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# World views in peace building: a post-conflict reconstruction challenge in Cambodia

*Mneesha Gellman*

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*This article explores post-conflict reconstruction in Cambodia through an analysis of both the dangers of liberal peace building and the positive role that training in capacity building plays in war-torn societies. The central question addressed is how insider–outsider dynamics influence Cambodia’s post-conflict reconstruction projects; and what assumptions do international workers and Cambodian NGO staff make about ‘the good life’ that will be constructed? The article offers an overview of Cambodia’s history and cultural context to situate its analysis of liberal peace building and foreign donors, as well as the behavioural characteristics of international peace builders operating within Cambodia. It assesses the potency of elite capture of insider–outsider partnership, specific NGO management practices, and the role of gender to better illuminate the challenges for post-conflict reconstruction. The article concludes with recommendations for improving future partnerships between insiders and outsiders in Cambodian peace-building projects.*

## ***Visions du monde dans la construction de la paix: un défi pour la reconstruction post-conflit au Cambodge***

*Cet article traite de la reconstruction post-conflit au Cambodge à travers une analyse des dangers de la construction de la paix selon des principes libéraux d’une part et, d’autre part, du rôle positif que la formation en renforcement des capacités joue dans les sociétés déchirées par la guerre. La question centrale traitée ici est : comment la dynamique entre les entités internes et externes influence-t-elle les projets post-reconstruction cambodgiens et quelles suppositions les travailleurs internationaux et le personnel d’ONG cambodgiennes font-ils sur ‘la bonne vie’ qui sera construite? Cet article comporte une vue d’ensemble du contexte historique et culturel du Cambodge afin de situer mon analyse de la construction de la paix libérale et des bailleurs de fonds étrangers, ainsi que des caractéristiques comportementales des entités internationales qui construisent la paix au sein même du Cambodge. J’évalue la puissance de l’accaparement par les élites des partenariats internes-externes, les pratiques de gestion propres aux ONG et le rôle du genre afin de mieux mettre en relief les défis de la reconstruction post-conflit. L’article se conclut par des recommandations en vue de l’amélioration des partenariats futurs entre les entités internes et externes dans les projets cambodgiens de construction de la paix.*

**Visões de mundo na construção da paz: desafio da reconstrução no pós-conflito no Camboja**

*Este artigo explora a reconstrução no pós-conflito do Camboja através de uma análise dos perigos da construção da paz liberal e o papel positivo que o treinamento em capacitação desempenha nas sociedades arrasadas pela guerra. A questão central abordada é como as dinâmicas internas–externas influenciam os projetos de reconstrução no pós-conflito do Camboja; e quais pressupostos os trabalhadores internacionais e funcionários de ONG cambodjanas adotam sobre ‘a boa vida’ que será construída? O artigo oferece minha visão geral sobre o contexto histórico e cultural do Camboja para situar a análise de construção da paz liberal e doadores estrangeiros, assim como características comportamentais de implementadores internacionais da paz que estão atuando dentro do Camboja. Eu avalio a capacidade de obtenção de parceria interna-externa da elite, práticas de gestão de ONGs específicas e o papel da questão de gênero para melhor iluminar os desafios para a reconstrução no pós-conflito. O artigo conclui com recomendações para se melhorar as parcerias futuras entre agentes internos e externos nos projetos de construção da paz do Camboja.*

**Perspectivas sobre la construcción de la paz: un desafío en la etapa de posconflicto en Camboya**

*Este ensayo examina la reconstrucción durante la etapa de posconflicto en Camboya analizando los riesgos de la construcción de la paz y la importancia del fortalecimiento de capacidades en sociedades devastadas por la guerra. La interrogante es ¿cómo influye la dinámica interior-exterior en los proyectos de reconstrucción durante el posconflicto en Camboya y cómo suponen los funcionarios internacionales y el personal de las ONG camboyanas que debe ser ‘la buena vida’ a construir? Este ensayo revisa el contexto histórico y cultural de Camboya como marco de referencia para analizar la construcción de la paz en el país. La autora evalúa cómo las élites pueden cooptar las alianzas nacionales e internacionales, ciertas prácticas administrativas de las ONG y el enfoque de género, mostrando posibles retos para así ejemplificar los desafíos de la reconstrucción durante el posconflicto. El ensayo concluye con recomendaciones para mejorar futuras alianzas entre organizaciones nacionales y extranjeras en los proyectos de construcción de paz en Camboya.*

KEY WORDS: Aid; Conflict and reconstruction; Gender and diversity; East Asia

## Introduction

In the aftermath of civil war, countries often experience political instability, economic marginalisation, and lingering violence long after the official cessation of hostilities. International intervention has sometimes brought as many problems as solutions, yet post-war reconstruction missions persist. The role of foreign staff in sustainable development work can have both positive and negative impacts on the lives of local citizens, for reasons ranging from clashing world views or ways of knowing (i.e. epistemologies) in the office to dual economies on the street.

