

## Listening is a virtue we have forgotten



We have a bad habit in developed countries. We think that our weight of history, our level of development and our age of enlightenment make us wise. They allow us to take big decisions, to impose our views on others, especially those in less developed countries.

This thinking is deeply flawed.

It means that those taking the big decisions about the world's big issues are often not listening. They believe their perspectives are best. They assume that the views of the politically and economically weak are naive, under-developed and backwards. So developed countries try to impose their ideas on the majority, assuming they know best.

We know, for example, that Indonesia has serious problems with deforestation. We believe too, that stopping rainforest destruction is critical to addressing climate change.

There are many in Indonesia who understand that too, but what do we really understand about why deforestation is happening, on the ground? NGOs and others speak of educating the Indonesians, of making them understand that the rainforest is better protected than cut down. Once they understand this, goes the thinking, they will stop deforesting. But this imposes our understanding on others, expecting them to bow to our superior wisdom. We are not listening to local Indonesians and their reasons for deforesting. Their motivations - economic, geopolitical, cultural, historic and emotional - are brushed aside. The Westerners and NGOs simply insist that their way is in everyone's long-term interests: that the Indonesians will thank us in the end. Yet without listening properly to those living at the edge of the forest and those financing the logging, attempts to stop deforestation cannot work.

The West is trying to help a pensioner cross a busy road, when he does not want to. Caught up in good intentions, we are failing to ask, or to listen to, what others need and want. As a result, we do not solve the problem.

Many of the challenges we face around the world stem from this failure to listen, to free our minds from preconceptions, and to understand the motivations of others. They stem from a culture of imposing Western motivations and ideals on the world.

This needs to change. Instead of telling the world how much we know and what is best for others, we need to start listening, not to what we want to hear, but to what is actually being said. Only then can we fix the problems for good.

*I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.*

**Ernest Hemingway (1899 - 1961)**