



Using the “Onion” as a Tool of Analysis

Overview: Overcoming conflict in complex and ever changing circumstances presents considerable challenges to the people and groups involved, whether they are part of organizations, movements or alliances. The “Onion” framework illustrates certain key elements at play in conflicts and helps us analyze them so they can inform our strategies. This tool also is useful for organizations and alliances in sorting out internal differences and conflicts to strengthen their work together. We strongly recommend beginning with the “How Do We Negotiate?” activity in preparation for *The Onion*.

Purpose: The “Onion” framework illuminates certain key elements at play in conflicts and helps us analyze them so they can inform our strategies. Specifically, these include the needs, interests, and positions of parties involved in a conflict from the most superficial to the deepest ones. This tool is useful for organizations and alliances as they try to sort out some of the aspects involved in their internal differences and conflicts, especially when general values and interests are shared about equality and justice.

This tool is complementary to the “How Do We Negotiate?” activity. We recommend beginning with **How Do We Negotiate** as a foundation for the Onion. Used together, they can give a better understanding of the differences in negotiating from needs and interests or positions.

NOTE: The Onion can be applied to other conflict situations as well, but in cases where the parties do not share basic values and purpose, it will need to be complemented by a careful power and risk analysis. There may be circumstances when even though you know the positions, interests and needs of the other parties involved in a conflict and they know yours, the power differentials and value differences may be not lend themselves to any easy resolution.

Time: 1 hour and 30 minutes

Credit: Inspired by Serapaz, México, adapted by Patricia Ardón

Materials:

- The Onion diagram
- Support material “The Case of the Water Coalition”
- Flip charts
- Color markers
- Masking tape



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Facilitator Introduction: Even when people, organizations and alliances share values and interests, overcoming conflict in complex and ever changing circumstances presents considerable challenges to those involved. In such situations those with less power often feel unable or unsafe to put forward their needs, lest they reveal their vulnerability and give others more power over them. As women, for example, we may know or feel that our perspectives and needs will be manipulated or not be taken into account or that expressing them will lead to new conflicts and even violence. But if we hide our needs, it is unlikely that other people or groups will be aware of them which can make responding to them difficult and can further exacerbate tensions.

There are other dynamics that also compound the difficulty of addressing conflict in organizations and alliances. Distrust often distorts our perceptions of each other and real or perceived power differentials increase tensions. For this reason, during times of conflict and instability we often try to protect ourselves from anything that makes us feel vulnerable and subject to greater marginalization. In the face of significant differences in power, this is not an unreasonable conclusion. Yet by so doing, we can end up developing positions or arguments more oriented to defending those positions than finding a way to meet our needs and resolve conflict. This is especially so when people and groups involved in a conflict define their position mainly in oppositional terms – as something that the other completely opposes. If we can untangle these elements of conflict situations and create enough trust and understanding of these different dynamics, we can address them more effectively.

Process:

- Introduce the purpose and process.
- Do a quick presentation on *The Onion*, its different layers and its application to conflicts. See handouts for more information.
- Introduce the idea of needs, interests and positions, giving definitions and concrete examples.
 - Clarify any questions or confusions around the difference between needs, interests and positions.
- Distribute the accompanying text and project or draw *The Onion* on a flip chart so everybody can see it.
- Either give participants time to read the accompanying text or have a group of participants to read it out loud. Clear up questions on how to use this tool.

Individually:

- Read case study.
- Jot down:
 - What you see as major needs, interests, positions and points of possible convergence among the groups.
 - What would you recommend to the different groups in order to reconnect and reach an accord?



In small groups:

- Ask participants to share their analysis of positions, interests and needs and suggestions – assess their pros and cons; come up with 2-3 key recommendations

In plenary:

- Have groups present their analysis and recommendations,
- Ask for comments and questions on analysis and recommendations.
- Summarize key points, clarify any questions, and add any relevant information, emphasizing the usefulness of this tool in helping groups reach agreements and limit conflicts

Role Play

In plenary:

- Ask for three volunteers. Each of them will represent a party in the conflict. Seat them in a way in which the whole group can see them. Using the case study worked on earlier, ask the parties to have a dialogue in which they try to articulate their needs, interests and positions to arrive to a resolution.
- After 5 minutes, stop the dialogue and ask the audience to share what they see:
 - Where are the parties getting stuck in their positions? Can you identify any changes the parties could make to change this situation?
 - Can you identify alternative ways in which the parties can arrive at a resolution?
- Ask parties to resume dialogue incorporating the group's suggestions. After another 5 minutes stop the dialogue and ask the group to reflect on the following:
 - What changed between the first and second dialogue? Where there any breakthroughs?
 - What do we learn from this exercise?
 - Do you have any other observations
- Closure: Ask the group to reflect on how these insights apply to their own experience. Summarize key ideas, empathizing the importance of thinking outside the box and looking for creative ways of articulating needs, interests and positions in negotiations.