This article focuses on the paradox that peace-building projects can positively promote community building, communication, and development projects, and yet simultaneously enforce neo-liberal conceptions of ‘the good life’. The specific notion of achievement and prosperity that forms liberalism’s ‘good life’ is distilled from the final stage of high mass consumption in modernisation theory (Rostow 1960). With reference to Cambodia, I contend that such a definition can place the pursuit of democratisation and development out of line with local understandings of success. Cambodian conceptions of ‘the good life’ have not been systematically

documented, and peace builders should recognise that this absence limits the potential for truly sustainable reconstruction to be achieved through insider–outsider partnerships. These insights emerged during qualitative interviews with Cambodian NGO workers in a society in which the ability to make a living and meet one’s needs, and opportunities to help other people, are mentioned as central to living a ‘good life’ (Nay 2007). This article suggests that the scope of these aspirations, and the ways in which they are pursued in Cambodian culture, may not accord with liberal notions of development.

The article first defines the limits of my enquiry, and then addresses the complexity of post-conflict reconstruction in the case of Cambodia. A brief historical background and analysis of neo-liberal peace building and insider–outsider partnerships in NGOs allow me to investigate people’s cultural assumptions and their implications for conflict-resolution processes. My experience as a Conflict Resolution Trainer at the Khmer Institute of Democracy (KID), a Cambodian NGO, from December 2006 to December 2007 is used as a case study, particularly the use of conflict-resolution training as a local empowerment tool. Gender inequality and other cultural norms in Cambodia are identified as needing special consideration. I conclude with reflections on some of the insights that I gained from my work in Cambodia, and suggestions for improving the role of outsiders in reconstruction work.

## The limits of enquiry

Post-conflict countries beginning to rebuild their physical, economic, and social infrastructure are especially vulnerable to donor agendas, and at the same time are most in need of the transformative and visionary power of their citizens. The Western<sup>1</sup> agenda of order and security promoted through international *Realpolitik* suspends indigenously<sup>2</sup> designed reconstruction in favour of prescribed versions of reality. Such agendas may end up reconstructing the *status quo*.

The hidden transcript that I examine is the question: what underlying assumptions about structure and agency do Western peace builders carry with them, particularly when their programmes are connected to specific donor objectives? The potential for peace builders unwittingly to act as neo-liberal agents is only now being documented (see Richmond 2003, 2007; Duffield 2001). I am particularly interested in furthering this line of enquiry because peace builders operate on large scales and have the potential to make long-lasting impacts. Deep questioning of motives and unconscious beliefs about the kind of world that peace builders are trying to construct is thus an ethical imperative.

This analysis must avoid romanticising the sometimes violent traditional cultures under threat of being supplanted. There is a divide between ordinary citizens in Cambodia, for example, and the Cambodian elite. It is not only foreign actors who delete customs in pursuit of Rostow’s stages of modernisation (1960), but wealthy insiders as well. As Marglin puts it, the ‘adoption of Western values by Westernized indigenous elites stacks the cards against tradition. . .the refusal to acknowledge the cultural source of the bias in favour of modernization makes it even more difficult to defend tradition’ (1990: 10). The cultural frameworks competing within post-conflict reconstruction processes partly determine the impact of both outside peace builders and inside elites on indigenous socio-political existence.

This article asks how insider–outsider dynamics influence Cambodia’s post-conflict reconstruction projects, and what are the various assumptions made by international workers and Cambodian NGO staff about ‘the good life’ that is to be constructed? Second, it asks whether internationally funded peace building inherently transgresses the emancipatory values of locally guided development? These questions are addressed through a review of relevant literature and the author’s fieldwork in Cambodia.

## The complexity of Cambodia

Cambodia is at the forefront of liberal peace building because of its history of civil war and destruction of its infrastructure, and the international agendas affecting the country's reconstruction. I use this case study to provide the historical context for an analysis of the ways in which an external conceptualisation of democracy has turned Cambodia into a crucible of insider–outsider conflict. More narrowly, I analyse liberal peace building and the rhetoric of NGO partnerships in the reconstruction process, to see how this plays out in practice.

