

Understanding and Respecting Community Dynamics in Aid Work



People are naturally skeptical about outsiders, especially if they feel there is a hidden agenda. It is therefore important to communicate clearly what your intentions are in order to gain trust and respect from community members including its leaders, says **Jennifer Grover**.  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7571-8418>

When external parties, such as researchers, policy makers, or humanitarian aid workers, first engage with a community, they often come from a different geographical location or cultural background and are considered ‘outsiders’. As outsiders, members of a community may be suspicious and distrustful of the outsiders' intentions or purpose, and reluctant to engage. There may also be a lack of trust and a reluctance to open up, hindering the ability to provide effective support. Alternatively, community members may have high expectations that the outsider will be able to support the diverse and numerous needs of their community, which can lead to extremely challenging circumstances. This article provides some essential strategies when entering a community so that the most appropriate and beneficial outcome is achieved for the community. How to achieve it all depends on the approach and connections made that ultimately benefit those in need of support or further development. The proposed suggestions and strategies in this paper can be applied to various settings, whether working in a domestic environment with migrant or refugee communities, with First Nations people, or as an international aid worker deployed to a foreign country to assist in the recovery process after a natural disaster or years of conflict.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IS GOLD

Entering a community that is foreign such as another cultural or country, may pose as a challenge for an outsider. They may not have in-depth knowledge or understanding of the local population. Outsiders may have preconceived ideas about the local culture that may be only partially correct or even false. They may have developed stereotypes of “the other” and this can impact on how they interact and how they conduct research or provide support to a community.

In nearly three decades of humanitarian work, both domestically and internationally, I have developed a broad range of skills and techniques for engaging with local communities. One of the important skills is to recognise local voices. The imperative of hearing and integrating local voices has long been recognised by researchers and practitioners in various fields such as healthcare (Peckham, 1994), agriculture (Cheyns, 2014), and sustainable development, justice, and peace studies (Abeysekera, 2023; Dzuverovic, 2018).

Locals understand what works in their context and can help co-create solutions tailored to their needs. These approaches focus on respect for sovereignty and traditional practices. For example, conflict-resolution

practices rooted in indigenous traditions will more likely result in a positive outcome for a community experiencing inter-communal violence (Rakgwata et al., 2024). During my nine years with the United Nations Mission in Sudan and South Sudan (UNMIS/UNMISS) I attended many conflict mitigation and peace-building gatherings with community leaders and members of warring factions. What I observed during these gatherings was a traditional approach to resolving inter-communal violence through the narration of events, sharing of related histories and the cultural practice of paying “blood money” in the form of cattle.

BUILDING BRIDGES AND GAINING TRUST

Building trust as an outsider working in a community is essential for meaningful engagement, effective collaboration, and ethical research or development work. Trust is not given freely it must be earned through consistent actions, respect, and accountability. People are naturally skeptical about outsiders, especially if they feel there is a hidden agenda. It is therefore important to communicate clearly what your intentions are in order to gain trust and respect from community members including its leaders.

The literature suggests that a “lack of trust and perceived lack of respect among researchers and community partners is one of the most significant challenges in conducting community based research” (Israel et al., 1998, as cited in Kerstetter, 2012, p. 113). Building on this, it can be suggested that transparency helps reduce fear and suspicion, allowing for the establishment of a strong foundation based on trust. For instance, when you first make contact as an outsider with a community it is important to explain who you are, why you are there and what you hope to achieve. This allows the community to have a clear understanding of your intentions. It is important to be honest about what you can and cannot provide.

For example when I worked as a Protection of Civilians Officer with UNMISS I often arrived in a community that had been internally displaced (IDPs) due to conflict or a natural disaster. People were in need of many basic things such as food and non-food items. My

approach was to always explain to the IDPs that as a Protection of Civilians (PoC) Officer with UNMISS I was not in a position to provide their material needs but that I was able to pass on the information regarding their request for support to the appropriate UN agency or non-government organisation (NGO). I also explained that as a PoC Officer my role was to listen, report and advocate on behalf of communities experiencing or at risk of protection violations such as the killing of civilians and sexual gender based violence.

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INSIDERS VERSUS OUTSIDERS

An insider is someone who is already a member of the community and as such has shared lived experiences, cultural knowledge, linguistic understanding and social identity with the participants or recipients. This provides the insider a deep contextual knowledge including subtle nuances due to their connection with their community. Being a member of the community means that trust is a given and community members may be more open and willing to share insights allowing the insider easy access to conduct research or assessment of community needs rather than remaining neutral. However, challenges exist for an insider working as a researcher or aid worker as they must navigate dual roles. Furthermore community members may have high expectations of an insider such as advocating for the needs of their members. There is also the argument that an insider bears a conflict of interest and the potential for bias and assumptions due to their lack of objectivity.

