

## **I. Who Are ‘Insiders’ and Who Are ‘Outsiders’?**

A key issue in peace practice is that of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ actors or of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. The meaning at face value is clear: ‘internal’ actors or ‘insiders’ are the people of the society experiencing the violence and ‘external’ actors or ‘outsiders’ are those that have come from another society to help. Yet from the perspective of those living in a conflict situation, the identification of who is an ‘insider’ and who an ‘outsider’ is more subtle:

*“I am from Acholiland and there is a conflict in Acholiland. But the people who are in conflict may say I am an outsider because of the way I try to work. It is up to them to decide.”*

*“Insiders are widely seen as those vulnerable to the conflict, because they are from the area and living there, or people who in some other way must experience the conflict and live with its consequences personally. In terms of those actively working for peace, it includes activists and agencies from the area, local NGOs, governments, church groups, and local staff of outside or foreign NGOs and agencies.*

*Outsiders are widely seen as individuals or agencies who choose to become involved in a conflict. Though they may feel a great sense of engagement and attachment, they have little to lose personally. They may live in the setting for extended periods of time, but they can leave and work elsewhere. Foreigners, members of the diaspora, and co-nationals from areas of a country not directly affected by violence are all seen as outsiders. Those working in leadership roles with foreign agencies, or local people working “in the manner of an outside organization” are also seen as outsiders.*

*In practice there are no pure insiders or outsiders, but rather degrees of insiderness and outsiderness. Often the relationship can only be defined in relative terms—one is more or less of an insider/outsider than someone else. An NGO from Nairobi was considered an outsider while working in Northern Kenya, but less so than a Swedish activist. A Nicaraguan staff member was seen as more of an insider to a conflict in Guatemala than a Canadian activist.*

*A common mistake is for foreign agencies to think of all nationals of a country experiencing conflict as insiders, without understanding their particular relationship to the conflict. Another common mistake is made by co-nationals or diaspora groups who do not understand that, for the reasons outlined above, they are often seen by communities in conflict as outsiders.” (Confronting War 2003:36)*

## II. Complementary Strengths of ‘Insiders’ and ‘Outsiders’.

### Insiders in Peace Work

Insiders, as those most in touch with the conflict and its consequences, clearly bring many of the key elements needed for peace work, including:

1. Clear motivation, passion, and commitment to the cause because they experience the costs of the conflict.
2. In-depth knowledge of the context, the conflict and its dynamics, the particular people and the internal politics of the groups in the setting, and the internal resources that exist for peace.
3. Their reputation, credibility, and trust with people in the setting. This can translate into ability to gain access to decision-makers, to negotiate, to mobilize constituencies, etc.
4. Leverage and the ability to apply political pressure in the setting due to personal influence or the domestic constituencies they represent.
5. Ability to provide continuity, follow-up, and long-term monitoring since they are present in the setting and able to maintain ongoing contact with the people they engage in peace efforts.

But insiders recognize that they also bring their own personal views and biases, precisely because of their intimate connections to the conflict. Personal experiences of war can make it impossible for an insider to play a neutral role between the parties to the conflict.

*“Civil society is sometimes part of the problem. Despite good intentions, civil society groups are not always good for peace. Internal peace groups have their own ideologies and views.”*

### Outsiders in Peace Work

Outsiders rarely work on other peoples’ conflicts without some partnership with people in the setting. Outsider efforts that are not connected with local activists and interlocutors stand little chance of being effective.

As noted above, outsiders bring power, resources, certain kinds of influence, and access to a wider stage to a partnership. Outsiders add value in a partnership when they:

1. Lobby, advocate, and raise awareness internationally on the local and international causes of the conflict and on peace initiatives by insiders.
2. Apply influence and pressure on national political authorities.

3. Use channels to and leverage with outside constituencies to increase security of insiders, through on-site presence, monitoring, and reporting.
4. Provide comparative experiences and new ideas and techniques from other settings in ways that insiders can decide whether or not to take up. This can also be in the form of facilitating exchange visits where insiders can see positive but also negative examples. The latter can impress the message that “we don’t want to be like that”.
5. Host a “safe space” where all sides of a conflict can come together for dialogue, training, conferences, joint work, etc.
6. Use external contacts and credibility to mobilize resources. (Confronting War 2003: 38-39)

### **III. Effective Partnerships.**

#### **a. The need for collaboration and partnerships.**

Peacebuilding challenges tend to be such that neither ‘insiders’ nor ‘outsiders’ on their own can properly address them. They have to be tackled instead through partnerships.

*“Experience shows that in many circumstances, a partnership of insiders and outsiders working together for peace can produce opportunities for increased effectiveness if the partnership is both well-designed and well-managed. This is because conflicts very often have both domestic and international dimensions. Partnerships that engage people from across this range can address the interlocking elements of conflict and, by doing so, more directly ensure that solutions on one level are not undermined at other levels.”* (Confronting War 2003:37)

*“While good partnerships do not always produce big impacts on the broader peace, they are necessary, if not sufficient, factors for doing so. Bad partnerships put peace work at risk, undermining programs and sometimes having clear negative impacts.”* (Confronting War 2003:35)

#### **b. Problematic relationships: asymmetry breeds frustration and resentment.**

Yet the prevailing situation is often that of asymmetry between ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’:

*“In the RPP workshops, insider and outsider practitioners stressed again and again that the role of outsiders is to support internal forces working for peace. However, in spite of this strong commitment, the RPP discussions showed that in many partnerships insiders feel undermined or weakened by outsiders. There were many concerns expressed by insiders, often presented in their own words, below.*

