Awareness-based system change as the basis for transforming systems and social norms

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Because harmful social norms or discriminatory practices are usually the result of deeply ingrained beliefs and mental models, any attempt to transform them needs to move beyond a purely technical approach to an awareness-based system-change model that supports a deep individual and collective transformative process as the foundation for new patterns of thinking and behaviours. Based on the findings of a project piloted in an Alternative Dispute Resolution centre in Baidoa, Somalia, this policy brief examines how using the Nonviolent Communication framework, a personal and collective development tool based on empathy, can support the emergence of a truly people-centred system. It also draws from the lessons learned to formulate recommendations for how to implement such an approach and suggests new ways of considering and measuring changes in our development programmes.

Traditionally, interventions aimed at ensuring better compliance of justice or security systems with human rights standards and eradicating discriminatory practices and harmful social norms, particularly against women, have generally followed a normative and technical approach focusing on three aspects: 1) establishing a normative framework by, for example, the codification of customary law and the development of a code of ethics or guidelines; 2) building technical capacities by providing training on human rights with emphasis on women's rights, ethics and establishing a case-management system; 3) establishing oversight mechanisms exercised by the courts or an independent human rights commission. This paper draws insights and findings from a UNDP pilot project in the Alternative

Dispute Resolution centre in Baidoa, Somalia,[2] which argues that discriminatory practices are so embedded in societal and cultural norms that meaningful change can occur only through a transformative process in individual and collective experience that leads to new patterns of thinking. This can be achieved not by increasing technical knowledge or enacting new regulations or policies, but by supporting changes in the ways people think and interact with each other: an awareness-based system-change model. If we want a truly people-centred system to emerge, this new awareness must be rooted in empathy and authenticity. Nonviolent Communication (NVC), as developed by Marshall Rosenberg, provides a powerful tool to enable such change.[3]

Empathy as the basis for system transformation

Traditional justice systems and their customary law and processes are shaped by peoples' perceptions of reality and by experiences that shape their thinking and are subject to changes over time. As Peter Senge stated, "It is not enough to change strategies, structures and systems unless the thinking that produced those strategies, structures and systems changes."[4] Therefore, efforts to support lasting reforms of the traditional justice system should address the thinking of its members as a starting point.

Discrimination and other harmful norms perpetuated by those systems are the manifestation of people's deeper inner beliefs, subjective views about the world, and personal, social and cultural environment, and those assumptions are so fundamental that people may find it hard to separate them from facts. Attempts to address them directly are likely to trigger strong defence mechanisms such as denial or anger. For example, during one session in June 2018, the issue of equality among clans was raised, and the traditional elders who took the floor during the training sessions asserted that minority clans were respected equally in Baidoa and that "members of minority clans do not complain". One participant said, "There is no discrimination of minority clans, as they have seats in the parliament and have ministers in the government"—even though discrimination against more vulnerable clans is a well-known problem in Somali society. To give another example: At the first training session of the initial group of trainees[5] on NVC at the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) centre in Baidoa, traditional elders and religious leaders were keen to portray their communities as highly respectful of women's rights and needs. During the first mixed-gender session, the women talked about and explained their feelings on issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and husbands secretly marrying a second wife. This provoked defence mechanisms from the male participants, who exhibited strong emotions of anger to the point that the meeting was on the verge of collapsing. The first mixed-gender session of the second group of trainees was equally challenging.

The Nonviolent Communication model is a powerful tool to transform those defence mechanisms into empathy and develop the willingness to see the other's perspectives. Discriminatory practices and other harmful social norms are hardly the products of someone's conscious choice but rather are a result of deep inner beliefs that disconnect an individual from the humanity of another. However, people's willingness to empathize (often described as "stepping into someone's shoes") requires first transforming their own prejudices and pain, as well as self-defence mechanisms, through a self-empathy process to be able to meet the other person with an open mind. One religious leader explained that before the training, he had problems expressing his feeling and emotions. After learning about NVC, he reported, "I am more aware of my emotions and perform daily self-reflection. I also ask my family and friends to describe me." Another traditional elder reported: "I was unable to build positive relationships with others. I used to overthink everything people said to me. I gained a lot from the training, which improved my relationships and connections with others and self-control."

Through its empathy process, the NVC model enables individuals to experience the feelings and needs of others. For example, in Baidoa, an exercise that included members of minority clans sharing stories of discrimination in their daily life with members of majority clans listening with empathy gave the participants insights about how 'power over relations' permeates their daily life and relations with others.