Facilitator's note: If participants are interested in going deeper on the subject, you may recommend they apply The Onion to analyze a conflict within their own organizations or movements.



CONFLICT ANALYSIS OF NEEDS, INTERESTS, AND POSITIONS IN ORGANIZATIONS AND ALLIANCES

“THE ONION”

INTRODUCTION

In periods of stability, when relations are good and trust is high, being transparent about our real needs and our actions and strategies designed to meet them is usually not a problem. In our organizations and alliances, we can be open and discuss them frankly so they are clear to all concerned. Even when we are not so clear or open, people may be able to perceive our needs, through analysis and empathy.

In situations and moments of harmony, as women, we are willing to open up and express our individual and shared needs, especially among ourselves. When there is great unrest, uncertainty, and polarization, however the way we express ourselves is often heavily influenced by prejudices, value judgements, and feelings such as resentment, anger, fear or insecurity, resulting in communication that can be both defensive and aggressive at the same time.

Overcoming conflict in complex and volatile situations presents considerable challenges to the people and groups involved. In such situations those with less power often feel unable or unsafe to put forward their needs, lest they reveal their vulnerability and give others more power over them. As women, in particular we may know or sense that our perspectives and needs will be manipulated or not be taken into account or that expressing them may lead to new conflicts and even violence. But if we hide our needs, it is unlikely that other people or groups will be aware of them which makes responding to them difficult and only exacerbates tensions.

There are other dynamics that also compound the difficulty of addressing conflict. Distrust often distorts our perceptions of each other and real or perceived power differentials increase tensions. For this reason, during times of conflict and instability we often try to protect and defend ourselves from anything that makes us feel vulnerable and subject to greater marginalization. When significant differences in power are present, this is not an unreasonable conclusion. Yet by so doing, we can end up developing positions or arguments more oriented to defending those positions than finding a way to meet our needs and resolve conflict. This is especially so when people and groups involved in a conflict define their position mainly in oppositional terms – as something that the other completely opposes. If we can untangle these elements of conflict situations and create enough trust and understanding of these different dynamics, we can address them more effectively.

It is particularly important to clarify our needs and interests as women, because we have learned to identify and respond to the needs and interests of 'others' more readily than our own, often leading us to adopt agendas that do not really reflect our own needs.

“THE ONION” - AN ANALYSIS TOOL

When there are conflicts between us or between our organizations, the "Onion" (also known as a "donut"), is used by many groups to sort out some of the dynamics at play in the conflict. It is based on a metaphor of an onion whose layers are gradually peeled back, first those that are readily visible, then the hidden protected inner sections. This tool helps uncover the hidden elements that are at the core of resolving a conflict – people’s deeply felt needs. If those are not addressed, conflicts persist.

The Onion illustrates some of many layers and elements of conflict that get built up over the course of a dispute. The aim is to understand and identify these dynamics and layers so that the real needs at the heart of the dispute can get addressed and the conflict resolved in a constructive way. This analysis helps groups lay the basis for negotiation, revealing what they must have in order to be satisfied.

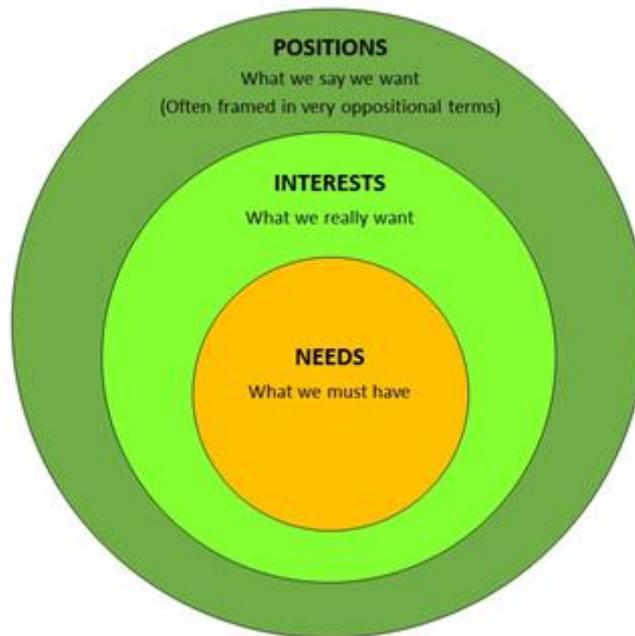


Figure 1. The Onion

The outer layers represent **positions** about the conflict that we assume publicly – usually a mix of judgments, perceptions, arguments and values. The language can be fairly strong with little room for negotiation.



Next are the layers that correspond to our **interests** – what we really want to achieve, what motivates us. These are often long term and include the broader hopes and goals of a group. Along with needs, people may keep these hidden because they fear if they are revealed, they may weaken their ability to negotiate. Yet it is often easier to find points of common agreement around interests than around hardened positions.