### *Historical background*

Cambodia gained its independence from France in 1953 after more than a century as a colonial satellite. Cambodians experienced post-colonial poverty, searching for stability and governance in a relatively volatile region. In the 1960s, the USA, as part of its strategy to contain the 'communist threat' of northern Vietnam, orchestrated a power grab by its democratic puppet General Lon Nol in order to suppress a communist-sympathiser government that was gaining strength just across the border. Lon Nol lasted in power from 1970 to 1975, when the Marxist-Leninist<sup>3</sup> Khmer Rouge army overthrew the government and consolidated power.

To start on their independent path to modernity, the Khmer Rouge re-set the Cambodian clock to Year Zero and embarked upon a highly idealistic programme of re-organising the entire country into self-sufficient agricultural communes. The wholesale execution of Buddhist monks, civil servants, and the urban educated class under the Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979 was intended to cleanse society of bourgeois elements and religion. Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge soldiers systematically destroyed temples and other cultural sites that connected ancient Khmer culture to the present. Peasants, merchants, children, and many former Khmer Rouge comrades suspected of harbouring elitist tendencies were murdered under the leadership of Brother Number One, Pol Pot. Approximately two million Cambodians died, either executed or succumbing to war-related starvation and disease.

The so-called 'liberation' in 1979 by communist Vietnam and its decade-long occupation of 'the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea' prolonged severe civil strife and allowed for continued existence of Khmer Rouge guerrilla factions. Even today, social reality is for many Cambodians still coloured by the civil war, despite its official cessation in 1991 with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. Until the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was put in place, from 1991 to 1993, there was little democratic infrastructure for Cambodian citizens to look towards in their hopes for restitution, reconciliation, and justice.

Indeed, in 2008, democratic mechanisms were still very much being developed. Cambodia is governed by a constitutional monarchy and experiences high levels of corruption and questionable rule of law. While Cambodian constitutional structures are slowly replacing those of UNTAC, many laws and amendments governing land reform, human trafficking, and taxation are sitting in various ministerial offices, incomplete and unratified.

### Peace builders or (neo-)liberal agents?

In order to assess the impact of insider–outsider relations in post-conflict reconstruction, I turn to the framework of the intervention itself. It has been argued that peace-building programmes, funded by international donors, can reinforce the neo-liberal economic agenda (Duffield 2001), and that 'well-meaning peacebuilders often unwittingly prolong or worsen the conflict, serve the ends of those intent on "pacification" in the interest of the powerful, distort local economies and encumber rather than empower local initiatives' (Ramsbotham *et al.* 2005: 224). In fact,

without a genuine focus on supporting an empowered local population engaged in mutual creativity with international peace-building staff, post-intervention societies may end up grappling with more hidden, structural modes of conflict.

Paris makes the case that ‘peacebuilding is in effect an enormous experiment in social engineering. . .that involves transplanting western models of social, political and economic organization into war-shattered states’ (cited in Ramsbotham *et al.* 2005: 209). In the case of Cambodia, externally promoted social engineering has not yet replaced organic peace-building initiatives altogether, but there is significant foreign investment and expertise dominating the country’s development discourse. Most NGOs that I visited had at least one expatriate staff member, often in management positions, and the roll call of donors on banners hung up at NGO training sessions and conferences represents the big players in the international aid community. In other words, foreigners and their ideas about how things should be done are embedded in Cambodia’s reconstruction process.

The aspiration on the ground among some international NGOs is ‘democratisation by any means necessary’. But if, as I assume here, the process of peace building is as valuable as the outcome, then the interveners’ ability to reflect on their own interests in reconstruction work becomes critical. Arguably, one reason why such self-awareness is lacking even among well-intentioned peace builders is that they themselves lack the capacity to carry out their roles in delicate ways. Also, because NGO budgets are attached to implementation timelines, peace builders are constrained to deliver results that may make sense in a ‘logical framework’, but not in a post-conflict country that is lacking much basic infrastructure.

Furthermore, outsiders who enter post-conflict regions with explicit visions of what the outcome of such an intervention should look like are in serious danger of imposing their own conceptions of reality and ‘the good life’ on local people who may hold divergent or opposing views. Democratic, capitalist states are what donors seek to create, but not necessarily what citizens in post-conflict settings most desire. Yet donor-sponsored peace builders present compelling options of stability and participation to people who have experienced war and are searching for a way out of its aftermath.

In some ways, my own project on non-violent communication did exactly this. Cambodians are enthusiastic about learning new ways to manage conflict non-violently, but the democratic assumption that both parties are equally deserving of being heard negates the Cambodian practice of ranking people according to their status. Women and younger people are not generally perceived as having a right equal to that of older men to participate in communication processes, and thus the communication tools that I brought, my own ways of doing and knowing, challenged these Cambodian ones. When a country is in need of so much post-war assistance, there is an argument that it should be delivered regardless of local norms. Peace builders are then the translators of donor intentions as we walk the narrow line between reconstruction and hegemony.

