

How to use this resource:

This resource is part of a series on working as allies. It is intended as discussion starter for groups or a think piece for individuals interested in this topic. You may wish to use the following questions when discussing / reflecting on this material.

- What resonates with your experience?
- Which points do you not agree with? Why?
- Which points do not make sense to you?
- What is missing?

Other resources in this series are available at:

www.groundwork.org.nz/resources/allies-discussion-starters

Working as allies - challenges and responses

Addressing power

Power imbalances exist in relationships between allies and those whose justice struggles they are supporting. Power issues cannot be overlooked.

- Recognise the complexity of power
 - It is seldom a simple powerful/powerless, coloniser/colonised dynamic. Both indigenous and non-indigenous people can carry/take victim and victimiser roles. Both parties hold different types of power, including moral, ethical, financial and decision-making power. Identify and acknowledge this.
 - Power dynamics change in different circumstances.
- Acknowledge privilege
 - Understand and recognise the benefits of your positioning/colonial inheritance and how that might manifest in your work as an ally.
 - Recognize the difficulty of acting outside of inherited roles. Addressing power and privilege is on-going, lifelong work.
- Be mindful of how power is operating in any given context and take conscious steps to mitigate power imbalances
 - In determining when to speak up and when to shut up – respond if requested by indigenous people to speak. If you have not been asked to, consider why you might want to speak and ask yourself if it is necessary. Give space to indigenous voices.
 - Organisations often address the imbalance of power by getting involved in issues only at the request of indigenous people. They may have explicit discussions about why their involvement has been requested, their organisational values/principles, and what they can offer.
 - Be aware of who is making decisions and how these decisions are being made.

In determining if and when to follow the direction given by indigenous people and when to take a lead, consider:

- the extent to which you should lead or follow depends on the situation and the relationship/s you are in.

- being an ally is clearly not about telling indigenous people what to do; however, taking a passive role does not create healthy relationships.
- to create change, work needs to be done with non-indigenous people. It is non-indigenous peoples' responsibility to undertake this work whilst remaining accountable to indigenous peoples for the outcomes of the work. Ways of maintaining accountability include:
 - requesting regular feedback on your work and responding to this feedback.
 - making your work transparent to those with whom you are in alliance e.g. through distributing information, public meetings, informal and formal discussions.
 - continually asking yourself 'Who are we in relationship with? Who are we accountable to? What are we doing to be accountable?'

While we may be able to walk away when it gets too hard, those with whom we are allies do not have this option—this creates imbalance.

- Sticking with the work gives you credibility—but only if you maintain your commitment.

The ignorance of the white settler population

Ignorance and collective denial of colonial violence, a lack of awareness of white privilege, and racism within the broader white settler population, are key challenges for white allies to address.

- Education is a key response to addressing these issues. In Canada unravelling the myth of settler benevolence is a key aspect of this work.
- A task central to the role of an ally is to speak up against racism whenever possible.
- White people need to turn the mirror on themselves and take responsibility for changing themselves rather than 'fixing the other'.
- It is necessary to move white people beyond a charity model of 'helping poor indigenous people' to seeing the struggle in terms of justice and rights.
- Treaties are generally regarded as being for indigenous peoples rather than being seen as a relationship that benefits non-indigenous peoples. This norm needs to be challenged.

Analysis paralysis

After becoming aware of injustice people can get caught up in feelings of guilt or denial. White people like to be comfortable and 'right' in their actions, and can become immobilized by these feelings and 'not knowing' what to do.

- If you are feeling uncomfortable it probably means that you are 'doing the work'.
- It is important to act and actions can be small; for example, sharing with other white people what you have learned about colonial history. Significant actions such as building alliances with indigenous peoples are best undertaken, initially at least, alongside other people / groups already active in this work, rather than being forged individually.

Working cross culturally

A challenge many people face is trying to determine the level of cultural competence needed to be a useful ally. It is critical to have an appropriate level of cultural knowledge to engage respectfully while not 'appropriating'.