At the center of the illustration are our **needs** – our must haves, the most important and crucial elements that people or a group must have satisfied in a conflict. By identifying and clearly understanding what our needs and interests are and what the needs and interests of "others" are, we can identify additional and better alternatives for an agreement.

Example of Needs, Interests, Positions:

Need: To feed ourselves and our families and communities

Interest: To produce our own food for local consumption

Position: We will not accept any food that is not produced in our communities

Options for using the Onion

The objective of this tool is to analyze the needs, interests, and positions of the parties in conflict, ranging from the more superficial to the deepest. It is important to start from what we see and perceive – those aspects that are the most visible as represented in the onion’s outer layers the positions of each person or group. Then we should write down to one side of the onion the needs and interests that we identify as we go deeper in our analysis.

It may also be useful to develop a table that records our perceptions (i.e. our needs, interests, and positions, and those of the other party), and identify which tend to polarize us in our relationship. The table can also help identify shared needs and interests or points of potential convergence, guiding us towards possible agreements.

	ORGANIZATION A	ORGANIZATION B	OUR MEETING POINTS
NEEDS			
INTERESTS			
POSITIONS			



WE RISE



It is important to remember that, as we have mentioned, we do not always have our needs, interests, and positions clearly identified, and sometimes we tend to confuse them. We face situations that lead us to position ourselves in a way that can even obscure or make us lose sight of our real needs and interests (of paramount importance in guiding our strategy). Remember that we should not label each category as “good” or “bad”. Our reality as women is much more complex and we often need to use different strategies to make gains in exercising our rights. If we strengthen alliances between us, we will have greater strength and power to do so.



SUPPORT MATERIAL FOR "THE ONION"

THE CASE OF THE WATER COALITION

THE PROBLEM

In a rural village of Central America, water is becoming increasingly scarce within both homes and surrounding lands; rivers are drying up; agriculture and communities are suffering. Several multinational mining companies have begun operations there, using large amounts of water to wash the minerals they extract from the land. These processes are harming not only the lives and livelihoods of the population but also the wider environment. To make matters worse, the villagers themselves have only recently become aware of how their own practices have damaged their natural surroundings.

The water problem is well known because the mayor has been vocal in supporting the people's struggle to make the multinationals withdraw from their lands. The mayor's commitment is not common, so his voice has made the issue more public which has made other communities with similar problems more aware of the possible consequences of this type of project.

Given their struggle, an alliance between two women's organizations has been formed to address the problem; the situation is becoming very dangerous, and community leaders who have demanded the withdrawal of these companies have been threatened. Other individual women, solidarity organizations, and even a research center want to form part of the alliance, but have not yet formally joined, pending a call to open up the process from the founders.

Lately, tensions have surfaced between the two organizations that make up the alliance. Members of the community group believe that the other is too visible rendering them invisible, while members of the other group, think that they are doing all the work and that the village women are not complying with the agreements. The two organizations have not met for some time and communication between them has become difficult and sporadic.

ALLIANCE OF ORGANIZATIONS

Village Women's Organization. For a long time, women from this village have organized to promote initiatives that benefit communities, encourage women's participation, and foster greater appreciation of women's contributions. They are proud of having founded their own organization. Many women faced opposition from their spouses when they decided to participate. The best-known leader has been accused by some community people of being a "trouble maker" and putting other women in danger because she is a feminist. Other women in the organization support it, but face increasing opposition in their homes to their activities.



The women in this organization think that they are the ones facing risks in their communities and territorial lands while other outside organizations take the credit and appear in the media as community "saviors".

The leaders of the organization face many pressures, not only from other people and the community, but also from colleagues within the group who do not want to work in an alliance. They have had to speak out at community assemblies to defend the need for alliances as a way to protect and defend their water sources, emphasizing that alliances mean greater strength. They also stress that women struggles are not only about defending women's rights but about benefiting the entire community. Yet some men say that women are dividing the community, are involved because they are against men, and want to get financing for their own narrow purposes using the community's name. The organization, especially its leadership, is under a lot of pressure because there is not enough funding to do everything members want.

Women's NGO

This NGO has existed for many years and was the first women's organization to call itself feminist. They have had a very important role in getting laws that benefit women approved and holding courses on women's rights and feminism. Women from around the country have participated in their Training Institute, including leaders of the Village Women's Organization who are confronting multinational corporations. The NGO also has contact with other women's organizations in other areas of the country that are experiencing similar problems.

The founding members are very committed to women's rights and the NGO has been waging a fierce campaign against all forms of violence in the country. They have had good financial support from international organizations and have often appeared in the media and participated in other national campaigns against violence.

They are now in the alliance with the village organization to support women's struggles for water. They think that it is important to be very visible and to campaign in the media so that there is greater public awareness of the problem and greater support for women's struggles. They have held some press conferences to talk about water-related problems and the struggles of the village women to ensure good water sources and safeguard their rivers. Although village women have been asked to go to the capital to participate in these press conferences, they have declined, saying that they have other priorities.