The way in which people construct their own realities on a daily basis holds significant implications for their ability to reconcile and develop new visions for their communities. Without reflection on identity and structural relationships, reconstruction work can take on an imperialist overtone reminiscent of colonial management. Thus, indigenous ways of knowing, or epistemologies, must be examined and accounted for in post-conflict reconstruction. Because significant funding for peace-building projects comes from the West, and Western professionals are often called in to implement conflict-resolution and development projects, the impact of Western epistemologies must also be considered. Although this also takes place at the government level, most Western peace builders working in Cambodia are operating at the NGO level, and the impact of their own cultures will be most strongly felt in that sphere.



## The NGO dilemma

NGOs are instrumental actors both in transforming civil society and implementing donor agendas. In Cambodia, NGOs are the main non-state actors involved in capacity building through training programmes, and thus are the most instrumental in re-creating social and political norms and behaviours in the reconstruction process. There is a mix of foreign and Cambodian-directed NGOs in the country, but most are staffed mainly by Cambodians, with international managers, technical advisers, or interns joining intermittently. A critical view of the relationship between NGOs and their international funding sources helps to contextualise the challenges for Cambodian NGOs in the post-conflict environment.

Since UNTAC left in 1993, international funds and expertise have been pouring into the country, mainly through organisations based in Phnom Penh (see Godfrey *et al.* 2000). Problematically, however, much of the financial aid entering the country frequently drains back out by way of salaries for international consultants. Corrupt Cambodian elites also take a cut, channelling the aid back into their traditional patrimonial power bases. The Royal Government of Cambodia receives a substantial portion of its annual budget from international donors. In fact, external technical assistance brings in more foreign exchange than any Cambodian export (Godfrey *et al.* 2000: 7). This makes the government, in addition to NGOs and Cambodian elites, interested in promoting Western ways of being and doing as benchmarks of success for donors.

Sarah Lister (2000: 228) observes that more successful partnerships between NGOs and outsiders include attributes such as mutual trust and support, advocacy, transparency, and clear goals, performance indicators, and internal conflict-resolution mechanisms. Many NGOs begin their work with these ideals in mind, but their back donors do not always foster this kind of participatory action. An example of this arose in my interviews with participants in one of the conflict-resolution training sessions run by the Khmer Institute for Democracy (KID). Several participants said that although they had been trained in various aspects of democracy and human rights, when they returned to their communities to put their knowledge into practice, they were suspected of party-political activity and were thus silenced.

In some communities, KID staff visited elected officials and political parties several months after the volunteers had been trained, to explain their role and guarantee the non-partisan nature of their work. Such courtesy visits should be worked into the training grant to help to address the nuances of social relationships. Too commonly, however, there is little space for NGO staff to reallocate grant funding to cover new needs as they emerge. There is an insistence that grants must be used as originally intended, without consideration for troubleshooting details missed in the original proposal. For donors, sending out trained 'democracy promoters' appears a relatively simple idea, yet without deeper cultural considerations the volunteers' reputation is damaged, and the impact of the project is limited by the suspicion that enshrouds it.

### *The Khmer Institute of Democracy*

Even when a healthy donor–NGO partnership makes funds available for social programmes that are potentially empowering, NGOs may not internally replicate the values that they seek to promote in civil society. I observed this phenomenon in Cambodia at the well-intentioned KID, whose mission statement of fostering democratic values is contradicted by its recreation of the non-democratic governance of wider Cambodian society in terms of its internal management. The disconnect between mission and behaviour can be traced in part to constraints imposed by donors, but also to the cultural context in which Cambodian NGOs operate (SPM Consultants 2006).



For example, despite the fact that many KID staff members are university-educated English speakers, they are accorded very limited power to craft projects or liaise with foreign donors. The director holds the bulk of the responsibility for all programme decisions, with unquestioned power to allocate funds. To be fair, KID is not exceptional in this management style. Both formal and informal interviews with staff at other locally managed NGOs suggested that this is the culturally accepted norm of NGO governance in Cambodia.

Few other models of NGO management are visible in the country (Godfrey *et al.* 2000), but the lack of insider–insider partnership will by definition affect the space for transforming such partnerships. Rectifying this scenario requires long-term donor investment to foster more empowering work environments, within the communities and within the NGOs that provide training. This implicitly entails an aspect of cultural transformation, as the NGO reflects and evolves, and it therefore tends to be unpopular among donors, international peace builders, and local staff alike.

