



The Essentials of Radical Listening

By Kinari Webb, Noor Trienekens, Pat Plude, Jonathan Jennings, and Padini Nirmal

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Introduction

Welcome! We are so glad that you are interested in learning about our Radical Listening methodology. The fundamental core of this work is a belief that humans everywhere would like to thrive now and would prefer conditions where their family, community, ecosystems, and the planet will thrive far into the future.

The idea forming the basis of planetary health, that the human and natural world are deeply intertwined, is not a new one. In fact, it is rooted in local, ancestral, and Indigenous knowledge about the interconnected and interdependent relationships between people, plants, animals, spirits and places. However, long histories of colonialism, paternalism, and extraction have contributed to devaluing this knowledge.¹ Importantly, local communities who often possess the greatest expertise about their own interconnected environments are paradoxically, listened to the least and afforded little agency in determining their own future. Those who are directly experiencing ecosystem degradation also often have the fewest resources available to use in addressing the challenges they face. We believe that if the human species, plants, animals and all living entities are going to thrive and even survive, resources need to flow to these communities– AND the use of these resources must be under their direction and control.

We have developed a methodology that we call Radical Listening that helps bring to clarity the solutions that a group of people agree upon. This methodology is based on the understanding that those who are closest to a challenge are those who are best equipped to determine what the best solutions are to resolve that problem. This document is about providing a broad overview of the essential skills for leading these kinds of group discussions about solutions.

Our primary experience in this methodology is in working with rainforest communities to protect rainforest and facilitate wealth transfer directly to rainforest community solutions. However, we believe the methodology is applicable to many different contexts. As such this document draws heavily on our experiences at the first site that Health In Harmony supported in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, with our sister organization Alam Sehat Lestari

¹ See Jason Hickel's book: *The Divide: a brief guide to global inequality and its solutions*.



(ASRI), our joint second site in Indonesia at Bukit Baka Bukit Raya (BBBR) National Park and replication sites in the Manombo Special Reserve in Madagascar and the Xingu Basin in the Brazilian Amazon. not as a form of charity, but rather as a reciprocal thank you for the well-being their expertise– once activated– returns to all global citizens. We see this as a living document that will improve over time as further knowledge is gained from other sites through monitoring and evaluation of our programs. We hope the reader of this document will share their own experiences as well and further improve this work.

Who is this document for?

This document is meant as a brief introduction for those who are unfamiliar with and curious about Radical Listening. This may include:

- **Anyone** who has heard about Radical Listening or Health In Harmony and wants to know more
- **Donors** who want to more deeply understand what Health In Harmony does
- **Nonprofits or other organizations** that might want to implement Radical Listening internally or in their projects
- **Individuals** who learned of Radical Listening from the Rainforest Exchange platform and want to take the first step toward hosting Listening sessions on the app

We recommend that you start with reading this document and attending a free webinar. This is the first of three levels of training we offer. If you are interested in hosting Radical Listening sessions on the Rainforest Exchange app, we invite you to complete the next level of training and read the accompanying documents. If you are interested in implementing Radical Listening within your organization, please contact us to learn about our most comprehensive training option that will include the details of how we practice this work in communities. You can reach out to info@radicallistening.org for more information.

What is Radical Listening?

Radical Listening is an alternative to the existing development and conservation



paradigms which are explicitly colonial and either exclude or only partially include local perspectives. In Radical Listening groups of people come to consensus about what the best solutions are for protecting their ecosystem and improving their own lives. It is an inclusive approach to community engagement that makes room for a group to identify both the intersectional drivers of complex problems and the intersectional solutions needed to thwart them. The goal is to create a supportive context for communities to come to agreement about which key system changes would bring about a thriving community and ecosystem for them now and far into the future.

- **Radical Listening is listening to a group:** The group (vs an individual) has the capacity to collectively determine which ideas are good ideas and which ones address the root causes of the systemic problems of that group (henceforth, ‘community’) is experiencing². When consensus is reached in the eyes and ears of the whole it also fosters a shared understanding within the community, avoids the opportunity for individuals to angle for their own benefit, and sets the groundwork for accountability for any entity working with a community to implement those solutions.
- **Radical Listening helps identify key fulcrums of change in a community:** Communities of any given place experience and therefore understand problems in their complexity. Almost by definition, in the absence of full contextual understanding, the best solutions (or the right combination of solutions) usually elude outsiders. Our experience is that these community-designed solutions are always systems changes that recognize the appropriate/integral interconnections between economics, health systems, access to knowledge, and ecosystems.