- Sometimes external models “crowd out the space” for people in the context to make their own ideas heard.
- Often outsiders impose “Western” values and devalue or ignore local solutions. They show “arrogance” and “neocolonial attitudes.” They may introduce techniques or approaches, such as “the culture of dialogue” that are inappropriate in some places.
- Outsiders often focus on “perceptual work” at the expense of “structural work.” They often “downplay the conflict and its roots.” They often try to provide “quick fix solutions for historical problems.”
- Outsiders often interpret the need to be neutral between the parties as the need to be silent on the abuses the parties commit.
- Outsiders are attracted to work at the grassroots with the victims of conflict but, in doing so, they sometimes undermine local and national peace networks.
- Outsiders enter new situations with “institutional biases and strengths that can blind them to what is already happening.”
- Outsiders are often unaware of local realities and political nuance. They come “armed with easy ethnic or two-party frameworks for conflict.”
- The “tourist nature” of the way some outsiders operate leaves them with “no real understanding of local dynamics to drive their programs.”
- “Outsiders mistakenly think they are not part of the conflict.” Many lack awareness of how their own identities relate to the conflict.
- Many outsiders also “seek legitimacy in the conflict. They become stakeholders because they want to be seen to succeed.”

Often there is also asymmetry in capacities for knowledge creation and in technical or methodological expertise (Building Effective Partnerships 2004:3)

*The fact that these critiques are heard again and again in many different settings points to the problematic nature of partnerships. Significantly, many outsiders share these same concerns regarding their own efforts to help with other people’s conflicts.*

*At the heart of the challenge facing insider/outsider partnerships is a serious power asymmetry felt by insiders. They feel that the priorities, biases, agendas, and analyses of outsiders tend to dominate. One source of domination is felt to arise from the way that peace work is funded.”* (Confronting War 2003:39-40)

Similar criticisms were heard in the country surveys done in the context of the so-called 'Peacebuilding Forum', a joint and participatory inquiry by Interpeace and the International Peace Academy into the question of the quality of the relationship between external and internal actors:

*"Joint proposals were entirely written by the external partner with little or no input from the internal partner." (internal actor in Sierra Leone)*

*"There is a lack of trust. If there is a lack of trust there is a lack of respect and without those it is difficult to cooperate." (member of civil society organization in Kosovo)*

*"We are in the driving seat and have our hands firmly on the wheel, but because they control the greater part of it, if I agree I survive, if I disagree I die." (internal actor in Sierra Leone)*

*"Until now, the internationals have acted without any accountability to the people of Kosovo/a. Decisions have been taken by internationals that will have a profound effect on our lives. I know that they are not elected by the people and that they report to the UN. However, they are running our lives and this is where the argument about accountability to the people comes in." (Kosovo)*

*"£100 that I can use at my discretion is worth £100,000 to carry out a donor-devised project." (local organisation Nepal)*

The overall picture that emerges is of internal actors generally perceiving their external counterparts as arrogant in Kosovo, patronizing in Guatemala, insensitive to culture and religion in Afghanistan, and generally lacking knowledge of the country context. The quotes do not convey often much stronger sentiments of frustration, resentment and even anger with external actors.

c. Insiders as gatekeepers.

*"In insider/outsider partnerships, insiders also can wield power over outsiders in damaging ways. Insiders are the conduits to communities affected by conflict and to those engaged in peace activities. Outsiders depend on insider partners to gain access to communities both in order to understand them and to conduct programs with them. This can give insiders a great deal of influence over the direction and conduct of programs. This is as it should be.*

*However, in some cases, local agencies compete to monopolize outsiders, partly to ensure access to outsider funds but also in order to derive influence and power from the relationship.(...)*

*As one Northern Irish practitioner described, "Gatekeepers keep other gatekeepers out. They get credibility from outsiders and want to keep others away." The result is that outsiders gain access to the situation in a way that is limited, or detrimental. The outsider can end up with no contact at all with important sectors of the society. Or the peace initiative is distorted to further the gatekeeper's personal or political special interests." (Confronting War 2003: 41)*

d. Effective partnerships: outsiders in an enabling role.

*“The challenge is to ensure that the partnerships entail mutual learning, empower rather than undermine internal actors, and capitalize on local knowledge and skills. Maximum effort must be devoted to strengthening the capacity of institutions of governance and civil society. If that does not happen, the pattern of domination and dependency will not be broken, institutional weaknesses will not be addressed, lasting peace will not be secured, and external actors will not find exit strategies. Implicit in this approach is the need for external actors to be less assertive, more receptive to local ideas and initiatives, and more flexible, adaptable, responsive and patient.” (WSP & IPA 2004:4)*

*“They also need the personal skills and attitudes to operate in the delicate and volatile aftermath of violent conflict, and to understand that effectiveness and durability require much more than short-term project outputs. Without a high level of flexibility, sensitivity, patience, an ability to manage risk and respect for internal actors, they will fail to secure trust, lack credibility and be unable to function effectively.” (idem p. 11)*

**References:**

Anderson, M. & L. Olson 2003: Confronting War. Critical lessons for peace practitioners. Cambridge MA, Collaborative for Development Action pp. 30-36

WSP International & International Peace Academy 2004: Building Effective Partnerships. Improving the relationship between internal and external actors in post-conflict countries. Conference document, Geneva