

# Alice Through the Looking Glass

A Response by  
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I have to admit that the contributions to this round of dialogue and debate have not fully assuaged my concerns about disempowerment and commodification in the development industry at large.

A passage from Lewis Carol's *Through the Looking Glass* keeps coming to my mind:

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means what I choose it to mean. Neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The questions is," said Humpty Dumpty, "who is to be master. That is all."

Even some of the passages intended to address the dangers of the lack of community participation in my ears suggest worrying underpinnings of disempowerment through cooptation and paternalism, of which external actors may well be unaware. If one understands cooptation to be a process by which the interests, needs, and agency (i.e. the ability to act) of an individual or group are subordinated to those of another individual or group, then the direction into which some of the initiatives on peace and conflict impact assessment or conflict-sensitivity are moving do raise warning flags. In order to avoid such pitfalls, we need to watch out for a number of "traps":

## Focusing our engagement

We need to be careful that we base our interventions on a broad base of invited engagement. It is detrimental to ignore those who are neither direct project participants nor beneficiaries (but who are nonetheless affected by positive or negative impacts). It is crucial that we put the emphasis *on*

*the communities* rather than on the intervention we are planning (because we have the funds to do so, because we believe that we will do some good, because it is what we are good at doing). Community “engagement” needs to lead, not follow, an intervention. When communities are fit into externally initiated, and, likely, externally controlled, interventions there is a strong smell of instrumentalism.

## Power and control

A rough-and-ready test for instrumentalism in our interventions would include an examination of two features of control:

- (1) **Money** – How are financial resources allocated in the project budget (or, more broadly, the “initiative”)? What proportion goes to the field beyond the capital city? What proportion goes to foreign consultants and to the operating costs of foreign organisations?
- (2) **Decision-making** – Who makes the decisions, small and large? How are they made? Are decisions reflective of the interests and needs of those on-the-ground *as they have articulated them*, or do decisions tend to represent the interests of those outside of immediate conflict zones?

Such tests are as appropriate for initiatives in Kenya and Sri Lanka as for those working with indigenous communities in Canada.

## Knowledge and understanding

I firmly believe that individuals and communities are acutely aware of the myriad ways in which their lives, livelihoods, and deaths are enmeshed within the political webs of violent, militarised conflicts. This is reflected daily in their resourcefulness and courage. At the moment, PCIA is largely used by outsiders as a means of improving their understanding of these inter-connections. Yet, to the extent that communities are put in a position of having to explain the obvious to the outsider, and to the extent that there is no sufficient foundation of trust between insiders and outsiders, communities have a strong incentive not to participate in such exercises based on, first, reasonable doubts about the immediate utility for the community itself, and, second, their very fine understanding of the thin line between *information* and *intelligence* – and the consequent increase in personal insecurity that would likely follow if information shared with “good guys” found its way into the hands of “bad guys”.

## Forgetting peace

There is a rather short-sighted focus on conflict, over peace – not just here, but in most writing on peacebuilding – which I think is a big mistake. It suggests an approach that focuses on the nature of – often only incidents of – violent conflict, but ignores the capacities and opportunities for nurturing peace. Thus, while the scope of the problem may be glimpsed, not much is known about possible solutions. At best, one might acquire a general understanding of what not to do, but much less is learned about what *might be done*. This approach to “peacebuilding” ignores the latter

of two fundamental dimensions: (1) the conflict-focused deconstruction of the structures/processes of violence, and (2) the peace-focused construction of the structures/processes of reconciliation/justice (Bush 1998; 2004).<sup>1</sup> The obvious implication is the need to place at least equal (if not more) emphasis on peace (explicitly defined) as on conflict (non-violent and violent), as well as the linkages between them.