Note: As an outsider, when Kinari Webb first came to the regions around Gunung Palung National Park which was rapidly being logged, all she could see were problems, any one of which could have been the target of a nonprofit’s work. For example, not enough children were going to school, only about half of households had toilets, and most people used firewood to cook, causing lung

² Higgins, E. T., & Toness, A. (2010). Eight Steps for Facilitators. Online, <http://uupcc.org>. Lykes, M. B., & A. Crosby. (2014). *Feminist Practice of Action and Community Research*. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.) *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. London: Sage.



disease and ecosystem degradation. When asked, 40 communities living in and around the park identified lack of access to healthcare and training in organic farming as the key (fulcrum) elements of the system which– when implemented– would reverse rainforest loss. They were right. It did reverse rainforest loss. It also improved their household health and economic outcomes. Remarkably, when these fulcrum elements were implemented and nothing was done about the other issues like education and water and sanitation, there was still a dramatic change in those other problems, too. After five years, 41% more children finished primary school (maybe because of more money to pay school fees and because fewer children had to stay home to care for sick family members), indoor toilets increased by 22% to 71%, and using wood for cooking declined 40% (possibly because of health education and more resources being available to buy gas stoves with more income and fewer healthcare costs).

- **Radical Listening is based on reciprocity:** We recognize that everyone has something to give to help bring about a healthy, thriving planet and our methodology honors all the actors: not only communities but also those with resources to help bring about community-designed solutions. Motivation is intrinsic (i.e., we all want a better future) not extrinsic (I am doing this for money alone).

How is Radical Listening different from other methodologies?

- **Active Listening:** This is a process of listening attentively to one individual– Radical Listening is about doing this with a group to find collective wisdom and then actually implementing those solutions. Nevertheless there are many similarities in the full attention it takes to listen.
- **Participatory Methods:** Most Participatory Methods focus on soliciting feedback on an existing solution– with Radical Listening the communities design the solutions themselves and refine work as it proceeds. Radical Listening is largely in alignment with many of the features which have been shown over time to be effective.³

³ Let us know if you would like further details on other methodologies.



- **Facilitating:** Facilitating is guiding the conversation and often directing towards specific aims. Radical Listening instead is a process of letting go of the outcomes and trusting the community and the process. Radical Listening is standing witness as people wrestle their way to their truth, not leading them towards an answer.⁴

Note: It can be quite difficult as a listener not to fall into facilitation. But our experience is that when the listener does not do that, people within the group will often step in and that their own facilitation is much more powerful. As an example, in one meeting a participant complained for quite a while about a path through their rice field. Another community member said, "Hey, that's off-topic, we know you have this personal concern but we are trying to figure out what will benefit the whole community." If the listeners had said something like that, it would have eroded the trust of that individual, but when the community themselves guide the conversation, more trust is actually built.

History

In 1993 Kinari Webb spent a year in Indonesian Borneo studying orangutans in Gunung Palung National Park as an undergraduate biology major. She was horrified by the loss of rainforest due to logging by the surrounding communities.

Kinari met many community members who lived near the rainforest. In general, they were farmers and fishermen but they lacked adequate healthcare. What care they had was expensive, far away, and of low quality. She also learned that logging was one of the few ways that communities could get the cash to afford healthcare. This intersection between healthcare access and logging made total sense to Kinari once members of the community explained it, but was not something she ever would have thought of herself. She began to wonder how many other things were obvious after being explained by community members, but were completely opaque to her as an outsider.

⁴ Hickey, S., & Mohan, G. (2005). Relocating participation within a radical politics of development. *Development and change*, 36(2), 237-262, Chambers, R. (2008). PRA, PLA and pluralism. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of action research* (2nd ed., pp. 297–318). London, England, Rahman, A. (2008). Some trends in the praxis of participatory action research. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Action Research* (pp. 49-62). London: Sage., Higgins, E. T., & Toness, A. (2010). Eight Steps for Facilitators. *Online*, <http://uupcc.org> Accessed April 2018.



