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# UNIT 10 CONFLICT MAPPING

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## 10.1 INTRODUCTION

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Conflict creates confusion, unpredictability and uncertainty. Intervention in this situation requires a clear understanding and analysis. This understanding is necessary not only for the conflict resolution practitioner but also the authorities, the stakeholders and even students of peace and conflict studies. All of them need to know – what is going on?

Conflict is a complex process having multiple elements, more so if it has multiple parties and stakeholders. Conflict can thus be analysed from various perspectives. Some scholars analyse conflict from a general or macro perspective while others take a micro approach and yet some others combine the macro and the micro perspectives. The basic or primary elements of a conflict can be helpful in creating a map which will enable one to negotiate their way through it.

### Aims and Objectives

After going through this Unit, you would be able to

- Understand the purposes, usage and limitations of a conflict map;
- Become aware about the basic elements of a conflict map;
- Get familiar with the different ways in which conflict can be mapped; and
- Graphically map a conflict by using signs and conventions.

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## 10.2 CONFLICT MAP: PURPOSE, USAGE AND LIMITATIONS

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A conflict map is a visual technique that presents a conflict graphically and shows the

parties in relation to the conflict as well as to each other. It can be used to analyse both micro and macro level conflicts – international, national, social, organisational and interpersonal conflicts. Being a visual tool, it can be used for group processes as well as with people who are not formally educated. It can be drawn on a sheet of paper or a chart paper or a flip chart or even on the mud floor. The technique of conflict mapping was developed first by Paul Wehr in 1979.

It is possible to use the conflict map for various purposes in different contexts. It can guide parties, third party interveners, conflict resolution workshop participants as well as students to collect information about the conflict, reconstruct the chain of events and help in understanding the situation better. This understanding can form the basis on which strategies can be developed and actions planned. Each party can draw a map with the aim of clarifying and understanding the conflict from their own perspective or it can be done jointly by two or more parties to understand each other's perspective. Parties to a conflict mostly have different perspectives and viewpoints about the conflict. In such a situation, when the parties draw their own conflict map, it can show differences in perception. Also it helps them to move a step back and make sense out of the complex and confusing process of conflict. A third party can draw a conflict map to use it as a point of starting a discussion among the parties to which things can be added or deleted as per the inputs of the parties. The conflict map thus is a flexible tool that can be modified depending on the conflict parties, the task at hand and the intervention goal.

Conflict maps help in the overall analysis of a conflict. It clearly shows the relationship between the parties and also clarifies the distribution of power among the parties. It aids in seeing where allies or potential allies are. Conflict mapping facilitates the identification of openings for intervention and entry points for action. Mapping can also help in making an informed decision about whether the intervention should continue. It also helps in evaluating what has already been done in the conflict. Conflict maps can thus be used either early in the process to just understand and analyse the conflict or later to identify possible entry points for intervention or to build strategies.

Conflicts change over time. Therefore, conflict analysis cannot be a one-time exercise; it must be an ongoing process, representative of the changing situation. A conflict map is limited to the time period and is representative of the time in which it is made—it only gives a snapshot of the current situation—and cannot possibly make all the aspects of the conflict visible. The map will show things differently if it is drawn either before or later during the conflict process. Besides, it depicts the relationship between the parties but is unable to analyse the causes of conflict. Moreover, the map is always drawn from some perspective, so it is critical to remember who is drawing the map and not just what elements and how they have been placed on the map. Thus a map drawn by a student of peace and conflict studies may be very different from the one done by a party to the conflict, depending on the amount of information the students have at any given point of time. Thus, Mapping on its own cannot provide all the answers; it only gives partial insight into the nature of a conflict.

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### **10.3 BASIC ELEMENTS OF A CONFLICT MAP**

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Conflicts have multiple elements. Each conflict is unique having its own distinguishing features. However, some elements are common to all conflicts. Understanding these common or basic elements of a conflict is essential for constructing a conflict map.

Each conflict has a *history*—how the conflict started, what was its origin, how the conflict evolved, what were the major events in the course of its evolution—these need to be understood. Secondly, conflicts do not emerge in a vacuum. They take place in a *context* or a setting. It is essential to know and be aware of the physical and organisational settings of a conflict.

