in the fields of conflict resolution and futures, this enquiry uncovered synergies that can support the adaptation of futures methodologies for conflict situations. This section explores the potential for cross-learning between the two fields in relation to two key synergies in existing practice: recognition of the value of reframing, through adopting alternative timeframes as well as perspectives; and recognition of the value of participatory approaches.

Shifting frameworks

Widely acknowledged in conflict methodology is the importance of ‘reframing’. In his 2007 paper, ‘Reframing: a strategy for conflict transformation’, Clem McCartney defines ‘reframing’ as:

...a learning process that involves a subject critically reflecting on and then adapting assumptions in the framework they currently espouse,

where a ‘framework’ is:

...the structure for understanding a conflict [...] composed of assumptions about different aspects of the conflict, such as the parties involved, possible and desirable solutions, and negotiation processes. (McCartney, 2007, p. 3)

McCartney goes on to explain that:

Conflicts almost always involve a clash of frameworks, so that without reframing it is likely that the conflict can only be contained and positive transformation of the conflict will not be possible. (McCartney, 2007, p. 3)

We have already discussed the objective of positive transformation of a conflict, from destructive to constructive. Ramsbotham puts reframing at the heart of this transformation, citing the interactive problem-solving pioneer Morton Deutsch:

At the heart of this is reframing the conflict as a mutual problem to be resolved (or solved) through just cooperative efforts. (Deutsch, 2000, p. 31; Ramsbotham, 2017, p. 32)

Futures methodologies developed to support collective explorations - such as the 2x2 matrix technique for building scenarios (Rhydderch, 2017), the futures wheel for exploring the possible implications of a particular trend or signal of change, and 3H - offer participatory experiences of shifting timeframes with the precise objective of reframing perceptions and aspirations. For instance, 3H begins with identifying assumptions, in order to reframe them by looking to emerging futures:

Thinking about the future means learning to think differently [...] The Three Horizons Framework (3H) helps by asking people first to make their assumptions explicit, and then to explore emerging change as a way to reframe what they think, what they want, and what they do. (International Training Centre, 2020, p. 2)

Futures can support reframing in conflict situations by offering a longer time frame for reflection, enabling participants in a dialogue process to consider how their perspective on a particular strategy or aspiration changes when asked to consider its impact over a decade or more, as opposed to the immediate term. Do their perceptions of risk and reward differ? Do their motivations shift under this light? Are they able to identify long-term objectives that other parties might share?

The workshop 'Horizons for Hong Kong' invited participants to explore three pre-prepared alternative scenarios, expanding both the timeframe and the number of frameworks to consider. The exercise asked them to discuss in groups and then note down the possible implications of these scenarios. It also prompted them to consider these implications in light of their objectives, referring back to the discussion of values:

Keep in mind what you want to build or strengthen as a group. How is your ability to do this affected in these different scenarios?

The choice to bring pre-prepared scenarios came with disadvantages: participants were reluctant to consider those scenarios they considered less likely, such as rising acceptance in Hong Kong of the role of Beijing. However, when prompted to do this, participants at 'Horizons for Hong Kong' produced valuable insights: for instance, they speculated that rising acceptance of Beijing might lead to more opportunity for universities and businesses in Hong Kong, particularly through increased connections to the Greater Bay Area. This recognition exposed and challenged their initial assumption that a greater role for Beijing would lead to more restricted conditions for Hong Kong.

As the international peace process and negotiations adviser Hannes Siebert remarked at the Hong Kong Forward Alliance forum:

People are so often unwilling to enter into the creative space of uncertainty, where they can discover shared values, understand each other's needs and interest, acknowledge collective brokenness, embrace each other's humanity, re-create and innovate with a common commitment ... and recognise and accept it will not be like the past.

In this vein, participants spent most time on the scenario they considered most plausible: ongoing protests. The participants shared the values that they imagined the protestors wanted to protect, such as accountability, freedom, participation. However, through the application of a futures approach, they found that ongoing protests could lead to unwanted outcomes, such as increasing military presence and martial law; escalating violence; the extradition of protestors; more fatalities; curtailed freedoms online; food and water insecurity; economic crisis with falling investment; mental health impacts; rising surveillance; an exodus of business and brainpower; and ultimately calls for peace and a rise in political apathy.