Kinari decided to train as a physician and return to Indonesia to work with rainforest communities to address these dual crises. After completing her medical degree from Yale University, she trained as a family medicine specialist in California. During her final year in residency in 2004, the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami occurred and Kinari volunteered in Aceh to help. There she was horrified to see how much the myriad aid agencies did not listen to community members but simply implemented what they saw as the best solutions. This meant that vast sums were spent on malaria medication and prevention in an area that had no malaria. In addition, when the communities asked for help clearing their rice fields of tsunami debris so they could plant, the NGOs said they were only willing to give out bags of rice. Kinari decided she could not work in this model and realized she would have to start her own nonprofit that would be based on listening and implementing community solutions.

After founding Health In Harmony in the United States in 2005, Kinari traveled across Indonesia to find where she would begin to address the intersection of human and ecosystem well-being. She was looking for a place with 1) viable forest under threat, 2) a supportive local government, and 3) a significant human health need. After evaluating sites throughout Indonesia what she found was that lack of healthcare was nearly ubiquitous and also a key driver of ecosystem destruction. In 2006 she ended up choosing Gunung Palung National Park where she had studied orangutans and knew many people in the local communities.

Kinari and Indonesian dentist, Hotlin Ompusunggu, co-led a program there called Alam Sehat Lestari (which translates to Healthy Nature Everlasting) or ASRI (harmoniously balanced) for short. Together with a local community member, Pak Farizal, they organized more than 400 hours of Radical Listening with the communities around Gunung Palung National Park. They did so many hours of listening because they thought that every village would come to a different solution. However, that was not the case. There was, in fact, complete consensus among and between communities.

Representatives from all the 23 communities all the way around the park were specifically asked, “You all are guardians of this precious rainforest that is valuable to the whole world, what would you need as a thank you from the world community so that you could



protect it and thrive yourselves?”⁵ They said that with access to high-quality health services and training in organic farming, they would be able to stop logging.

Based on these discussions, in 2007, Alam Sehat Lestari (ASRI) began to provide high-quality, affordable healthcare for all community members including a fixed clinic, mobile clinic visits to remote communities, four wheel drive ambulance service, and birth control access. In order to provide affordable healthcare, a non-cash payment option was implemented where community members could choose to pay with seedlings for reforestation, manure for the organic farming training, or handicrafts that were sold both locally and globally. Variable discounts were also co-designed where prices would drop for an entire community up to 70% based on the amount of logging in their community (but even non-discounted care was heavily subsidized). In other words, the more these communities gifted the world forest protection, the bigger the gifts from the world community. People said they loved this model because it would help the communities get the few cheaters to stop illegal logging. In addition, organic farming as an alternative livelihood to logging was implemented in all the communities. Over the course of ten years a total of \$5.2 million was spent which included providing health care to a population of 120,000 people, building a large medical center, training thousands of organic farmers, reforesting 100s of acres and providing education to adults and children about health, healthy ecosystems, and the inter-relatedness between the two.

After ten years Stanford did an analysis of this pilot project and found that overall community health had improved with decreases in diseases such as malaria, diarrhea, and tuberculosis. Simultaneously, rainforest protection had improved with a 90% decline in logging as a primary livelihood and the loss of primary forest stabilized. When compared to other national parks in Indonesia, the averted loss of primary forest was worth \$65.3 million dollars in carbon⁶. It should be noted that this Stanford paper did not account for below ground carbon (which is significant because of large areas of peat swamp) or the 52,000 acres of rainforest that grew back over those ten years⁷. That value also does not take into account all the other benefits of rainforest including biodiversity, water cycling, and spiritual value. In other words, the \$65 million is an underestimate of

⁵ This is a loose translation from the Indonesian.