Role-playing marital disputes also helped the traditional elders understand women's deeper needs and feelings[6] and encouraged them not to dismiss the women as being 'overly emotional'. For example, one elder stated during an interview: "I never thought of having a fruitful conversation with my wife on family issues were not only for men, but rather for both man and woman of the house. I have even decided that I will talk to my wife about our daughters' upbringing, future and marriage, preventing them from exploitation likely to occur, like FGM." Similarly, both male and female participants reported having changed the way they dealt with their children, explaining that they now sit with their children and use NVC when a problem arises instead of resorting to corporal punishment. By practicing self-empathy and empathy and experiencing them though role play, individuals come to see conflicts under a new light: not as right or wrong but as signs of unmet needs. For example, during role plays in which a wife asked for money and the husband refused,[7] trainees could see behind the usual accusations that women always ask for money and men do not care about their families and want to keep the money for themselves. Trainees empathized

with the feelings and needs of each party: The wife is anxious about not being able to care for the children and pay their school fees, while the husband is facing financial difficulties and worries that he cannot meet the needs of the family. Those personal experiences and the inner changes they triggered had a transformative impact on the way the ADR centre functions. ADR members focus not solely on investigating the facts of the dispute but on uncovering the unmet needs of each party and finding solutions that meet everybody's needs. This leads to more sustainable outcomes, as shown by the fact that couples who came to the ADR centre regularly to deal with marital disputes stopped coming after NVC was used in the dispute resolution process.[8]

Emergence of new system practices and outcomes as a result of inner transformation

The common theory of change in development programmes supporting the traditional justice system assumes that behavioural and attitudinal change will result from a combination of training focusing on imparting technical skills and the imposition of rules regulating resolution process and ethics. Oversight bodies need to be established to ensure compliance, with the risk that not all transgressions to the rule will be detected. Under an awareness-based system-change model, changes in behaviours and new practices are no longer imposed but emerge through inner transformations and personal experience.

For example, after the NVC training at the ADR centre in Baidoa, mediators implemented new practices, such as asking parties to a dispute to take the time to breathe and connect with themselves before starting the process, as the mediators themselves had come to understand that people can only experience and express their deeper needs in a state of presence. Another example is that ADR members take time to deeply listen to each party to empathize with their feelings and needs. As one elder stated during a training session: "Before the training, I did not have the knowledge. I now speak separately to the conflict parties, trying to find out about their feelings and needs." They also make sure that the parties listen and empathize with each other, as this is a necessary condition for finding sustainable solutions that can meet the needs of both. One elder expressed in an interview: "Whenever I receive a case, the first thing I do is to listen to both parties, which I never used to do before NVC. I used to rush to conclusions. But luckily, now I am well trained. Letting the parties listen to one another makes them resolve their matters on their own, without needing a third party. Using that technique reduced the cases we received after we shared NVC with the community." It was also noted that, after participating in the NVC training, the ADR members made greater efforts to ensure that the outcome would meet the needs of both parties (and particularly the women). As observed by the ADR coordinator, ADR members previously treated it as a mere formality to ask the parties if they were satisfied with the outcome, while today, they take more time with the parties (particularly the women, who, because of the prevailing social norms, might feel pressure to accept a solution that they do not fully endorse) to ensure that the satisfaction is genuine.

Because those newly adopted practices and behaviours are based on personal growth and intrinsic motivation, they are more likely to be sustained over time and not require oversight mechanisms that are needed when behaviours are imposed.[9] It is believed that this will increase the system's efficiency as well as its performance over time. However, additional long-term evaluation will be necessary to confirm this.

Awareness-based system-change approach based on NVC requires new indicators of measurements

Progress should be measured against a set of indicators that can reflect this new awareness. While traditional data, such as the number of cases resolved and decisions enforced, might be useful, they lack context and do not include important aspects of dispute resolution processes and outcomes that are fundamental to human beings and their wellbeing, such as the need for acknowledgement for the pain suffered, dignity, safety, empathy, respect and to be understood and the need for healing in relationships. Current indicators commonly used in programmes fail to reflect the depth at which a dispute resolution process should happen for it to have a meaningful impact.

For example, traditional qualitative indicators related to the dispute resolution process will usually verify whether both parties have been listened to; however, those indicators cannot measure the level of listening by the members of the ADR centre that benefitted the parties to the disputes.[10]

