The Politics of Peace-Building

RITA THAPA AND ELINOR BRAY-COLLINS

Cet article est basé sur le dialogue écrit entre Rita Thapa et Elinor Bray-Collins. Rita partage ses expériences de travail avec Nagarik Aawaz, une Népalaise dans un ONG qui travaille pour la paix et s'occupe des victimes en temps de conflit. Elinor, encadre la discussion avec des questions qui émergent de ses propres expériences de travail et de ses études sur le développement.

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The article is based on a written dialogue between Rita Thapa and Elinor Bray-Collins. Rita shares her experience of working with Nagarik Aawaz, a local Nepali NGO engaged in peace-building and addressing the needs of victims of conflict. Elinor, frames the discussion with questions that emerge from her own experience working and studying development. The dialogue format, we felt, was representative of the larger on-going dialogue that includes Southern and Northern feminists, as well as one that connects practical development work to academic inquiry.

Elinor: Rita, you have been engaged in feminist activism and community development work for over 20 years, but peace-building specifically is a recent involvement. What led you to become involved in peace-building in Nepal and how does it connect to your feminism?

Rita: As Nepal reeled under escalated violence owing to aggressive Maoist attacks that followed the Palace massacre of June 1, 2001, many Nepalis felt helpless and isolated. In an unprecedented way, this event changed Nepal forever. Shortly after, the government clamped down by declaring a state of emergency, which led to more deaths on both sides in its first six months than in the total six-year history of the Maoist insurgency.

As a feminist activist, my reaction to these events, and my recognition of the inevitable costs that would eventually occur, led me to agitate to bring individuals and groups of civil society together. This ultimately led to the founding of Nagarik Aawaz, literally meaning the voice of the citizens in Nepali. The membership is constituted of individuals doing cutting edge work in their fields, with strong commitments to ongoing conflict transformation and peace-building efforts in Nepal.

Elinor: Peace-building work and responding to people's needs in situations of conflict would present you with a multitude of issues you could address. I would also think that the work would require a large degree of flexibility in order to respond to situations as they arise. Can you describe how Nagarik Aawaz's foci emerged? What other organizations has it been working with in its projects?

Rita: Everything we began, unknowingly had a much bigger design. An interaction program of focusing on victims of conflict, led an entire program designed specifically for young "conflict volunteers" between the ages of 16-25 years of age. This program aims to provide a learning/healing space in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for youth who have been displaced as a result of conflict. They are a group at risk of falling through the cracks. These youth come to Katmandu where they engage in networking and learning. On return to their homelands, hopefully they will be enabled to initiate, support and/or lead local-level peace and development work. Acceptance and inclusion by local NGOs at the earliest, suitable placements for these volunteers, and availability of necessary resource, continues to be a challenge.

We also sought out a man who we learnt had founded an organization for victims of Maoists violence, some three years back. Harassed by the overwhelming influx of displaced victims, lack of support from the political leaders, and a sense of disregard from the local organizations and population, Ganesh Chiluwal had little hope he would find an ally and support in Nagarik Aawaz. But, presently he is conceptualizing and looking for support for the running of a half-way home for the displaced victims, besides other mutually beneficial and supportive activities with this organization. Not having been involved in development or relief work prior to the founding of their organization, they do not presently have the skills or networks that are required to do their work.

Another Nagarik Aawaz project focuses on conflict widows. I traveled to Surkhet in Western Nepal in order to gain an initial glimpse and understanding of the challenges that face these women. Currently Nagarik Aawaz has launched a pilot program in order to ensure that these women, as a group with particularly urgent needs will be a focus of government

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and external donor agencies. As a result of this visit, a local-level organization called the "People Help Organization" (PHO), also benefited in terms of being connected with resources and ideas to continue their good work at the local level, particularly in relation displaced children and women.