⁶ Jones, et al. (2020). Improving rural health care reduces illegal logging and conserves carbon in a tropical forest. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117(45), 28515–28524. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2009240117>

⁷ Fauzi et al. *Jurnal Ilmu Lingkungan*, 2019 Forest Change Monitoring and Environmental Impact in Gunung Palung National Park, West Kalimantan Indonesia.



the much larger gift that the communities gave back to the world. We also recognize that even by citing this research we are playing into a colonial way of valuing carbon and putting a monetary value on what can't be valued.

Throughout this time Health In Harmony supported ASRI through a transfer of funds and other resources including knowledge from the Global North but specifically under the direction and control of the local communities in an anti-colonial manner.⁸ Since then Health In Harmony and ASRI have spread this model globally with another national park in Indonesia, a protected area in Madagascar and a network of protected areas in Brazil over 8.5 million hectares. At the same time, we have tested this model in other ecosystems across Indonesia, in the Philippines, in Madagascar and Brazil and trained other organizations which have done Radical Listening in Malaysia and Mozambique. We have found that many fewer than 400 hours of listening yields consistent results across a region.

The Practice of Radical Listening

Given that listening is probably one of the most important things that one does on a daily basis, it's remarkable that it is so rarely taught as a skill. The fundamental skills in Radical Listening are the ability to receive well; the ability to read body language; the ability to remember; the ability to verbally reflect what one has heard; and the ability to relate on an emotional level. All of these skills are based on a recognition of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "inter-being" – a deep knowledge of our interconnectedness and spiritual oneness.

The process of attentive listening– really hearing people– encourages genuine participation and helps build trusting relationships where people feel their own agency.⁹ Listening is a process of spiral reciprocity where the more deeply one feels oneself to be heard, the more likely one is to share deeply, and therefore the more wisdom can be received.

⁸ For example, Health In Harmony frequently pushed back at donors who wanted to dictate the terms or wanted to influence what ASRI did if it was not in alignment with the community requests.

⁹ This is conceptualized around four key topics: power, motivation, legitimacy, & trust by Borg, et al (2012). Opening up for many voices in knowledge construction. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 13(1), Art. 1, and Eversole, R. (2003). Managing the pitfalls of participatory development: some insight from Australia. *World development*, 31(5), 781-795.



The role of body language and nonverbal Receiving

Listening to words is only one aspect of Radical Listening. We listen with our entire bodies. Being a good receiver also includes **managing our body language** to actively communicate that we are fully present and engaged. The virtual training will include tips on good receiving body language including body posture, tips about meeting people's eyes¹⁰, mirroring people's emotions (smiling, frowning, etc), and making small noises like hmmm, yes, ah, I see.

When listening to a group, one is also listening to the web of how a conversation flows and watching which threads are picked up by the group and which dropped. One is also observing the body language of the whole group and seeing which ideas resonate and which don't. People are likely to lean in, nod, or sit up straighter when they agree with something said. They may also make small noises of affirmation.

Documentation is also important. When you take notes, people feel like they are really being heard. We recommend marking which ideas are getting general resonance from the group as this can help when you go back to reflect and summarize.

Receiving is much bigger than body language. If you're interested in learning more about all of the components of being a good receiver, please reach out to info@radicallistening.org for more information about progressing to the next level of our Radical Listening curriculum.

What kind of question should be asked?

Phrasing of the question in Radical Listening is key. It needs to be open ended, use positive phrasing, and ideally recognize reciprocity and interconnectedness. It should also call the participants to a higher calling than just their own life. In rainforest communities we ask a question like this:

¹⁰ This is somewhat culturally dependent and must be modified accordingly.



“You all are guardians of this precious rainforest that is important for the health of the whole world. What would you all like as a sign of thanks from the world community that would allow you to protect this forest and bring about a thriving future for yourselves?”

We recommend once the question is asked and any clarifications made, that the listener simply stop and **be quiet**. Often there will be a period of silence– but this is okay. Let the question sit and in our experience people will begin to speak.

Once people begin to speak the listeners must pay extremely careful attention to what is said. It requires intense energy and focus.

What if people express strong emotions?