Thirdly, conflict takes place between groups or individuals, i.e. the *parties*. The primary or main parties are those who are directly opposed to one another, are directly involved in the conflict and are indulging in conflict aggravating behaviour. On the other hand, there might be groups and individuals who have a stake in the conflict—whose lives would be impacted by the outcome of the conflict but who have no direct stake in its outcome—are referred to as secondary parties. Besides, there can be third parties as well. These are conciliators, mediators or conflict resolution professionals who intervene in the conflict with the aim of facilitating resolution. Fourthly, conflicts take place in a *relationship*. The main and secondary parties and the stakeholders in a conflict can have different kinds of relationships between them – alliances, close contacts, broken relationships, confrontation, intermittent links etc. The relationship between the parties must be represented in a conflict map.

Fifthly, a conflict cannot take place without *issues* or factors and points of disagreement. It is thus essential to answer the question as to why does a particular conflict exist? Although, there may be several issues in a given conflict, the key ones need to be pointed out. *Contrasting values* can be one such issue. It must however be noted that these values can be different for different parties either in reality or it might just be a *belief* or a perception. Next, each conflict arises because of some root *causes* and as the conflict progresses, depending on what action is taken, it leads to certain *consequences*. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between the causes and the consequences. So in a given conflict, there are likely to be some issues which can be seen as both the causes and the effects of the conflict e.g. scarcity of food can be a cause of conflict between two groups but that scarcity may itself be a consequence of normal agricultural activities getting disrupted by the ongoing violence.

Additionally, *goals* are an important aspect of conflict. A goal is an objective of a conflict, which is acknowledged as such by the parties. This may be a *position* that the parties take publicly to make others see and hear. Besides, there are interests involved in conflicts as well. *Interests* are something we really want; these are the motivating factors for the parties. However, satisfaction of *needs* is at the core of resolution of conflicts. Interests and positions can be negotiated but needs are non-negotiable, something we must have e.g. water. In the process of analysing a conflict, it is important to distinguish between what the parties ‘say’ they want (positions or goals), what they ‘really’ want (interests) and what they ‘must’ have (needs). Also, different parties may have different goals and interests.

Further, each conflict has its own *dynamics*. Things constantly change and move in a conflict and thus conflict is a dynamic process. It might seem that there is a deadlock between the parties but the aspects of the context of the conflict keep changing. Mapping too is a dynamic process as it reflects a particular point in a changing context and points towards action.

Finally, conflicts have some purpose or positive consequences for those who are involved in it – these are the *functions* of a conflict. The purpose could be to direct attention to

social injustices that need to be addressed or to promote much needed change in social systems and organisations or at a micro level just to release tension or pent up feelings.

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## 10.4 WAYS OF CONFLICT MAPPING

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There is no standard way of mapping a conflict; it can be done in various ways depending on the purpose of the analysis. Here two ways of mapping a conflict have been presented. These have been devised by Paul Wehr and William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker. Certain elements are common to both these maps but they also have some distinguishing features. They can be used either in combination or can be altered to take care of specific situations.

### 10.4.1 Paul Wehr

Paul Wehr provided the technique of conflict mapping in his book *Conflict Regulation* written in 1979. According to Wehr, conflict mapping is the “first step in intervening to manage a particular conflict. It gives both the intervener and the conflict parties a clearer understanding of the origins, nature, dynamics, and possibilities for resolution of the conflict.” The main elements of his conflict map are as follows:

*Summary Description:* This is a maximum one-page description of the conflict.

*Conflict history:* It describes the origins and major events in the process of evolution of the conflict and its context. It is necessary to distinguish between the context and the relationship among the parties which led to the conflict.

*Conflict context:* It relates to the scope and character of setting in which the conflict takes place such as geographical boundaries, political structure, etc.

*Conflict parties:* It includes the units who are directly or indirectly involved in the conflict and have some stake in its outcome. Wehr divides the conflict parties into three kinds – primary, secondary and interested third parties.

*Primary parties* are those whose goals are or they perceive them to be incompatible. These parties interact directly in pursuit of their respective goals.