In addition, in August 2002, with the financial support from two feminist funds: Mama Cash Holland and the Urgent Action Fund/U.S.A.,[1] conducted a three-day workshop on "Conflict Analysis and Peace-Building" for leaders of civil society and security personnel. Sunila Abeysekara, an internationally renowned peace activist from Sri Lanka provided the technical support. Besides being educational for all participants, considering that this was the first workshop of its kind conducted in Nepal, it was a ground-breaking event in it that it brought senior security personnel, donor representatives, and NGO leaders together on the same platform, very successfully. Sunila herself said that in the 20 years of conflict in Sri Lanka, it has been impossible to think of bringing in security personnel with members of the civil society and actually hope to have a mutually beneficial dialogue!

Elinor: I am interested to hear more about the impact of the conflict on women in Nepal. Feminist writing on women and war has described the particularly harsh ways women can be affected by war. When families and communities come under siege, women face the stress of increased workloads and added responsibilities, while often male family members are absent or unable to act. What are some of the issues women in Nepal are facing as a result of the conflict?

Rita: It's true, in Nepal, throughout the country for that matter, women are the hardest hit. Growing instability and insecurity, unemployment, inflation, government cutbacks by over 50 percent in social sectors, and increased taxation, all have a direct negative impact on women. If there is less food, it is women who get to eat even less; if there is less money for education, it is girls who are made to drop out of schools; if the environment is insecure women's and girl's mobility is further restrained and they become more prone to violence, owing to the general subjugation of the Nepalese women. But in the areas directly affected by the conflict, life is closing in on them from all sides. Since most of the men have left the villages, women are usually left to fend for themselves, the elderly and the children. For the safety of their lives, they are under compulsion to provide shelter or cook for the Maoist cadre, which gets them into problems with the security forces, who then give them a hard time for looking after the "enemy." Needless to say, they are vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse from both sides. But, for many women in these areas it is also the trauma of not knowing weather you are going to see a father, a husband or a son ever again—be they in the security cadres or in the Maoist ranks.

Elinor: My experience working with women in Lebanon has educated me about the negative impacts war has on the lives of women, but also, among other things, how women have utilized crisis conditions to break out of traditional roles and occupy social and political spaces previously closed to them. Does your experience of women and conflict in Nepal also suggest the same window of opportunity exists for women to reformulate their roles?

Rita: There is this break with tradition that you mention. For women particularly those from the disadvantaged ethnic and class groups, the Maoist ranks provide the space they could never have hoped to have. In fact, Maoist leadership has explicitly stated that women's participation has lent major strength to their movement. However, it has also come to be known that women are victims of rape sexual abuse, and other forms of violence and discrimination within the Maoist hierarchy. In its short history, Nagarik Aawaz has learnt about these experiences of women.

Elinor: Rita, in my studies of international development I have read many feminist critiques of international development. Mainly development has been criticized for its inattention, incorrect assumptions, and/or negative impact on women. One of the critiques I have found most astute is the argument about the "depoliticizing effects" of development aid, particularly the way in which the discourse and agendas of donor agencies can displace or co-opt feminist language and activity. In my

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experience, explicitly feminist language can be perceived as "too political" in the eyes of certain donors. Thus, terms like "feminist" or "consciousness-raising" are displaced by more amorphous development concepts such as "gender concern" or, "empowerment." What do you think of this, and does it relate to your experience?

Rita: "Feminist" is not a popular word in our part of the world. At one time, my colleagues, who were the most feminist women and some men working in South Asia in Oxfam, were not ready to label themselves as feminists. The risks are just too high and that is a reality. For instance, being feminist can mean being "western" which is seen as disrespectful of traditional and cultural values. Being feminist can also mean being "loose" of character, or it can also mean that you are simply a "home-breaker." Owing to these connotations, as a change-agent in development, it is risky to lose the community's respect and one's credibility.

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In the last ten years, I have been very explicit in introducing myself as a feminist, but one must always be prepared to explain, and/or defend one's identity. So in development work, as you correctly point out, it is almost always cloaked or subverted under the commonly used and the acceptable term "gender." The growth of the Women's Funds,[2] originally in Europe and North America, and now throughout the world is an indication that the mainstream funds have not really worked for women in the way they were meant to. This is a real irony. I don't think our project will be perceived as feminist action by the donors. In my past experience, I have always had to re-word my work with a more acceptable development discourse in order to remain palatable to development donors.

