



Insider Understandings of Reconciliation

Hannah Adamson

In an effort to better understand reconciliation, the Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation has been engaging with insider reconcilers – individuals working to foster reconciliation within their own communities – to learn what reconciliation means across contexts and what is needed to facilitate such processes. The term insider-reconcilers has emerged as a subcategory of insider-partials defined by Paul Wehr and John Paul Lederach in 1991 as individuals who have trust with multiple conflict parties and continue to live in the conflict context (Wehr and Lederach, 1991, pp. 85-88). These individuals hold a number of roles within their communities, ranging from religious leaders, to women, to tribal leaders, to youth. While diverse in their roles, all insider reconcilers utilize their trust and connection within communities to bring people together after conflict or violence has occurred.

As part of a broader research study working to understand insider reconciliation through the unique experiences, insights, and challenges of insider reconcilers, this overview captures a few key aspects and meanings of reconciliation shared by insider reconcilers currently working around the globe. Building upon common understandings of reconciliation, these insights are informed by interviews with thirty individuals*, reconciliation scholarship, and leading reconciliation experts.

Truth – Throughout interviews with several practitioners, uncovering truth has been recognized as a needed step in overcoming histories of harm. In many cases, individuals and groups have experienced trauma due to violence – whether that be directly physical or structural injustice. Whether at the individual, community, or national level, recognizing this harm and its subsequent pain is essential for developing an accurate account of the past to facilitate acknowledgement and justice, allow for possible forgiveness, and open space for the creation of a better future. While differing in each context, several participants shared about their efforts in truth and reconciliation commissions, formal apologies from harming parties, and accountability measures to open pathways for moving forward.

Healing – As part of conflict, trauma is something that exists both within individuals and communities as a remnant of harm that allows conflict cycles to continue, even over generations. Similarly to the truth, insider reconcilers expressed the need to address trauma in order to overcome conflict. They also recognized the challenges in pulling inner “woundedness” to the surface to be healed. They shared the need for further trauma-healing training and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in order to help community members reckon with harms of the past, while also addressing their own trauma in a healthy

manner. Insiders emphasized how it is imperative to begin their own healing journeys prior to their involvement in reconciliation processes, as unresolved trauma can even be disruptive to their efforts to overcome it on a broader scale. Furthermore, several insiders emphasized how collective healing often occurs through supporting one another, sharing stories, listening to others and being listened to.

Wellbeing – Relating to healing, insider reconcilers collectively defined wellbeing in terms of being aware of trauma, how it affects the community, recognizing triggers, and minimizing its ongoing impacts on day-to-day life. Social and individual wellbeing are important for initiating and maintaining reconciliation processes, as insiders often stated that healing needs to be facilitated for social repair. Considering this, as the actors often working to facilitate that healing, the wellbeing of insider reconcilers and MHPSS practitioners is critical to not only ensuring the longevity of reconciliation processes, but also preventing further harm through practitioners passing on their own trauma. In this same way, practitioners can also become harmed by listening to accounts of harm in reconciliation processes, and thus need to actively combat compassion fatigue and burnout (Herman, 1992, pp. 102-103). This is a growing area of research — which is being investigated by MHCR’s Nicholas Sherwood — and highlights the importance of supporting those who are supporting others. When asked about wellbeing, participants noted several sources of strength to mitigate these challenges, including community support, longer stays of external intervenors, close friends and family members, and holding onto a generally positive worldview.

Recognizing Shared Humanity – In coming to terms with the past through processes of individual and collective truth-telling and healing, conflict-affected people may be able to shift out of “us vs. them” and other polarizing views, to instead recognize the “other” as an equal. Seeing one another as human is a key step towards conflict transformation as it enables an expanded view of the other – their complexity and struggles – instead of a limited, polarizing view. This is not to say that previous dynamics and harms go away or that all is forgiven, but instead recognizes the complexity that comes with being human and the possibility for change. Insider reconcilers can and do play a key role in facilitating this experience of shared humanity through their convening of conflict-affected individuals to open dialogue for truth-telling and healing. With this basis of humanity, there are increased opportunities for communication, recognition of harms, and visioning of a shared future.

Structural reform – Expanding on truth-telling and formal apologies, taking action to reform the structures that contributed to conflict is imperative to continuing the journey beyond conflict (du Toit & Mendes, 2022, p. 20). In their discussions about overcoming harms of the past, several insider reconcilers discussed the need for changes in government, social, and peacebuilding systems. A significant aspect of this included increased financial support from relevant government and civil society institutions for their work, including logistics support, creating protection mechanisms, offering trainings, and connecting insiders with one another and with the broader peacebuilding community. In this way insider reconcilers are not only advocating for change within their own community and government structures, but within the peacebuilding field itself. Insider reconcilers championing their own initiatives are examples

of how the peacebuilding field can re-envision the relationships between insiders and outsiders to be more collaborative and contextually tailored.

Inclusivity – Encompassing their diversity of community-based roles (e.g. community members, religious and traditional leaders, elders, women, etc.) insider reconciler approaches can often foster inclusivity in reconciliation processes. Unlike strictly Track I approaches that engage with leaders at the government level, insider reconciliation often occurs in informal spaces that are accessible to actors involved in and affected by conflict at *all* levels. Several insider reconcilers spoke to their work with youth, ex-combatants, and women as critical contributions to overcoming conflict within communities. An example of these informal spaces are social healing circles convened by a Nairobi-based NGO to foster dialogue and trauma healing between individuals affected by ethnic and political violence in remote areas of Kenya. As formal efforts continue at the national level in the government, these social healing circles have allowed for individuals to overcome trauma, connect across difference, and ultimately contribute to broader transformation away from cycles of violence in their communities and the country as a whole. It is in these humble circles and spaces that the collective healing described earlier can occur. Similarly, insider reconciliation can foster respect for cultures outside of the dominant liberal peacebuilding framework that is characterized by primarily outside interventions. Returning to the example of the social healing circles, materials for this program have incorporated elements of religion and community traditions to best connect with participants in an approachable manner. In this way, the program is tailored to the specific context and has more capacity than a rigid pre-set framework. By considering insider reconciliation along with grassroots, civil society, national, and international efforts, there is the possibility for reimagining the shape of peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts to champion local culture and agency alongside technical expertise, political change, and resources.

While there are several more components to and understandings of reconciliation, these are some salient examples of what reconciliation means to those engaging in such processes around the world. As the peacebuilding field, and the world, continues to learn about reconciliation, it is critical to understand the insights of insider reconcilers working within their own communities. Continuing to connect with insider reconcilers and contemplate what reconciliation means in each unique situation and how people can begin to envision futures beyond conflict is essential to improving reconciliation processes and offering needed support mechanisms.

*Thanks to the Transformation and Reconciliation Lab (TRL) at the Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation for their work interviewing insider reconcilers and analyzing data which has been instrumental to gathering these understandings. Special recognition to TRL Lab Manager Beltina Gjeloši for her lead in data analysis.

References

du Toit, F., & Mendes, A. (2022). Reconciliation in Practice: Selected Observations about the Assumptions Informing Practices of Reconciliation (No. 1).

<https://www.thinkpeacehub.org/reconciler>

Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books.

Wehr, P., & Lederach, J. P. (1991). Mediating Conflict in Central America. *Journal of Peace Research*, 28(1), 85–98.