*Secondary parties* are those who are not directly involved in the conflict but who have an indirect stake in the outcome of the conflict. As the conflict moves forward, there is a likelihood that primary parties may become secondary and vice-versa.

*Interested third parties* are those who have an interest in successfully resolving the conflict.

In addition, it is essential to know the nature of power relations between or among the parties i.e. whether it is symmetrical or asymmetrical, the leadership of the parties, the main goals of the parties, and what is the potential for forming coalitions among them.

*Issues:* Conflicts develop around one or more issues. These are points of disagreement that emerge from or lead to a decision. They need to be resolved. Issues can be classified into the following on the basis of how they were generated: facts-based, values-based, interests-based and non-realistic. One or a combination of the above issues may be the source of a conflict.

*Facts-based issues* are concerned with disagreements over ‘what is’. This happens because parties either perceive it like that or it is their judgment.

*Values-based issues* relate to disagreements over ‘what should be’ as a determinant of a policy decision or a relationship or other sources of conflict.

*Interests-based issues* are disagreements over ‘who will get what’ when distribution of scarce resources such as economic benefits or power take place.

The origin of *non-realistic issues* does not lie in incompatible perceptions, interests or values. It is rather concerned with the style of interaction of the parties, the quality of their communication or physical discomfort in their immediate physical setting.

*Dynamics*: The dynamics of a conflict may not always be predictable because there are constant changes taking place in it but they need to be reversed for either regulating a conflict or resolving it. Some of the dynamics are: precipitating events; issue emergence, transformation, proliferation; polarisation; spiralling; and stereotyping and mirror-imaging.

*Precipitating events* are those that signal the surfacing of the dispute.

*Issue emergence, transformation, proliferation* are indicative of how issues can change with the progress of the conflict. It is likely that specific issues will become generalised or single issues may multiply into many or impersonal disagreements can turn into interpersonal conflicts.

*Polarization* occurs when parties seek internal consistency, try to collate with allies and their leaders make an effort to consolidate their positions. This can either lead to greater intensity or to simplification and thus resolution of the conflict.

*Spiralling* refers to the patterns of escalation or de-escalation of a conflict. There is a likelihood that each party will try to increase or escalate the level of hostility and damage to the other side, which in turn will result in a corresponding increase from the opponent. In the case of de-escalatory spirals, opposing sides may make reciprocal efforts to incrementally reduce the levels of hostility in their interaction.

The process of *stereotyping and mirror-imaging* refers to parties perceiving themselves (self) as ‘good’, having superior qualities while at the same time perceiving or seeing the other party (not-self or mirror-opposite) as ‘bad’ or even ‘evil’, someone who is greedy, aggressive and less than human. This leads to rigid positioning, miscommunication and misinterpretation, which results in the ‘Us versus Them’ syndrome.

*Alternative routes to solution(s) of the problem(s)*: In a given conflict situation, depending on the context, there can be several different ways of resolving a conflict – structural changes, policy changes, behavioural changes, etc. These and other options should be made visible, not just to the parties but also to those who are interested in intervening in the conflict, so that they can suggest new alternatives or a combination of those already identified.

*Conflict regulation potential*: These refer to the resources, which may be used for limiting, managing or resolving a conflict. Each conflict contains such resources. These resources can be noted on the conflict map. Some of the resources are internal limiting factors, external limiting factors, interested or neutral third parties, and techniques of conflict management.

*Internal limiting factors* refer to the values and interests that the conflicting parties have in common. It could also include the cross-pressures of multiple commitments of parties.

*External limiting factors* could mean either a higher authority who can intervene in the conflict or force the parties to agree to a settlement or an intermediary who is from outside the conflict.

*Interested or neutral third parties* are people who are trusted by all the parties to the conflict and who are in a position to either facilitate communication or do mediation or locate financial resource to take care of problems of scarcity.

The *techniques of conflict management* could range from negotiation to conciliation to facilitation to mediation to breaking down a large conflict into several small manageable conflicts (referred to as ‘fractionating’) so that they can be easily resolved.