The exercise above shows that strategic analysis within alternative scenarios can lead to the recognition of potential shared benefits across opposing parties, and expose cases in which a particular strategy does not serve its proponents' aspirations. Exploring scenarios can therefore be a valuable resource for developing more constructive strategies, and a precursor to mediation between parties for conflict resolution. Reflecting on the workshop, McCartney comments:

One important contribution of a futures approach is that it helps to show that solutions might be found. Most people in a conflict believe it is intractable and that the only outcome is for one side to win. A futures approach shows that win-win solutions can be envisaged, and therefore that dialogue might be a better alternative than trying to win. (McCartney, 2019)

This finding challenges the dichotomy that Fisher set up in his observation that dialogue is primarily for building trust and understanding, rather than creating alternative solutions. Arguably, it can and should do both, and futures methodologies can support this.

The exercise also shows the power of a longer timeframe to call into question not just the course of action - in this case, the protests - but also their purpose, in the light of adverse potential outcomes. Ramsbotham observes that timeframe is fundamental to the process of setting goals in Collective Strategic Thinking, supporting discussion on plausible or viable outcomes as participants consider both short and long-term trajectories. (Ramsbotham, 2019)

A lesson taken from the workshop is that, where time is available, the opportunity for participants to develop their own scenarios from factors they have themselves studied and prioritised could be advantageous. This would support them to consider a variety of outcomes they had not previously thought of as plausible, and so expand their sense of potential agency within multiple possible futures. However, the use of pre-prepared scenarios in this pilot workshop indicates that they are a useful tool to bring to the surface and challenge assumptions. As McCartney observes:

We look for scenarios which confirm our current position and strategy in a self-fulfilling prophecy. And in conflict situations, we may be pessimists expecting the worst, and not on the look-out for opportunities to achieve a positive outcome.

Not only can looking to the future enable a shift in expectations and open up new strategies, but McCartney adds, it can support participants to recognise and overcome fears:

Often the future is the enemy. If you look with a clear eye at the thing you fear, you find it's not so frightening. (McCartney, 2019)

Participatory futures and 'Collective Strategic Thinking'

This section focuses on a second synergy between futures and conflict resolution practice: the importance of participatory approaches to engender transformation. While exercises to expand one's perspective - through considering different timeframes, for instance - can in theory be undertaken by individuals, expanding the framework for dialogue depends on challenging shared understandings. The potential to support a significant shift in mindset and approach is increased by taking an inclusive approach, where multiple and diverse perspectives and imaginations are valued.

In the conflict resolution field, steps have been taken to increase participation in the last two decades. The United

Nations Security Council urged “all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts”, with the adoption of Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security in the year 2000. In 2009, Conciliation Resources published the policy brief ‘Public participation in peacemaking’, exploring how negotiations and peace processes can be more inclusive; and in 2017, Ramsbotham introduced the methodology ‘Collective Strategic Thinking’.

The World Futures Studies Federation has supported a pluralistic approach since it was founded in 1973, with a focus on “how we envisage and develop desirable outcomes in the times ahead”. The emphasis on plurality and diversity of perspective in *futures practice* distinguishes it from forecasting. Unlike forecasting, which foregrounds one possible trajectory based on an expert perspective and prediction, the field of futures explores multiple futures, maintaining that there can be no experts on the future - as there is no singular or fixed future to study. Trends observable today do not follow linear trajectories (Nikolova, 2014), such that any single change can lead to multiple possible outcomes, a phenomenon known as ‘emergence’ (Holland, 1998). This relates to the premise that we live in “complex adaptive systems’ in which the agents of change are not static, but respond to other changes in their environment:

Complex systems are shaped by cross-scale interactions, nonlinear feedbacks, and uncertainty, among other factors. Transdisciplinary approaches that combine participatory and conventional methods and democratize knowledge to enable diverse inputs, including those from local, informal experts, are essential tools in understanding such systems. (Cundill, Fabricius, & Marti, 2005)