This is, however, a fundamental aspect of the dispute resolution process. When asked what was different in the dispute resolution process in the centre since the NVC training, beneficiaries highlighted how they appreciated being genuinely and deeply listened to during the process and how much confidence it gave them in the process. In the same manner, data related to case outcomes usually focus on the number of cases solved as quantitative data or the level of satisfaction in the outcome as qualitative data. However, here also qualitative data does not reflect the multi-layered aspect of human needs. For example, in the case

of forced marriage, while before the training of ADR members on Nonviolent Communication, those members would oppose fathers' attempts to force marriage on daughters, after the NVC training they started to work with the fathers to help them first recognize their own needs[11] and then empathize with the needs of the daughter for a family environment that provides sense of security and protection, for love from her father and for autonomy, showing how a decision to marry her forcibly impacts the fulfilment of those needs and her psychological wellbeing. In such a case, the decision to prevent the marriage, while important, is not sufficient, and a genuine resolution process should aim not only at preventing forced marriage but at restoring the trust between the daughter and her father, along with her sense of security and dignity, and help the father understand that while his intentions might come from a place of caring, they will ultimately harm his daughter. Indicators should therefore be able to go below the surface to reflect those aspects. Since feelings are a signpost as to whether our deeper needs are met, new indicators and methodologies drawing from the field of social psychology, such as psychological wellbeing assessment tools, should be explored to include the feelings of the parties after the resolution process and to study the needs that are below the surface. This means that measurements of changes should also reflect this new awareness. Indicators should also include whether the agreed resolution to the dispute had been implemented and continued to hold or should be revised. This will indicate whether the outcome met the deeper needs of the parties.

Organic expansion as a sign of meaningful change

Human beings naturally have a strong need to contribute to the wellbeing of their communities and they do so based on intrinsic (vs extrinsic) motivation when they are given a task they are convinced is deeply meaningful. Two factors seem to have fostered this inner motivation: the direct experience of inward transformation and regular mentoring sessions. For example, in Baidoa, both male and female trainees began spontaneously sharing Nonviolent Communication methods in their neighbourhoods and later organized, on their own initiative, visits to camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) and remote villages to do the same.

They are still doing it today, though less frequently since the mentoring sessions have ended. This shows that transformative change needs to be constantly nurtured. The metric to measure whether an initiative is relevant or not should be whether it has triggered beneficiaries' inner motivation to contribute to the development of the community. This is also key in fostering the self-responsibility and self-empowerment of communities, as ultimately the primary responsibility for developing a community lies not with international partners or authorities but with its members.

Conclusion

The results from the project in Baidoa offer interesting insights into the future of development work and how focusing on individual transformation can lead to systemic change.

Such change requires development practitioners to move from a mechanistic approach (one that is based on change through control) to a more organic approach that focuses on creating the conditions for change by accepting that pro-sociality is intrinsic to human nature and that development work should focus on cultivating it to build systems that serve human beings. In conclusion, we recommend the following:

- **Programmes aimed at supporting** the establishment of a human rights compliant system should focus on strengthening the capacity for empathic connections on the part of those operating the system, as this enables them to fully understand human needs (as opposed to only complying with a set of rules) and support solutions that can satisfy those needs. The NVC model that focuses on understanding one's own needs and the needs of others to create a connection is a powerful tool for systemic change.

- **Inner transformation requires human beings** to bring to the surface mental models, biases and unresolved issues or conflicts that are usually deeply buried so that they can look at them and potentially transmute them. This can be done only in a trustworthy environment and can be a very difficult process that triggers pain or anger, as evidenced in the first joint sessions between men and women leaders. Additionally, there is a right time to explore a sensitive issue, and one needs to sense when the time is not ripe for it or, on the contrary, when the group is ready to delve into it and needs a small push. This requires a trainer and/or facilitator with strong experience and centredness to be able to create this safe space, hold the group together when anger and frustration emerge and sense what the group needs and how to move with it at the right pace on its transformative journey. Additionally, because the change process is based on direct experience through role play and can bring to the surface unresolved issues, it is preferable to have a trainer skilled in trauma approach.

- **Programming objectives** towards increasing behaviours intended to benefit others should focus on creating an environment of autonomy that is more likely to lead to the desirable behavioural changes, as it enables individuals to better internalize the values sustaining such behaviours. On the contrary, a controlling approach that focuses on imposing a set of rules or behaviours should be avoided, as it risks exacerbating antisocial behaviours, be they discriminatory practices or harmful social norms. NVC, which promotes a model of communication devoid of coercion, threat or blame and respectful of the cultural background, is particularly suited to foster such an environment.

- **Indicators to measure progress towards programme objectives** should include measurements of whether the basic psychological needs of human beings are being met and not focus on external indicators such as whether a party to a dispute has obtained redress, as the satisfaction of those basic psychological needs are fundamental for human wellbeing. This includes different elements, such as acceptance, belonging, contribution, empathy, etc.[12] For example, indicators could include the extent to which parties to the conflict felt they could co-create solutions to the disputes (need for autonomy and acceptance), the extent to which they felt their perspective on the dispute was understood by the other parties and the extent to which they understood the other party's perspective (relatedness)—and whether, through experiencing this process, they felt more capable of solving disputes on their own (competence) in a follow-up one to four weeks after implementation of the agreement or whether they needed an additional agreement and another follow-up.

