

Leverage Point Identification Matrix

Introduction

Leverage points are places within complex conflict systems where small, well-focused interventions can produce significant changes in system behavior. This matrix provides a structured approach to identifying, analyzing, and prioritizing potential leverage points for more effective peacebuilding interventions.

Based on Donella Meadows' pioneering work on systems leverage points and adapted specifically for conflict contexts, this tool helps practitioners move beyond addressing symptoms to transforming the underlying systems that drive conflicts. By systematically evaluating potential intervention points, peacebuilders can direct limited resources toward actions with the greatest potential for sustainable impact.

Leverage Point Hierarchy

Leverage points vary in their transformative potential, with deeper system changes generally offering more fundamental and lasting impacts. This hierarchy organizes leverage points from most powerful (paradigm shifts) to least powerful (parameter adjustments), though all types have their appropriate applications:

1. Paradigms and Worldviews (Transformational)

Interventions that shift the basic assumptions, beliefs, and values through which people understand conflict.

2. System Purpose and Goals (Directional)

Interventions that reorient the aims and objectives of conflict systems.

3. System Structure and Design (Architectural)

Interventions that reorganize the relationships, rules, and power dynamics within conflict systems.

4. Feedback Mechanisms (Regulatory)

Interventions that adjust how information flows and influences behavior within the system.

5. Rules and Constraints (Operational)

Interventions that modify the formal and informal rules governing conflict behavior.

6. Information Flows (Informational)

Interventions that change what information is available to whom and how it is interpreted.

7. Material Parameters (Tactical)

Interventions that adjust specific resources, numbers, or physical factors within the conflict.

Leverage Point Identification Process

Step 1: Identify Potential Leverage Points

Using system mapping tools (e.g., Causal Loop Diagrams, Stock and Flow Analysis), identify areas where intervention might significantly influence system behavior. For each potential leverage point, document:

- **Name:** Clear, specific descriptor of the leverage point
- **Location:** Where in the system this point exists
- **Type:** Classification according to the leverage point hierarchy
- **Current State:** Description of how this aspect of the system currently functions

- **Desired State:** Vision of how this aspect would function in a more peaceful system

Step 2: Analyze Impact Potential

For each potential leverage point, evaluate:

- **Influence Scope:** How many other system elements would be affected by changes at this point
- **Directionality:** Whether effects would be unidirectional or create ripple effects throughout the system
- **Time Horizon:** How quickly effects might manifest (short, medium, or long-term)
- **Sustainability:** Likelihood that changes would be self-reinforcing rather than temporary

Step 3: Assess Feasibility

Evaluate the practical considerations for intervention:

- **Access:** How readily this point can be influenced by your organization
- **Resource Requirements:** What would be needed to create change at this point
- **Stakeholder Support:** Level of buy-in from key actors for intervention at this point
- **Risk Level:** Potential for unintended consequences or backlash

Step 4: Prioritize Leverage Points

Using the analysis from Steps 2 and 3, prioritize leverage points based on:

- **Impact-to-Effort Ratio:** Balance of potential influence against required resources
- **Strategic Alignment:** Fit with organizational capabilities and mission
- **Sequencing Logic:** Which points might need to be addressed before others
- **Complementarity:** How interventions at different points might reinforce each other

Step 5: Design Interventions

For prioritized leverage points, develop specific intervention strategies:

- **Intervention Approach:** Concrete actions to influence the leverage point

- **Key Actors:** Who needs to be involved in implementation
- **Timeline:** Sequence and timing of activities
- **Success Indicators:** How to measure whether the intervention is creating desired change

Leverage Point Matrix Worksheet

1. Potential Leverage Point Identification

Leverage Point Name	System Location	Type (1-7)	Current State	Desired State

2. Impact Analysis

Leverage Point Name	Influence Scope (High/Med/Low)	Directionality (Uni/Multi)	Time Horizon (S/M/L)	Sustainability (High/Med/Low)

3. Feasibility Assessment

Leverage Point Name	Access (High/Med/Low)	Resource Requirements (High/Med/Low)	Stakeholder Support (High/Med/Low)	Risk Level (High/Med/Low)

4. Prioritization Matrix

Leverage Point Name	Impact Potential (1-10)	Feasibility (1-10)	Impact-to-Effort Ratio	Priority Ranking

5. Intervention Design (for top priority leverage points)

Leverage Point Name:

Intervention Approach:

Key Actors:

Timeline:

- Short-term (0-6 months):
- Medium-term (6-18 months):
- Long-term (18+ months):

Success Indicators:

Case Example: Water Conflict in Arid Region

Identified Leverage Points

Leverage Point Name	System Location	Type	Current State	Desired State
Water Governance Structure	System Structure	3	Centralized, non-inclusive decision-making	Participatory basin management with all stakeholders
Water Scarcity Narratives	Paradigms	1	"Zero-sum" competition for limited resource	"Positive-sum" cooperation to manage shared resource
Water Monitoring System	Information Flows	6	Limited, non-transparent data on usage	Open, reliable monitoring accessible to all parties
Agricultural Incentives	Rules	5	Subsidies for water-intensive crops	Incentives for water-efficient practices
Water Infrastructure	Parameters	7	Aging infrastructure with high water loss	Modernized, efficient water delivery systems