## The impact of outsiders

Even the most self-reflective foreign peace builders may be unable to operate outside their own understandings of reality, and therefore their very presence risks imposing their definitions and perceptions on the ‘other’. Although it is a complex matter to work outside one’s own cultural boundaries, outsiders who exemplify some of the qualities valued by the local population can mitigate the dangers at the interpersonal level. Cambodian society values discreet, modest, and respectful social interaction. In my own experience, outsiders who observe these values in their behaviour will get further than those who force Western-style communication on to their Cambodian partners.

Ideally, outsiders who seek to be involved in reconstruction efforts should be grounded in themselves, sensitive, flexible, and willing to subordinate their personal objectives to those of their local counterparts. In practice, this means that outsiders should be aware of the structures that they represent, and the potential clash with local social and political structures. More importantly, outsiders need to demonstrate their commitment to addressing any such clashes. This might take the shape of having a conversation with local colleagues about power and privilege before establishing the details of anyone’s duties. Or it may include outsiders deliberately taking on tasks that would usually be ascribed to lower-ranking insiders, such as taking dictation or typing up reports. While such actions will address only interpersonal dynamics and not the wider structural inequalities, they can be helpful in day-to-day peace building within an NGO office.

In interviews with several civil-society members in Cambodia, I enquired about their experiences of insider–outsider relationships. I was repeatedly told that when the aim of the partnership was to undertake collaborative research or co-creative project implementation, both sides stood to gain new skills from the exchange. Resentment came when the power dynamic was lopsided and certain skills were prized over others (Heang 2007; Kim 2007; Strickler 2007). For example, when outside researchers gather information from villagers, they sometimes generate data from surveys or focus groups, drawing on their own elite intellectual frameworks. However, if they engage local community leaders or insider NGO workers as equally valid designers of data-collection processes, the parties can work together in ways that are mutually beneficial (Kim 2007). This requires outsiders trusting that insiders have something to offer them, rather than assuming that it must be the other way around. When no such trust is demonstrated, insiders report feeling used: too often they are asked to do administrative tasks such as taking minutes that are beneath their level of education and training (Heang 2007).

Westerners them(our)selves have specific epistemologies socialised into them throughout their lives, as do the people in the communities where outsiders intervene. Contrasting notions of ‘the good life’ may be hard to conceal when the ‘lifestyles of even the “poorest” of international development workers, those who work for local NGOs, still typify levels of affluence Cambodians believe prevail outside of Cambodia’ (Tarr 1996: 107). After all, approximately 80 per cent of Cambodians live in rural subsistence situations, a lifestyle rarely experienced at length by outsiders.

Outsiders have the potential to be allies in Cambodia and to work alongside insiders in ways that are mutually empowering. To date, however, the complicated relationship between individual abilities and structural change has been deeply compromised by financial arrangements that perpetuate Western discourses. This situation all too easily makes well-intended reconstruction projects an exercise in neo-liberal peace building, thus compromising genuine insider–outsider partnerships.

## The influence of assumptions in reconstruction

This section examines some concepts that serve as conduits for the intellectual and emotional baggage that insiders and outsiders bring to their cross-cultural working relationships. Specifically, I consider differences in *ontologies*, which are assumptions that we make about the nature of social reality, and *epistemologies*, or how we know that what we believe exists, as well as definitions of culture and conflict. Far from being homogeneous, expatriates, advisers, and volunteers working in Cambodia, and the local staff with whom they interact, have diverse personalities and backgrounds. All of these people hold conceptions of processes such as democratisation and reconstruction that are derived from their own unique experiences. To understand the impact of conceptions about being and doing, it is useful to analyse the power of culture and the perceptions of conflicts that are formed through its lens.

The conceptual frameworks of ontology and epistemology provide insights into how people produce, recognise, categorise, and validate personal knowledge, as well as how they shape social interaction. In plain terms, different cultures have distinct systems for producing knowledge. Thought processes influence how time is understood, how issues are prioritised, and how decisions are made. Disregarding such differences can be problematic and is regrettably commonplace among foreign peace builders and donors.

When Western epistemologies are transposed into post-conflict settings that do not share the same cultural, religious, and structural characteristics, they can contribute to the disintegration of indigenous culture already affected by civil war. Such impositions are not only routine: they can even be a deliberate act on the part of some international donors to re-assert their own cultural hegemony through post-conflict reconstruction funding (Duffield 2001: 8). Even in less dramatic cases when peace-builders intend to contribute to sustainable (as opposed to neo-liberal) development, undercurrents of culturally constructed ontologies and epistemologies influence how and why decisions are made. These influences introduce conflict into insider–outsider relationships in peace-building work and are mirrored in the identity crises of reconstruction projects in Cambodia.