*Using the map:* The map is best used as the initial step in conflict intervention. It helps in forming an informed judgment especially about whether the intervention should continue. If the intervener decides to continue with the intervention, the map can make the conflict seem less complex, making resolution possible. It also helps the parties to take a step back and reflect on the whole conflict process. Finally, the map works for the lay man as well for it simplifies the complex, mysterious and cumbersome process of conflict, making it comprehensible.

#### **10.4.2 William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker**

Wilmot and Hocker devised a guide to focus on several components of conflicts. It comprises of a series of questions. Although Wilmot and Hocker’s device is more of a guide rather than a map, the aim is similar to that of the map: to analyse and understand the nature and dynamics of a conflict. The guide helps to bring into focus specific aspects of the conflict: the orientation to the conflict, the nature of conflict, interests and goals, power, styles of conflict, assessment, personal intervention, and attempted solutions.

This guide is best used in its entirety as then the interplay of conflict elements gets highlighted. For intractable and long-term conflicts, this guide can be of help in assessing the situation. In some other scenario, users might just pick relevant questions from each section of the guide and leave the rest. This can be done either in a facilitated or guided discussion, or as a reflective exercise or in writing. The guide can also be used to construct interviews or a questionnaire that will reveal the dynamics of the conflict. It can thus be used in a variety of contexts but it should be modified as per the task at hand.

##### *Orientation to the conflict*

What attitudes toward conflict do participants seem to hold?

Do they perceive conflict as positive, negative, or neutral? How can you tell?

What metaphoric images do conflict participants use? What metaphors might you use to describe the conflict?

What is the cultural background of the participants? What is the cultural context in which the conflict takes place?

How might gender roles, limitations, and expectation be operating in this conflict?

##### *Nature of the conflict:*

What are the “triggering events” (immediate causes) that brought the conflict to everyone’s attention?

What is the historical context (underlying causes) of the conflict with regard to 1) the ongoing relationship between the parties and 2) other, external events within which the conflict is embedded?

Do parties have assumptions about conflict that are distinguishable by their choices of conflict metaphors, patterns of behaviour, or clear expressions of their attitudes about conflict?

*Conflict elements:*

How is the struggle being expressed by each party?

What are the perceived incompatible goals?

What are the perceived scarce resources?

In what ways are the parties interdependent? How are they interfering with one another? How are they cooperating to keep the conflict in motion?

Has the conflict fluctuated between productive and destructive phases? If so, which elements were transformed during the productive cycles? Which elements might be transformed by creative solutions to the conflict?

*Interests and goals:*

How do the parties clarify their goals? Do they phrase them in individualistic or system terms?

What does each party think the other's goals are? Are they similar or dissimilar to the perceptions of self-goals?

How have the goals been altered from the beginning of the conflict to the present? In what ways are the prospective (these are identified *beforehand*), transactive (these are expressed *during* the conflict), and retrospective (these are expressed *after* the conflict episodes have occurred) goals similar or dissimilar?

What are the content, relational, identity, and process goals? (Content goals relate to the question "*What* does each person want?" These are verifiable, objective issues that people talk about. Relational goals relate to the question "*Who* are we in relationship to each other during our interaction?" These are about parties' influences on each other and define "how each party wants to be treated by the other and the amount of interdependence they desire." Identity or face-saving goals relate to the question "*Who am I* in this interaction?" These have "to do with the needs of people to present themselves positively in interactions and to be treated with approval and respect." Process goals relate to the question "*What communication process* will be used?" They "refer to parties' interests in how the interaction is conducted." The content, relational, identity, and process goals are altogether referred to as CRIP goals.)

How do the CRIP goals overlap with one another?

Which goals seem to be primary at different stages of the conflict?

Are the conflict parties "specializing" in one type or the other? (Parties tend to highlight or "specialize" in only one type of goal and limit themselves to it.)

Are the identity and relational issues the “drivers” of the conflict? (Identity and relational issues is the core but they lie beneath the content and process issues.)

Are any of the goals emerging in different forms? (Goals are likely to emerge in a different form e.g. content goals can surface as relational, identity or procedural goals.)

