

BOOK REVIEW

The importance of local involvement in conflict transformation

REVIEWED by Cynthia Petrigh¹

*“Local Ownership” in Conflict Transformation Projects:
Partnership, Participation or Patronage?*

Hannah Reich, *Berghof Occasional Paper 27*, Berghof Research Center for Conflict
Management, Berlin, September 2006, ISBN 978-3-927783-79-9, ISBN 3-972783-
79-9, 36 pages

¹ **Cynthia Petrigh** is a *PCD* Editorial Board member. She has worked for a number of humanitarian organisations, including the Red Cross. Her interests include conflict resolution and international humanitarian law and human rights.

This Berghof Paper examines the recent trends on inclusion of local ownership in conflict transformation projects. Though recognising that “such activities are unsustainable if they are conceptualised entirely by outsiders and merely implemented locally”, the author underlines the contradictions within the concept, as it covers up the challenges inherent to asymmetrical power relations.

The paper asks interesting questions on the notions of ownership, of local counterparts and of peace constituencies. It also seeks to differentiate whether this request comes from the “inside” (local partner, peace constituencies); or from the “outside” (donor, international partner); and whether it is a long-term objective or a concrete project objective, the latter being problematic.

The terms “inside” and “outside” are preferred to “local” and “international”, as they show the degree of impact on the actors rather than their geographical position – a distinction that makes sense in the context of conflict resolution

Having acknowledged that donor requirements do not allow for a withdrawal of the outsiders from the control of the project, the author suggests that local ownership should not be envisaged as a concrete project objective. But, rather, it could be seen as a shift towards ultimate local ownership and self-dependency of the project and the programme in the long-run.

To attain this longer-term objective, and to provide a constructive and realistic approach, the author proposes to work on the relationships between the actors. To this effect, she underlines that the relationship between insiders and outsiders is an influencing factor on the project, and that conflict transformation also applies to the transformation of the relationships in which the conflict resolution activists are themselves involved. She suggests studying the implicit messages carried in this relationship, and to examine this relationship from both sides’ cultural backgrounds. The importance for learning is to be able to unlearn.

The author proposes a framework to carry this study on relationships, and to offer a space where “particular needs and issues that unexpectedly arise in the course of the work” (such as inter-personal difficulties): the learning sites. They can take the form of a workshop, a staff retreat, or any other format different from daily staff meetings. Though the agenda should remain flexible and open to any such issues, the author suggests that the following three main issues are particularly addressed in terms of relationships and power:

- the decision-making process,
- budgetary allocations and restrictions,
- proposals to alter or modify project implementation.

Having explored the potential for learning, the author doesn't leave the reader unequipped for practice, as the paper includes a list of questions to check the validity of the learning sites experience.