### *The impact of culture*

Culture manufactures meaning, norms, and beliefs, as well as personal epistemologies and socially accepted ontologies. I would suggest that culture plays a more significant role in determining the success of insider–outsider relations in post-conflict reconstruction than is typically understood. If this is so, neglecting to address cultural issues in peace building can generate

tension between insiders and outsiders, as they apply different conceptions of reality within joint projects.

By reflecting on, instead of imposing, the boundaries of appropriate behaviour and knowledge in cross-cultural working environments, insiders and outsiders can recognise their own distinct lenses and begin to expand them. Both groups can then deliberately choose which assumptions to carry with them into their programme choices, goals, and cross-cultural interactions. Of course, culture is not uniform but rather a pulsing, viscous, and changing set of norms, beliefs, rituals, and values that people collectively hold to be true. Nor are people allowed only one cultural identity in a globalised world. Rather, cultural communities are now spread out and modified by other encountered cultures, making stereotypes much harder to apply.

An example of these multi-cultural actors are Cambodian urban elites, many of whom went abroad during the civil war, while others found ways to survive within the country during that period. In the reconstruction process, Cambodian elites are well placed to liaise with international donors and NGO staff, and they bring into the discourse their own notions of what Cambodia should be. From my own personal interactions, I observed the complexity of the elite Cambodian identity and the many worlds in which they walk. Traditional, Khmer-speaking, family-oriented Buddhists in some ways, these elites also speak English (and the older ones speak French), and many admire Western models of economic growth, aspiring to bring private enterprise and liberalism to Cambodia. The skills and resources of this minority put them out of touch with the average Cambodian. Thus, the input that they provide to outsiders who seek their counsel tends to reflect elite aspirations, rather than those of ordinary Cambodians.

Too commonly, the involvement of any 'locals' contributing 'insider' perspectives to peace-building projects lends an air of credibility to work that is otherwise questionably culturally situated. The pressure of donor timelines, in addition to this lack of attention to variegated Cambodian cultures, limits the role of non-English-speaking, rural Cambodians in outsider-driven projects. Elites who can be contacted on their cell-phones, and who can attend strategy meetings without a translator, are the preferred insiders. The danger of 'elite capture' of reconstruction processes, then, is that the needs and perspectives of ordinary Cambodians are subsumed by the more Western-friendly agendas of the local elite. Without understanding the impact of cultural globalisation, and the resulting diversity of what constitutes 'being Cambodian', participatory models of peace building risk conflating elite desires with those of the wider population. 'Cultural multilingualism' requires a delicacy and patience available in process-oriented rather than product-focused work. This is not yet the norm in Cambodia.

### *The complexity of conflict*

Without cultural multilingualism, there is ample scope for conflicts to form in cross-cultural work. Conflicts between external reconstruction agendas and local aspirations in Cambodia are on-going, whether visible or beneath the surface. Conflict can generally be taken to mean anything that upsets the balance of a relationship, and international donors often perceive conflict in recipient countries as a kind of 'social regression' (Duffield 2001: 6). It is in the interest of both insiders and outsiders to minimise social regression, while reinforcing the perception that conflict can also be positive.

Cambodian Secretary of State H.E. Prum Sokha asserts that 'social conflict can be viewed as a precondition or catalyst for human progress and development' (Sokha 2005: 22). As this is also the perspective taken by many foreign conflict-resolution practitioners, Sokha's interpretation (and his elite status) opens the door for collaboration with these outsiders. Yet traditionally in Cambodian culture, and in many other Asian societies, disrupting social

harmony is seen as a transgression. Face must be maintained at all costs, and strict social rules, which include the ostracisation of transgressors, ensure this norm (Hughes and Kim 2004: ix). Conflict *can* have both positive and negative potential, but the same patience required in cultural multilingualism needs to be applied in working with this tension. For example, what looks like a fight to one person may look like heartfelt communication to another, and what one party sees as losing face might appear to someone else as acknowledgement of the problem.

A final point on the influence of insider and outsider relationships with conflict rests in the divergent notions of public and private space. In the West, conflict may float interchangeably between public and private spheres, but Cambodian society observes a greater differentiation. Specifically, a grievance refers to a conflict whether or not it is public, while a dispute is one stage of a publicised grievance (Avruch 2003: 359). The tendency of Cambodians not to display their grievances means that more attention must be paid to addressing trauma and lack of trust in public expression, emotions that can be quite inaccessible to the outsider. Grievances do exist in Cambodia, even if the disputes are handled discreetly.