## **It was an example of the best, it was an example of the worst**

In one contribution to this dialogue on “New Trends in PCIA”, the “PCIA” workshops in Sri Lanka are used as an example of how to move forward in the area of capacity-building. In another contribution, the same workshops are used as an example of how *not* to proceed. The reader might find this striking, confusing, amusing, weird, or all of the above. A number of points should be highlighted here: On the rare occasion that initiatives are evaluated, the results are rarely circulated. Internal evaluations (or less formal assessments or reviews) that are externally distributed need be read with a large grain of salt since, more often than not, they are part of a broader public relations/fund raising effort. Not surprisingly, the more interesting and useful reports that critically assess an initiative tend to be swallowed into the black hole of an organisation. This underscores the importance of independent, and widely available, assessments of self-labelled peacebuilding initiatives, as well as development or humanitarian initiatives in conflict zones. For me, this points to the need to develop an independent facility for PCIA – a space where the compartmentalised work at community, project, programme, organisational, and country levels could come together, and build on each other.

## **Where we’ve come from, where we should go**

It is striking to see how theoretically refined the thinking on PCIA has become in some circles in the North. A common vocabulary is evolving – as is evident in the current discussion about terminology, principles, and core concepts. We are seeing the growth of a body of experience as a result of the application of PCIA-related ideas, approaches and tools. There is even an appreciation that institutional politics within and between development organisations may need to be taken more seriously if mainstreaming is to stand a chance of success. I would imagine that this is a trajectory similar to that taken by environmental impact assessment and gender analysis.

It is also exciting to see how such developments have accelerated over the past few years between the “round 1” and “round 2” of the Berghof dialogues/debates. The two organisations that have been most central to sustaining the virtual space for promoting learning from this accumulating body of ideas and experiences are the Berghof Center and International Alert. As a result of their efforts to make PCIA-related material available over the Internet, I have personally met strangers from as far afield as Peru and Taiwan who were current in the electronic exchanges. While not detracting from these contributions, one of the central challenges now is to balance the current North-to-South flow of ideas with South-to-North and South-to-South contributions. This challenge includes getting beyond the mediated footprint of the Internet – in light of the fact that more than 50% of the world’s population has not made a phone call, let alone surfed the net.

I wonder, for example, what an appropriate and useful “PCIA” would look like if it

<sup>1</sup> All references may be found in the original article Bush 2005 at [www.berghof-handbook.net/articles/PCIA\\_addKB.pdf](http://www.berghof-handbook.net/articles/PCIA_addKB.pdf).

grew from the soil of a non-literate (oral-based), agrarian society set in the context of protracted militarised conflict? How might story-telling, song, popular culture, art be woven into experiences of, understandings of, articulations of *peace* (locally-defined) and *conflict* (locally defined) over time? Would the findings (read “assessments”) generated by such initiatives have the same legitimacy, credibility, and clout as those produced by consultant-evaluators who speak the log-frame language of the development industry? Could such “assessments” even be understood by those outside that field reality? The answer is: not likely. However, the answer is not a full “no”. This leaves space for important and creative work in the field. The presence of those with anthropological sensibilities and like-minded allies in the development industry also suggests exciting possibilities for running conduit South-North as well as South-South.

The harsh critique of the development industry in my contribution to this round of debates and elsewhere (Bush 2004) should not lead to the conclusion that attention should be directed exclusively to communities in conflict zones. If the development industry is a part of the problem, it must be a part of the solution. Clearly, there are actors that are moving the PCIA agenda forward with vision, integrity, and effect. The question raised in Adam Barbolet et al.’s contribution to this dialogue – how to “mainstream” peace and conflict issues into projects, programmes, and organisations – is certainly the right question. The answer requires more than simply an add-PCIA-and-stir approach. Ultimately, it requires a fundamental paradigmatic shift. Approaches which are blind to – and passive in the face of – the power imbalances, competing interests, and political interests within the political economy of the development industry are doomed to fail, or worse, to reinforce their corrosive impacts. Since this tectonic shift is unlikely to happen anytime soon, we are left to pursue change incrementally and strategically one project, one programme, one organisation at a time – learning as we move along.