Listening is not just about hearing words, but also about the emotions behind the words and learning to manage how the emotions of individuals and the group may affect your own responses and emotions. In our brains, we have **mirror neurons**, which respond to other’s emotion and the same areas of the brain that are active in the person having the emotion become active in the listener.¹¹

Recognizing and managing these responses is one a skill that must be practiced. We find Karla McLaren’s approach of recognizing that there is a question in each emotion that arises¹² to be very useful. These are:

- **Anger:** What needs to be restored?
- **Sadness:** What needs to be released?
- **Fear:** What action needs to be taken?
- **Joy:** What needs to be celebrated?

When strong anger arises in a group, it is important to recognize that an individual may be expressing an emotion more widely held by the group. Note that the anger means that specific person really cares about something, so it’s a good sign. You can reflect back to them, “I hear that you are really upset because you really want this, and the need for this

¹¹ Rizzato & Donelli, (2018) I am your mirror, mirror neurons and empathy. Blossoming Books.

¹² Karla McLaren, The Language of Emotions



is not being met.” The reflection does not judge the anger or indicate a resolution (no fixing) but rather simply reflects back to them that they are fully heard. In our experience, sometimes the most oppositional people can become your very best allies, because they are the people that really care.

Reflecting and Summarizing:

Once one has listened for a good long time (at least 20-30 minutes and possibly much longer), one should begin to reflect back in a way that makes the speaker feel heard and understood. We have found that most meetings finish just around the 1.5 hour mark. We usually find ourselves just listening for about an hour until there is a point when there seems to be consensus. When this happens there is often a strong sense of the energy in the room dropping as people have less to say and seem content with what has been said.

At this point, a listener can reflect back the key points of what they heard: “So what I heard, is that you all see X, Y and Z as the key problems in your community and these are the key solutions. Is that correct?” When reflecting back one should use the exact **key words** that the community used. These are specific words that have emotion and force behind them, or words and phrases that speakers have used multiple times. Using the exact words used helps people feel more heard.

Reflecting is a way of checking in with everyone to make sure that you are hearing correctly. Sometimes people say, “No, it’s not quite like that,” or they might say, “Yeah, that’s correct, but don’t forget this.” Reflection helps you determine if you are on the right path and allows people to correct the listeners if they don’t have it quite right.

When you feel like the meeting is coming to an end, one can then summarize. For example: “I hear that these are the three key issues.” Keep summarizing until everyone says, “Yeah, that’s it.” There is this moment when you get it right, where everyone in the room relaxes and agrees (body-language).

A note on consensus. If you are talking to a group and there is one person who strongly disagrees, our experience is that they usually have something really valuable that the rest



of the group needs to incorporate and think about. If you give them the space and time to do so, normally groups will shift the answer or even completely move to that person's position. If someone won't let go of their point, there is usually a reason why.

Note: For a Radical Listener, it will take faithful practice to reflect back lovingly and non-judgmentally not only in one's speech, but also in one's heart. Imagine listening to a group sharing their most intimate and painful struggles with you, searching together to find solutions that will allow them to have a more thriving future. Even a hint of blaming, lecturing, warning, interrogating, or educating in your tone of voice or your body language will be felt by the community.

Summary & Next Steps

As listed at the outset these are the key principles of Radical Listening

- Groups of people who are facing a given challenge know their own needs, and they know the most feasible solutions.
- If solutions have been suggested by people from a given community, they will be locally and culturally appropriate and more likely to be followed and sustained.
- Allowing groups of individuals facing a given challenge to lead demonstrates respect for their knowledge, and capabilities; this helps engender a sense of trust and commitment.
- The fundamental key to listening is a recognition of Interbeing– that all our well-beings are intertwined.
- This methodology is effective in improving the ability of any given community to thrive and could help bring about a thriving future for our planet.

If you are interested in learning more we offer a free Introductory webinars on a monthly basis where you will practice the skills of listening. As noted, this document is intended to accompany that course. If you would like further training or would like to join our global force of Radical Listeners on the Rainforest Exchange, sign up for a more advanced course, which is offered on a rolling basis and read the accompanying documents. And



then, if you plan to actually practice Radical Listening in communities, we have a document available called A Deep Dive into Radical Listening and we offer specific trainings for individuals and organizations in our full playbook. You can reach us at info@radicallistening.org.