A key commonality between the fields of conflict resolution and futures is the recognition of rapidly changing circumstances. Ramsbotham explains that the founders of the conflict resolution field emphasised the importance of second-order social learning - which is social, generative and reflective, as opposed to first-order, which is geared towards a specific learning outcome (Allert, Richter, & Nejd, 2004) - in enabling socio-cultural systems to adapt to changes. With reference to the work of Anatol Rapoport, he writes:

The critical issue of peace - the need to convert destructive into constructive conflict - demanded the ‘incorporation of second order learning in social systems’. And ... this could only be done ‘through a participative design process’. (Ramsbotham, 2017. pp. 7-8)

In proposing ‘Collective Strategic Thinking’ as a new methodology, Ramsbotham distinguishes it from previous approaches through its emphasis on overcoming ‘radical disagreement’. Not only can participatory approaches support adaptation to changing circumstances, he argues, but they can counter a primary reason for the failure of conflict resolution: when it is confronted by a ‘war of words’, or ‘linguistic intractability’.

No other approach [except ‘Collective Strategic Thinking’] identifies radical disagreement as the chief impediment to conflict resolution in the communicative sphere, or sees strategic engagement within and across parties, including third parties, as the essential preliminary work to be done when so far conflict resolution does not gain traction. (Ramsbotham, 2017. p. 46)

Here, Ramsbotham argues, the process has to be engagement with the disagreement, “starting where conflict parties are, not where third parties want them to be”. This, he continues, “means beginning not *between* conflict parties but *within* them [...] Above all, it means promoting collective strategic thinking by the main identity groups: Where are they? Where do they want to be? How do they get there?” (Ramsbotham, 2017. p. 5).

While working within conflict parties, Ramsbotham maintains that it’s important to consider not just the outcomes you want, but the outcomes other parties may be looking for. In response to this, the workshop ‘Horizons for Hong Kong’ prompted participants to consider what other parties - such as protestors, the police, the government - might want to build or strengthen for the future. Among the protestors’ desired outcomes, socio-economic justice and accountability were thought to be high priorities; for the government and the police, an end to social conflict. These alternative perspectives were imagined, rather than voiced by other parties directly; while this shifted the framework by offering new points of view, it did not require or inspire participants to engage empathetically with other parties. Are there ways to inspire empathy with other parties as part of a single party futures process? This would be another avenue to explore.

The consideration of different strategies and perspectives enabled the group to imagine a broader range of outcomes, potential courses of action and resources to support them. Embracing alternative perspectives could also be combined with the exploration of scenarios, asking, ‘How might a particular party respond to such a scenario?’ Such exercises can help a group to assess whether they have ‘sufficient strategic unity’ - Ramsbotham’s term for a shared vision: are they prepared to work towards a collective future? (Ramsbotham, 2019)

The third stage of ‘Horizons for Hong Kong’ invited groups of participants to develop their visions for Hong Kong. Here, a broader range of aspirations came into play, such as for peaceful and lively streets, smiling people, and more green space, with lower levels of pollution and congestion and street design to accommodate bikes and pedestrians. Participants then used a ‘Causal Layered Analysis’ process to identify various elements underlying this vision: a widespread sense of respect and responsibility for shared community resources, enabled by inclusive channels for civic participation, government accountability, and a more constructive dynamic between economic growth and the wellbeing of Hong Kong’s citizens.

In exploring how such a Hong Kong might come about, a brainstorming exercise made the most of the plurality in the room to generate as many ideas as possible, before clustering these to show where the collective appetite lay. The greatest share of ideas related to new channels for the public to engage, through a variety of means:

- District Council-level polling enabled by secure apps, to support grassroots feedback, give a voice to the ‘silent majority’, and legitimise decision-making at the top;
- Community-based dialogue initiatives in neighbourhoods, schools and universities, supporting citizens to develop listening skills;
- Programmes to upskill civil servants in civic engagement;
- Adjustments to the education system to support critical thinking and decision-making.