Is there “shape shifting” of the goals over time in the conflict? (Goals do not stay static; they shift and undergo changes before, during and after the conflict.) How do they change during the prospective, transactive, and retrospective phases?

*Power:*

What attitudes about their own and the other’s power does each party have? Do they talk openly about power, or is it not discussed?

What do the parties see as their dependency and the other’s dependencies on one another? As an external observer, can you classify some dependencies that they do not list?

What power currencies (particular resources that are valued or needed by others) do the parties see themselves and the other possessing?

From an external perspective, what power currencies of which the participants are not aware seem to be operating?

In what ways do the parties disagree on the balance of power between them? Do they underestimate their own or the other’s influence?

What impact does each party’s assessment of power have on subsequent choices in the conflict?

What evidence of destructive “power balancing” occurs? (When individuals or groups block the exercise of power by another it is destructive while when they exercise appropriate power and let others do the same, it is constructive.)

In what ways do observers of the conflict agree and disagree with the parties’ assessments of their power?

What are some unused sources of power that are present?

*Styles of conflict* (“Conflict styles are patterned responses, or clusters of behaviour, that people use in conflict.”):

What individual styles (avoidance, accommodation, competition, collaboration, and compromise) did each party use?

How did the individual styles change during the course of the conflict?

How did the parties perceive the other’s style?

In what way did a party’s style reinforce the choices the other party made as the conflict progressed?

Were the style choices primarily symmetrical or complementary?

From an external perspective, what were the advantages and disadvantages of each style within the particular conflict?



Can the overall system be characterised as having a predominant style? What do the participants say about the relationship as a whole?

Do the participants appear to strategise about their conflict choices or remain spontaneous?

How does each party view the other's strategising?

What are the tactical options used by both parties? ("Tactics are individual moves people make to carry out their general approach", such as threat.)

Do the tactical options classify primarily into avoidance, competition, or collaborative tactics?

How are the participant's tactics mutually impacting on the other's choices? How are the tactics interlocking to push the conflict through phases of escalation, maintenance, and reduction?

*Assessment:*

What rules of repetitive patterns characterise the conflict? ("All conflicts follow patterns, predictable actions of communication and response." Mostly these are circular as it is difficult to pinpoint where the pattern started.)

What triangles and microevents best characterize the conflict? ("When people perceive that they are the lower-power party in a two-person conflict, their typical response is to try to form a coalition with another person who can bolster their power." The third person becomes part of the conflict and thus the triangle. "Microevents are observable, recurring patterns of behaviour that can be analyzed for underlying conflict structure.")

How destructive is the tone of the conflict?

*Personal Intervention:*

What options for change do the parties perceive?

What philosophy of conflict characterises the system?

What techniques for self-regulation or system-regulation have been used thus far? Which might be used productively by the system?

How might anger be managed more productively?

*Attempted solutions:*

What options have been explored for managing the conflict?

Have attempted solutions become part of the problem?

Have third parties been brought into the conflict? If so, what roles did they play and what was the impact of their involvement?

Is this conflict a repetitive one, with attempted solutions providing temporary change, but with the overall pattern remaining unchanged? If so, what is that overall pattern?

Can you identify categories of attempted solutions that have not been tried?

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## 10.5 HOW TO MAP A CONFLICT SITUATION?

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In order to map a conflict situation, one needs to decide *what* one wants to map, *when* and from what *point of view*. If one tries to map the whole conflict in detail, it will be a time-consuming exercise. Moreover, the result will be large and complex, which will not be helpful. One thus needs to choose a particular moment in a specific situation so that the scope of the mapping exercise is not too wide. It is also advisable to do several maps of the same situation from different viewpoints, especially for students of peace and conflict studies. While doing so, one can ask the question, how different parties could see the same situation differently.

One can be guided by the following questions while doing the mapping:

What are the main parties of this conflict?

What other parties (should include marginalised groups and external parties as well) are involved or connected in some way to the conflict?

What are the relationships between the main and other parties? Are there alliances, close contacts, broken relationship or confrontation between them?

Why does the conflict exist? What is the incompatibility? (These relate to the issues between the parties in the conflict.)