Dealing with submerged grievances, building trust, or maintaining face while navigating cross-cultural conversations on controversial topics are all part of the job for international and local NGO staff. The discrepancies between Cambodian and outside perspectives regarding the role of conflict and when it should be made visible can influence the tone and tempo of peace-building projects. Gender inequality poses an extra layer of challenge to attempts to address culturally entrenched patterns of conflict.

### *Gender discrimination furthers inequality*

Traditionally, Cambodians with limited resources educate only male children. Therefore, there are generally lower levels of education and literacy among women and girls, with 63 girls for every 100 boys enrolled in lower secondary school, and fewer than 50 girls for every 100 boys in upper secondary and tertiary education (World Bank 2004: 8). This disparity limits female employment opportunities and makes women more vulnerable to the authority of male relatives – and also to international peace-building plans. If women are generally outside decision-making process in their own homes and communities, the chances are that they will remain so in NGOs and state-level peace-building efforts. Although the national government has pledged its support for improving the status of women, Cambodia has one of Asia's lowest Gender Empowerment Measures, meaning that it has the fewest spaces for women in parliament and government (World Bank 2004: 11). Because of entrenched sexism in Cambodian society, it will take female leadership to bridge the gender gap in areas such as health, domestic abuse, education, employment, and democratic participation.

Indigenous Cambodian culture lacks a language to address this gender divide, and NGOs such as KID struggle both to include female participants in their training programmes and also to promote gender equity internally. Although at one point there was a female executive director, which showed that women could aspire to such a position, I observed women routinely becoming secretaries for men who were no better qualified than they. When I attempted to raise this with male colleagues, I was assured that the disparities were owing to other reasons, such as differences in experience. This seemed, however, a response that was more about saving face and deflecting my (Western-style) attempt to address the issue head-on.

In general, women have less access to the resources coming into Cambodia through peace-building projects, due to entrenched male dominance. While gender mainstreaming in reconstruction projects alleviates this problem to a degree, changing fundamental cultural assumptions concerning gender brings peace builders into confrontation with Cambodian ways of knowing and being. At what point do reconstruction handbooks allow us to pass

judgement and say that another's way of engaging with the world is wrong? This question haunted me throughout my work in Cambodia. I tried to find ways to participate in dialogue with Cambodians that made space for questioning assumptions without promoting my own as correct, but the point remains that the role of gender in reconstruction work remains a source of conflict that has to be handled delicately.

## **The role of conflict resolution in transforming civil society**

While this article is better poised to offer critique than solutions, I do want to present a potential avenue for action. Conflict-resolution trainings by NGOs have become a popular method of capacity building for Commune Councillors, the elected officials charged with governing daily life at the local level. Such trainings have been warmly received as a way to offer free skills-upgrading to officials who carry large responsibilities for conflict management in their villages. In practice, this is a way to directly improve the quality of democracy experienced by people at the commune level, although in theory such activities are more complicated. After all, decisions about what methods of dispute resolution are most appropriate for the Councillors, and what kinds of pedagogy are used in their training, are of utmost importance.

International relations (IR) has provided much of the framework thus far for post-conflict reconstruction, but it does not alone bear the burden for flawed epistemology and ontology. For years, conflict resolvers from various disciplines have tried to 'manage' conflict in positivist social-science models. Erroneously, ideas such as 'separating the people from the problem' (Fisher and Ury 1981) have promoted 'culture-free' conflict-resolution procedures (Väyrynen 2001: 2). Such easy solutions have mass appeal but ignore the cultural lens through which we all perceive and create our realities. This is a dangerous predicament, as lack of attention to the importance of culture in processes such as conflict resolution can in turn normalise the minimisation of cultural considerations in more large-scale endeavours such as democratisation.

During my work in Cambodia I tried to approach conflict as a transformative process, but because of limited time, resources, and capacity for international and local staff alike, I fear that I fell prey to the same limiting cycle that I am critiquing in this article. My needs assessment was abbreviated and done through informal translation, and because of language barriers I was not even able to collaborate with Cambodian NGO colleagues who had done conflict-resolution trainings before my arrival. Rather than truly shifting embedded patterns of violence in the communities, I felt that the conflict-resolution training that I designed would be used to instruct people how to invoke Western dialogue techniques to address conflict in a more direct way. Despite my attempts to engage meaningfully with my NGO colleagues, I was viewed as a conduit of external peace-building information that could help the organisation to secure funds from donors seeking to support liberal, Western agendas.