Participants also brainstormed who could play a role in advancing such activities: suggestions included District Councils, social enterprises, academics, politicians, religious communities, and the newly politicised youth. (Of course, the context has since changed, and citizens would need to be mindful of what activities are allowed by law.)

The potential of inclusive, participatory dialogue to support mindset transformation was recognised by participants in ‘Horizons for Hong Kong’. In the feedback, three of the sixteen participants named the opportunity to engage with diverse opinions as significant in transforming their own perspective. Others commented that they appreciated the collaborative format, noting in particular the atmosphere of openness and respect created through the establishment of ground rules from the outset, the wide range of ideas, and the diversity of the group. Moreover, when asked how to make the workshop more effective, participants asked for more time to share perspectives, and also greater diversity among participants.

One important outcome of the workshop was the recognition that Hong Kongers can work together to shape their own future. Comments collected through the feedback form included:

- There is always scope for change to build a better and happier Hong Kong
- There are things we can do now to make Hong Kong better

The use of the first person plural in the latter comment, “we can do”, points to the potential of participatory approaches to support a group to develop ‘sufficient strategic unity’ to identify and pursue new ways forward. In complex and rapidly changing contexts, more important than the pursuit of any single path (such as the creation of new channels for public engagement), is this capacity to adapt by considering multiple possible ways to achieve shared aspirations.

Conclusion

This exploration of the potential of participatory futures to support conflict transformation, drawing on expert insights and the ‘Horizons for Hong Kong’ pilot workshop, offers some starting points for the adaptation of futures methodologies as a means of civil engagement through dialogue in conflict situations. It also offers an initial indication that futures methodologies can enable conflict transformation by supporting participants to shift their perspective and identify alternative ways forward. Of course, it is also possible that using futures methodologies might affirm the current course of action as the optimum approach. My plan is to pursue this line of enquiry through more pilot workshops in a range of conflict situations, with the ultimate aim of developing best practice methodologies to support the widespread use of futures as a means of stimulating dialogue for conflict

transformation. Here are the key lessons I would build on.

First of all, noting that dialogue aims not to resolve conflict but to create a basis for constructive action, a sustained approach is necessary, building trust and understanding between participants through a series of encounters. During these encounters, an effective futures process should create a safe space and allow sufficient time for verbalising and recognising personal experience, values and aspirations. This contrasts with mainstream applications of futures processes for business or government strategy, which can focus almost exclusively on non-personal factors, such as the availability of infrastructure, raw materials and data, forms of governance, or business model.

I also find it important to recognise that futures processes already have some synergies with conflict resolution techniques, of which two in particular stand out: the potential to reframe perspectives on a situation, and the emphasis on participatory approaches. Futures processes can support fundamental shifts in narrative frameworks by changing the time frame. The exploration of a future time frame through alternative scenarios can expose a mismatch between a party's strategies and its aspirations, and therefore support the consideration of new strategies to better match aspirations. To maximise the chances of this, it is important that the process and facilitator encourage participants to consider scenarios they might consider implausible. Participatory approaches that prioritise 'second-order' (social, generative and reflective) learning are crucial to support the need to adapt to changing circumstances. For this, the more diversity in the group the better, alongside structures and support to enable each participant to embrace alternative perspectives to their own.

Beyond these insights, this initial exploration of the potential to adapt participatory futures to support conflict transformation suggests that it would be useful to run more pilot workshops, with varying durations and at greater scale in a variety of contexts, to better define optimum approaches and support the design of specific tools or methodologies. The workshop feedback also indicates that a one-off event is not sufficient to prepare facilitators to scale such workshops, becoming a distributed network drawing on open source tools and resources. For them to initiate and provide ongoing support for sustained enquiries in local communities, they need first to become a community themselves through a sustained approach to training. A further question is therefore how best to support a network of facilitators to become a community, and the role of second-order social learning in this.

This enquiry has explored the potential for greater use of participatory futures as a starting point for dialogue in conflict situations. There is also the potential to explore how futures processes might be applied at other points in the conflict cycle, looking beyond dialogue to conflict prevention, mediation, negotiation and post-conflict strategies for reconstruction.

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