What are the views of the parties in the conflict? (This can indicate the position of the conflicting parties.)

Mapping should be geared towards creating new vistas and possibilities as it is a dynamic exercise. These questions can be helpful in doing so:

What can be done?

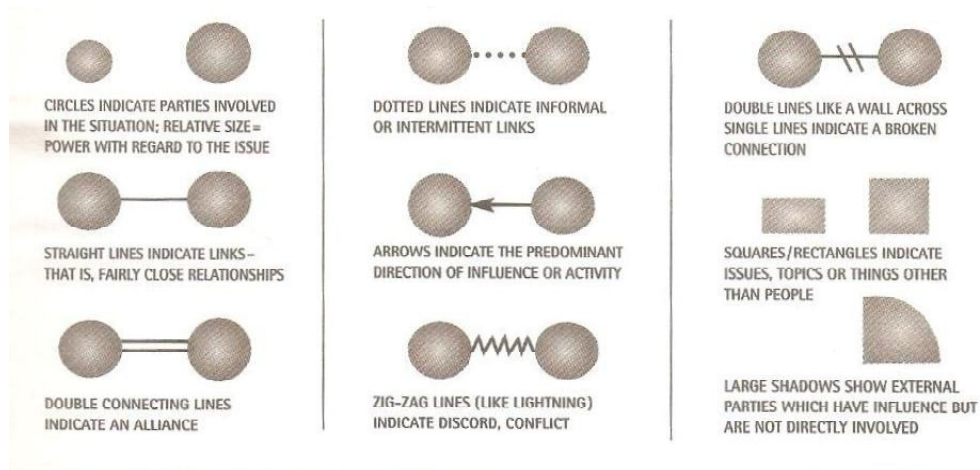
Who can best do it?

When is the best moment?

What is needed before and what should be done after?

If the map is being done by an intervening organisation or agency (say a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) or an international organisation), then it is necessary that they put themselves on the map as they are now part of the situation. Moreover, how the intervening organisation is perceived by others can have either positive effect, in that it can open up opportunities and possibilities for working with the parties, or lead to negative consequences, in that the parties can refrain from cooperating with it.

In mapping, certain signs or conventions are used. However, one need not stick to them but can invent their own signs. Given below are some ideas for signs that can be used in mapping:

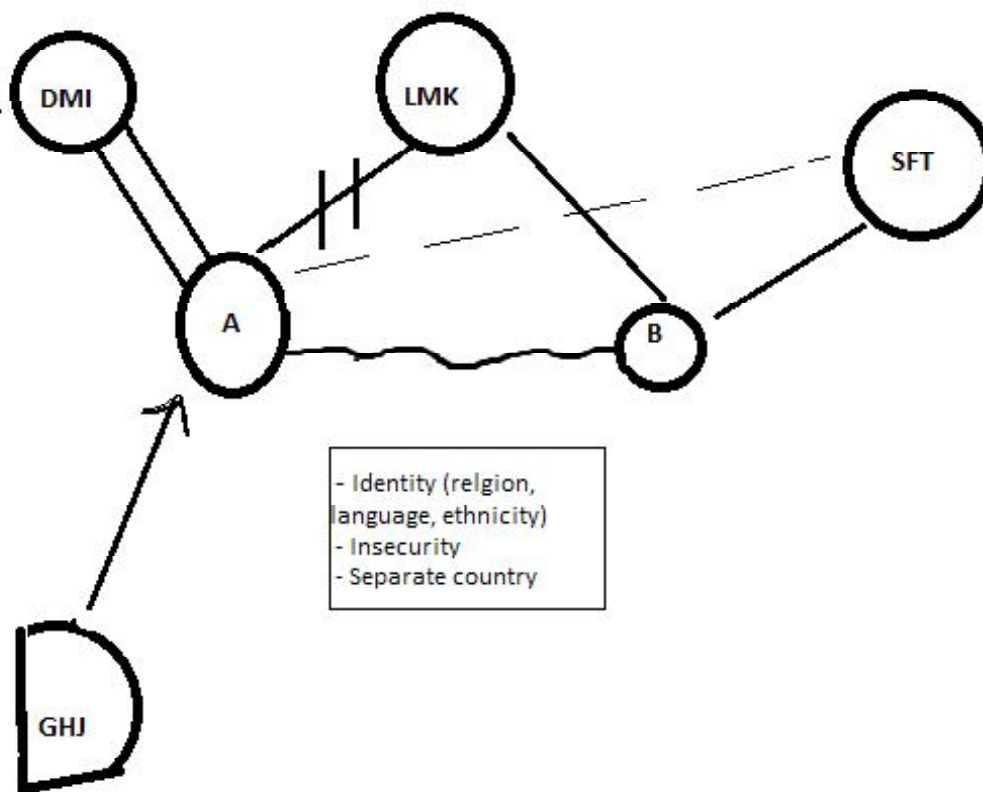


**Figure 1: Mapping Conventions**

Source: Simon Fisher et al, *Working with Conflict: Skills & Strategies for Conflict* (New York: Zed Books & Responding to Conflict, 2000).

An imaginary conflict situation is described below and a conflict map drawn by using the conventions given above so as to illustrate how to go about mapping a conflict situation.

‘A’ and ‘B’ communities have been in conflict for the past twenty-five years in the country ‘XYZ’. ‘B’ is in a minority but enjoys good terms with the neighbouring country ‘SFT’ as they both belong to the same ethnic group. ‘A’ belongs to a different ethnic group from ‘B’, but is dominant in terms of numbers and also occupies power at the centre. ‘B’ wants to create an independent country by splitting country XYZ. Their contention is that ‘A’ does not give them the liberty and freedom to practice their language, religion, customs and traditions. ‘A’ dreads the day when ‘B’ will be successful in breaking the country and taking away their holy land and resources. This feeling makes ‘A’ insecure. They thus try to strike back at ‘B’ with all the resources they have; in fact they invest a lot of money in buying arms and ammunitions from country ‘DMI’ with which it has a military and strategic alliance. ‘B’ fears a complete annihilation of their community in genocide like situation and thus built an armed cadre and indulges in guerrilla warfare against ‘A’, striking at will and killing several people. Country ‘GHJ’ is ready to invest a lot of money in country ‘XYZ’ if ‘A’ and ‘B’ manage to resolve the conflict amicably. In fact, it is the major donor partner of country ‘XYZ’ and thus exercises a lot of influence on it. Country ‘LMK’ tried to mediate between ‘A’ and ‘B’ as it enjoyed the goodwill of both the parties for it did not have any selfish stakes in the conflict but burnt its finger in the process and is really displeased with ‘A’. ‘A’ has nothing personal against its neighbour ‘SFT’ but because of the history of its conflict with ‘B’, ‘A’ only has informal links with ‘SFT’.




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## 10.6 SUMMARY

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Conflicts are complex and confusing both to the participants as well as outsiders. There are multiple elements operating in any given conflict situation. Understanding the dynamics and being able to analyse the elements of the conflict is the first step towards resolution. For this purpose, a conflict map which presents the conflict graphically and shows its main elements can be created. It gives a structured analysis of the conflict at a given point of time. The conflict map provides a snapshot or a quick picture of the conflict and is thus indicative rather than comprehensive. Some of the main elements which must be represented on the conflict map are the parties – major, minor as well as third and external parties, the relationships between them, their relative power, the issues between them, and their interests and goals. There is no standard way of mapping a conflict. Depending on the context and the elements present, one can creatively use signs and conventions to map a conflict. Mapping is a dynamic process which must point towards possibilities, opportunities and action.

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## 10.7 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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1. What are the purposes, usages and limitations of a conflict map?
2. Discuss the basic elements of a conflict map.
3. Both conflict and mapping are a dynamic process. Elaborate.
4. Describe in detail the main elements of the conflict map as given by Paul Wehr.
5. What are the specific aspects of conflict that the Wilmot & Hocker conflict assessment guide helps to bring into focus? List the main questions of the guide.

6. What are some of the things one must bear in mind while doing a conflict map?
7. Draw a conflict map replete with signs and conventions for a local or grassroots level conflict that you are either a part of or see around you.

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## SUGGESTED READINGS

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