Perhaps over time the processes that I shared, such as reflective listening and using 'I' statements, could encourage insiders to speak up for themselves more assertively; and this, in conjunction with other human-rights programming, would confront structural violence and diminish it in their communities. However, such broad conjecture is dangerous and walks the same erroneous path as democratic-peace theory. My role as an outsider in Cambodia highlighted the intense and complex challenge facing even well-intentioned peace builders attempting to engage in genuine partnerships. I could not operate outside the structural assumptions that have socialised me, and consequently my very presence brought liberal values into KID, as did the Western training that I was requested by Cambodian management to create.

Conflict transformation entails expansion and growth of all parties – it is not something that one person does to another. As Cambodian and foreign staff learn to collaborate in equitable ways, such transformation can take place.



## Towards locally driven emancipatory development

As long as the hidden transcript (or underlying assumptions) of international aid agendas persists in guiding Cambodia's reconstruction framework, Cambodians are relegated to the role of compliant actors within their own governance structures. Making this hidden transcript public should be the task of outsiders as well as insiders. Publicising such undercurrents will enable Cambodians to enter into dialogue about the effects of the combination of international and domestic structures upon their own agency. Unless scholars and peace builders play a role in articulating the existence of the (sometimes) subtle development hegemony, we risk being accomplices in the process of subverting subaltern voices in peace-building projects.

Outsiders need not always impose their own values, but instead can enter collaborative and rewarding relationships as respectful co-creators with national counterparts. Genuine partnership means that those affected are involved at every step of programme development, from needs assessment, programme design and implementation, to monitoring and evaluation. Flexibility in client-NGO relations, mirrored in NGO-donor agreements, could give insiders licence to modify projects to fit their needs.

This insight demands that outsiders eschew the language of 'helping' that reinforces a power and privilege hierarchy, instead seeing their own realities as bound up in those of others. Unlearning ingrained notions of 'the good life,' and of linear and positivist conceptions of development, will be challenging. Yet through confronting our own ontologies and epistemologies and seeing them for what they are – relative, socialised judgments – scholars and peace-building practitioners can act in solidarity with local actors.

Public and hidden transcripts draw our attention to the framework of assumptions through which outsiders enter other cultures. If outsiders are thinking about their return ticket safely stowed back at the hotel, it complicates their ability to be open to the lived experience of insiders, and even to themselves. Post-conflict reconstruction work is not simply the process of transferring the liberal outline of socio-political existence from one culture to another. It entails bearing witness to the diversity of cultures within a society and collaboratively finding ways to create an infrastructure to support a people's agency. Mutual understanding, or at least mutual respect for life choices and cosmologies of the 'other', is critical in order that outsiders and insiders work together in empowering ways.

Ultimately, the insider has no 'ticket home' and will live with the aftermath of reconstruction projects after the outsider leaves. Perhaps these varying levels of commitment between insiders and outsiders are to be expected, but being aware of and working to reduce the gap between them can create more equitable working relationships across the divide. The goal of sustainable peace building is to form empowering, emancipatory relationships with local citizens, not simply to ease the conscience of the international community.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that it is essential to analyse insider-outsider relationships when scrutinising the challenges posed by post-conflict reconstruction. By looking at contrasting notions of 'the good life' and ways in which outsiders and insiders craft their lives around these notions, I have underlined the importance of addressing ontology and epistemology in peace-building processes, in order to avoid being part of a neo-liberal hegemony. Genuine partnership is a responsible alternative method of engagement, wherein insiders and outsiders recognise each other's diversity and take time to examine the aspirations for 'the good life' that is being promoted. To offer anything less is to operate outside the moment in which a shared experience of reality takes place. By being present within the moment of cross-cultural exchange,

observing gender-related challenges and responses to conflict, insiders and outsiders can begin to name the agendas playing out in their lives.

Insider–outsider dynamics affect the way that post-conflict reconstruction takes place, but there are ways to integrate democratic practices with peace-building projects that honour indigenous knowledge. Such a blending of assumptions remains a formidable challenge in Cambodia, but with commitment to true insider–outsider partnerships, peace builders can co-create their worlds.

## Notes

1. ‘Western’, in the context of this article, refers to cultures derived from Europe, which hold Judeo-Christian moral values and are socially grouped through political rather than kinship affiliations.
2. ‘Indigenous’ refers to those who are included in Cambodia’s 90 per cent ethnic Khmer population (CIA 2007).
3. The Khmer Rouge are also described as Stalinist-Maoist (Chanda 2003: 127).

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