- Knowledge and use of an indigenous language is a central issue.
 - Be aware that your use of the language will be perceived differently by different people in different contexts. Understanding the context and implications of the use of language before using it may help in managing this.

Working cross-culturally is often uncomfortable, and misunderstandings are common. Therefore:

- be prepared to sit with the discomfort and learn from it.
- be prepared to engage with 'unlearning' of assumptions and behaviours.
- be open to feedback and challenge.

Some people of colonial heritage respond to learning about colonial violence by wanting to run away from their own culture and adopt another culture. This is not a useful response.

- Allies have a role in supporting members of their culture to consider their responsibilities and roles they can take up from within their own cultural context.

Building trust

Trust is important to strong relationships; however, given the history and enduring impact of colonisation there can be suspicion and a lack of trust of non-indigenous people who want to work as allies. Some organisations and groups for example, church based organisations, face particular challenges because of their previous active role in colonisation. Therefore it is important to:

- recognise that building trust can be slow and is an on-going process.
- be reliable over time—do what you say you are going to do.
- maintain continuity in relationships. When working in organisational or group contexts endeavour to build group relationships. This can be a challenge as there are often key individuals within organisations who establish and maintain the relationships.
- develop a collective approach as this assists in sustaining relationships.

Respecting different/conflicting expectations

Often we¹ might encounter conflicting expectations from different members or sectors of the group/s we are working with.

- We should not expect unity. We need to be able to deal with working in environments where there are contradictions and complexity.
- Where possible/appropriate learn about the internal issues before getting too involved.
- It is important not to exacerbate internal divisions within groups or communities. It is not the ally's role to reconcile the differences. In some circumstances this may mean not acting on an issue.

¹ The terms 'we' and 'our' are used here to refer to white settler allies.

- Be clear about your own organisational positioning and values, and your role in the alliance.
- Do not be afraid of the conflict - instead try to learn from it.
- People who request your support may not have a mandate from their broader community. In determining whether to engage reflect on your own positioning, values and the implications of supporting a particular person or sector of a community.
- Work at points of convergence; for example, a community might have different views about logging happening in their area; however, they may agree on the need for their informed consent for logging to proceed. In this instance provide support on the issue of informed consent rather than taking sides on whether logging should be carried out.

Juggling the interests of indigenous communities and constituents

For people working within organisations with a predominantly non-indigenous membership it can be a challenge to balance the expectations of your membership and those of the indigenous people with whom you are working. Ensuring the support of membership is important to sustaining the work; however, this can mean that you are not seen as being bold enough by indigenous communities. Therefore:

- be clear about your purpose and accountabilities and try to find a position that both parties can live with.
- recognise that positioning may differ on different issues. Relationships with members and with indigenous people are for the long run so you need to consider the implications of actions and responses over time.

Balancing working with your own people with relationships as an ally

Allies may find it difficult to determine the balance between generating change within their own cultural group and the need to support the initiatives and struggles of indigenous people.

- Your work needs to be informed by those it is intended to support - seek their input on what is needed.
- You need to keep coming back to the needs of the group/s you are working to support and how you are contributing to the bigger picture of change.
- Relationships are maintained and strengthened through working together so it is important to balance a focus on working with your own people with ensuring that you are maintaining relationships with those who you are working to support.

Allies judging each other

As allies our critique of our own culture can often be carried into our relationships with one another and can manifest as judgment and righteousness concerning approaches to the work.

- We need to allow for a diversity of approaches and recognize there are many different ways to do the work. This needs to be accompanied with mechanisms / space for providing constructive critical feedback on each other's practice.
- We need to support and nurture each other as allies. We should be hard on issues and soft on people.

Sustaining a lifetime commitment

There has been a long history of colonisation and dismantling it will take generations; the infinite horizon can be daunting. Long term struggles need long term allies. Therefore it is important to:

- nurture ourselves and others in the work to prevent burn out.
- develop and maintain networks and coalitions of allies.
- create spaces and processes for working through the challenges, for example, talking to others, spiritual practice etc.
- make space for reflection on practice.
- reflect on, and celebrate, positive change/successes.
- remember what you can, and are, contributing and value this contribution.