Prioritization Results

Leverage Point	Impact (1-10)	Feasibility (1-10)	Ratio	Ranking
Water Governance Structure	9	6	1.5	1
Agricultural Incentives	7	8	0.9	2
Water Monitoring System	6	7	0.9	3
Water Scarcity Narratives	10	4	2.5	4
Water Infrastructure	5	3	1.7	5

Intervention Design for Top Leverage Point

Leverage Point: Water Governance Structure

Intervention Approach:

- Create multi-stakeholder river basin council with representation from all communities
- Develop transparent decision-making protocols for water allocation
- Build technical capacity for integrated water resource management

Key Actors:

- Local government water authorities
- Agricultural communities from all ethnic groups
- Regional environmental NGOs
- Technical experts in water management

Timeline:

- Short-term: Stakeholder mapping and initial convening
- Medium-term: Council formation and protocol development
- Long-term: Capacity building and authority transfer

Success Indicators:

- Representation of all major stakeholder groups in governance
- Decisions made through established protocols rather than power politics
- Reduction in water-related grievances and disputes
- More equitable water distribution patterns

Common Leverage Points in Conflict Systems

Paradigm-Level Leverage Points

- **Identity Narratives:** How groups understand themselves in relation to others
- **Historical Memory:** How past conflicts are interpreted and remembered
- **Justice Concepts:** What constitutes fair treatment and legitimate grievance

- **Security Definitions:** What creates a sense of safety and threat

Purpose-Level Leverage Points

- **Shared Visions:** Articulation of common futures that transcend divisions
- **Peace Agreement Goals:** Stated aims of formal conflict resolution processes
- **Development Priorities:** What outcomes are valued in post-conflict recovery
- **Institutional Mandates:** Formal purposes of governance organizations

Structure-Level Leverage Points

- **Power-Sharing Arrangements:** How decision-making authority is distributed
- **Resource Allocation Systems:** Mechanisms determining who gets what
- **Governance Architecture:** Design of institutions managing conflict-prone issues
- **Social Network Connections:** Relationships across conflict divides

Feedback-Level Leverage Points

- **Accountability Mechanisms:** How actions are monitored and evaluated
- **Constituent Pressures:** How communities influence leadership decisions
- **Market Signals:** How economic incentives shape conflict-related choices
- **Success Metrics:** What outcomes are measured and valued

Rules-Level Leverage Points

- **Legal Frameworks:** Formal laws governing conflict-related behaviors
- **Social Norms:** Informal expectations about appropriate conduct
- **Operational Procedures:** How organizations implement broader policies
- **Incentive Structures:** What behaviors are rewarded or punished

Information-Level Leverage Points

- **Conflict Early Warning:** What data is collected about emerging tensions

- **Media Narratives:** How conflicts are portrayed and interpreted publicly
- **Knowledge Access:** Who has information about resources, rights, and options
- **Decision-Making Inputs:** What factors are considered in policy choices

Parameter-Level Leverage Points

- **Security Force Numbers:** Size and composition of military/police
- **Resource Quantities:** Amount of contested resources available
- **Budget Allocations:** Financial resources directed to different priorities
- **Physical Infrastructure:** Material systems supporting communities

Implementation Considerations

Complementary Interventions

Design multi-level approaches that combine:

- High-impact but slow-moving paradigm interventions
- Medium-impact structural changes
- Immediate parameter adjustments to create space for deeper work

Stakeholder Engagement

- Include diverse perspectives in identifying leverage points
- Consider whose interests are served by current system configurations
- Engage those who can influence or might resist changes at leverage points

Complexity Awareness

- Recognize that interventions may have unintended consequences
- Design adaptive approaches that can adjust to system responses
- Build in regular reassessment of leverage point effectiveness

Context Sensitivity

- Adapt the framework to match local conflict dynamics
- Consider cultural factors in how leverage points function
- Respect indigenous knowledge about system functioning

Conclusion

The Leverage Point Identification Matrix provides a structured approach to finding the most promising intervention points within complex conflict systems. By systematically analyzing where limited resources might create maximum positive impact, practitioners can design more effective, sustainable peacebuilding strategies.

Remember that higher-level leverage points (paradigms, purposes, structures) generally offer more transformative potential but may require more time and face greater resistance. Lower-level points (parameters, information flows) can show quicker results but may address symptoms rather than causes. The most effective approaches often combine interventions at multiple levels, creating synergies that can shift seemingly intractable conflicts toward sustainable peace.

Additional Resources

- Meadows, D. (1999). *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*
- Ricigliano, R. (2012). *Making Peace Last: A Toolbox for Sustainable Peacebuilding*
- CDA Collaborative Learning Projects: *Reflecting on Peace Practice Program*
- Swanson, D. & Bhadwal, S. (2009). *Creating Adaptive Policies: A Guide for Policy-making in an Uncertain World*