- **Programme relevance** should be assessed based on whether it fostered intrinsic motivation in beneficiaries to become agents of change in their community. External rewards or incentives to undertake initiatives should be discouraged (or limited) as they likely will make it more difficult to assess individuals' intrinsic motivation.

Transformative change can occur only through sustained engagement over a long period of time. One-off training cannot produce meaningful results. One reason the training programme was successful was that it included numerous sessions with intervals of a few months between

them, allowing participants time to absorb what they had undergone, develop and practise what they learned. A transformation process is not linear, but rather undergoes periods of stagnation or even seeming regression (i.e., when human beings fear change and try to cling even more to old patterns) and breakthrough. This should be considered and acknowledged. Concrete actions to build this approach into the programme should include developing the capacity of programme beneficiaries of NVC through training, mentoring and nurturing communities of practice that connect with each other to create sustainability and encourage learning and development.

Endnotes

1   Virginie Blanchard is a Judicial Affairs Officer currently serving with the United Nations Mission in Somalia, blanchardv@un.org and Doel Mukerjee is the UNDP Rule of Portfolio manager for Somalia, doel.mukerjee@undp.org. **Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to thank Leanne McKay, Senior Justice Advisor, UNDP Crisis Bureau and Gloria Manzotti, Access to Justice, Security and Human Rights Specialist, UNDP Regional Hub for Latin American and the Caribbean for their review and helpful comments to this brief.

2   The ADR centre is supported by UNDP through the Ministry of Justice. It includes traditional elders, religious leaders and women leaders. Dispute resolution is based on Xeer (Somalia customary law and sharia law).

3   It [NVC] is based on the principles of nonviolence—the natural state of compassion. NVC begins by assuming that we are all compassionate by nature and that violent strategies—whether verbal or physical—are learned behaviours, taught and supported by the prevailing culture. NVC also assumes that we all share the same basic human needs, that feelings are a signpost whether our needs are met or not and that all actions are a strategy to meet one or more of these needs. The aim of NVC is to increase individuals' awareness of their own needs and the needs of others to enable them to make more conscious choices about how they behave and choose more life-serving strategies. It also aims to increase understanding within communities, deepen connections, and facilitate conflict resolution through a four-step process: (i) observations; (ii) feelings; (iii) needs; (iv) requests. www.cnvc.org; https://baynvc.org/what-nvc-is/.

4   Peter Senge, MIT, Sloan Institute of Management, The Fifth Discipline.

5   The first group of trainees was made up of 30 traditional leaders and religious leaders and 30 women leaders. Training included separate sessions for women and men followed by a mixed-gender session.

6   For example, elders shared a belief that women are naturally jealous. Through the NVC process, they came to understand that, given the social context in Somalia, many women live in fear of their husband secretly marrying a second wife. During the session, they also shared experiences of times when they were themselves jealous, leading them to connect personally with this feeling.

7   This particular role play was used as it became evident during the session that this was a common topic of marital dispute that could lead to violence.

8   Those cases were reported by the ADR coordinator, who checked in with the couples and confirmed that they are now able to solve conflicts on their own after having experienced NVC at the centre during the dispute resolution process.

9   This is confirmed by a recent study that shows that an environment that promotes autonomy results in people adopting more prosocial behaviours (defined as voluntary behaviours intended to benefit others) as it supports the internalization of healthy social norms, while experiences of control undermine this process and produce antisociality (actions that harm or lack consideration for the benefit of others). Donald, J. N., Bradshaw, E. L., Conigrave, J. H., Parker, P. D., Byatt, L. L., Noetel, M., & Ryan, R. M. (2021). Paths to the light and dark sides of human nature: A meta-analytic review of the prosocial benefits of autonomy and the antisocial costs of control. Psychological Bulletin, 147(9), 921–946. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000338.

10 There are different levels of listening: simple listening, active listening and deep listening

11 The resolution process in one such case showed that the father's decision to marry off his daughter was motivated by the need to care for her and protect her from outside marriage relationships, ensuring her a secured future.

12 Psychological needs should be understood as "a psychological nutrient that is essential for individuals' adjustment, integrity, and growth". Richard Ryan, professor, Institute for Positive Psychology and Education, Australian Catholic University, North Sydney, USA and Australia. Basic psychological needs are often grouped in three categories: autonomy (volition, willingness, authenticity and integrity), relatedness (warmth, bonding, care, connection, sense of belonging) and competence (efficiency, mastery, expanding skills and expertise)—https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/application-basic-psychological-needs.