McNess argues that this concept is a previous held idea that insiders are “culturally embedded and subjective” and at the opposing side, an outsider as “detached and objective” (McNess, 2013). An insider’s familiarity can lead to taking knowledge for granted or overlooking alternative perspectives. An outsider on the other hand may recognise issues that insiders overlook due to familiarity and can compare findings with broader patterns from other communities and therefore experience fewer conflicts of interest. (Kerstetter, 2012). However, these categories are not always rigid as researchers may occupy both roles simultaneously.

In my own experience as an outsider who lived and worked in a community for several years, my ‘outsiderness’ began to blur and morph into being considered more as an ‘insider’. This was due to the fact that I gained trust and respect from community leaders and members. My intentions were clear that I was there to support them not just as a United Nations staff member but as a fellow human-being genuinely interested to work with the community on their road to peace-building and development.

LIVED EXPERIENCES

Another way to develop an in-depth understanding of a population is to engage in community-centred participatory work. As described by Altman et al. (2020), this approach allows those with lived experiences to be actively involved in identifying challenges, shaping solutions, and leading decision-making. Diverse voices, especially marginalised groups (e.g., women, youth, Indigenous populations, the elderly and disabled), are included in discussions and decision-making. The role of the outsider is to facilitate the discussion and not to impose external solutions. Community-centred participatory work shifts power dynamics, ensuring that communities are not just passive beneficiaries but active agents of change.

An example of community-centred participatory was when I facilitated a workshop for a group of women leaders from remote communities that had experienced ongoing inter-communal conflict. The workshop was designed to engage the women in an open discussion on

how to develop an early warning system that would provide them with a culturally specific and female centred response. The women drove the discussion and designed an early-warning system that they were going to implement in their community when they returned home to their village.

DEEP LISTENING

An important part of gaining respect from a community is being a good communicator. How to communicate well doesn’t necessarily refer only to the practice of talking or by visually demonstrating a message. It also includes the ability to listen.

For instance, First Nations’ people in Australia practice “deep listening” (Burgess et al., 2023). This refers to the practice of taking the time to *really* hear what is being said to develop an in-depth understanding and appreciation of the issues or concerns impacting an individual or community. This is also reflected in a common Native American sentiment regarding “white man talking too much and not listening” and is often expressed through proverbs like “Listen to the silence, it speaks,” or “Listen to the wind, it talks,” emphasising the importance of deep listening and respecting the power of silence, which many cultures view as a crucial aspect of understanding and wisdom, as opposed to constantly filling silence with words. Another way to interpret deep listening is by approaching a community with a mindset of learning rather than leading.

DO NO HARM

One of the important ways to build bridges with a community is by spending time making connection with community leaders, members and grass-roots organisations. In humanitarian aid work there exists a basic mantra referred to as ‘do no harm’. Part of this basic rule is the importance of confidentiality of recipients who may have experienced serious human rights violation such as sexual gender-based violence (SGBV).

A breach of confidentiality can have a serious impact on the survivor of SGBV as a result of cultural or social stigma including the safety of the survivor. Ultimately a

breach of confidentiality will damage the trust between the humanitarian worker, the survivor and the broader community. The significance of trust lies in its ability to foster qualities like empathy, care, openness, and approachability—qualities that flourish when confidentiality is ensured and a safe working relationship is built (Ebrahimi, 2024). Although Ebrahimi is referring to the coach-client relationship, the same principles can also apply to the relationships between aid workers and those they support, as well as between researchers and their participants.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While those who enter a community as an outsiders often bring new resources and methods to resolve an issue, members of a community are able to contribute their local knowledge within a contextual nuance. By recognising local voices an outsider fosters respect and strengthens relationships between communities and themselves. It also empowers locals by validating their expertise and agency. By engaging on a meaningful level with a local community allows outsiders to hear local voices that provide first-hand insights and lived experiences that external perspectives might lack.

This enables outsiders to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural norms, unique social dynamics and historical fabric of a community. Outsiders who are able to build meaningful connections with communities can pave the way for a more inclusive discourse that ensures alignment with community values. The end result is that both outsiders and local communities enrich each other by bridging gaps between global and local perspectives. This also serves to create strong and meaningful bridges between the community and outsiders, including a positive outcome for all involved.

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