Elinor: Rita, you have told me before that Nepal is 70 percent dependant on foreign aid. When I think of this and the fact you have found it necessary to "water-down" the feminism in your project description in order to fit into donor agendas and access funding, what comes to my mind are serious questions about the ability of local social movements, and grassroots organizations, to exist and operate outside of the domain of foreign donors and according to their own terms. In Canada, Tanzania and Lebanon I have worked with people who feel that donor influence, among others things, has contributed to a erosion of the spirit of political activism as both programming and organizational structure became more "professionally" and "development" based and less volunteerist and activist based. What are your own feelings about this? Does it apply to the case of Nepal?

Rita: Elinor, this process is definitely apparent in Nepal. Just before I started work on founding Nagarik Aawaz, I thought I should start a political party, and began talking with my friends and colleagues. Sadly, in the absence of adequate support for this idea, I gave it up. Indeed, as Nepal has became increasingly aid dependent, it was also interesting to observe that "development" has begun to equal "jobs" and as a result Nepali civil society including social movements and feminist politics, have been slowly but surely subsumed within development aid structures. It was precisely the reason of getting away from the dangers of donor dependency that I founded Tewa (a Nepali Women's fund dedicated to supporting rural women's organizing and remaining independent of international development funding). One of the greatest dangers I see, is how development work can become "just a job" and one can forget that we are intervening into people lives, and thus have a tremendous moral and ethical responsibility.

Elinor: In terms of this intervention into people's lives you mention, I would like to ask you about how you see the perceptions of local people towards the development agencies. While working in rural Tanzania with a community-based health project, I was struck by the extent to which people in local communities were skeptical of development agencies, and NGOs. Privately, many community members expressed that they did not feel much connection between the development projects carried out in their village, and the needs they felt in their daily lives. Yet, because of the serious lack of governmental services, communities members felt they had nowhere else to turn except to the development NGOs, even though many doubted as to whether these organizations could ever affect a meaningful change in their daily lives. Are there similar sentiments expressed among people in Nepal? What are their perceptions of development agencies and NGOs?

Rita: In regular times, starting yet another NGO is not something I would have wanted to do. There is lot of skepticism among the general public for the work that they do and are perceived literally as "dollar-farming" businesses. In the last decade, with donors' preference to work directly with NGOs owing to the possibility of a more cost-effective, extended, and expansive program coverage, the government also sees them as a competitor rather than an ally. At the community level as more and more NGOs become more project oriented and time bound according to donor need, there is a growing distrust and lack of interest in the local communities. But under the present conditions we have little choice and Nagarik Aawaz will provide a legal framework for us to work in this area. Also in an aid-ridden country it is a good way to allow for the allocated resources to be used for the benefit of the affected people. However owing to the existing lack

of trust it will be very important to build in transparency and accountability in the entire process of doing this work.

Elinor: As we have touched on, funding is an issues that has sparked much critique among development scholars and practitioners alike. I see the issue of accessibility of development institutions to local organizations as being key to this critique. Even when there are funds available, institutional structures often impede locally based organizations from accessing much needed funds. The United Nations, World Bank and large bi-lateral agencies are common targets of this critique as the gap between their policies and practices and the needs of the actual people they purport to serve can, at times, appear immense. How well do you feel development agencies bridge this gap in Nepal?

Rita: Well, even if the intentions of these organizations are good, their structures are indeed major impediments to accessing funds. I feel that their structures, policies and processes have not been sufficiently reviewed for the extent to which they allow grassroots groups to access resources. For instance, often they do not have field offices or proposals can only be written in English. A women's group in rural Nepal can barely come into Katmandu and organize a meeting with the likes of the World Bank or the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP), let alone write proposals in English! But the most worrying thing is how everyone seems to be able to a turn a blind eye to such an obvious problem!

This problem is not limited to local groups however. Despite the skills and experience Nagarik Aawaz has working with donors even we have faced difficulty in securing funds. Early on, we learned that major donors working in Nepal created what is called a "basket fund." This fund was named the "Peace and Development Fund" and comprised funds from various donors. It is housed at the UNDP. The fund was earmarked specifically for peace building work since it was becoming increasingly evident that development work could not happen in the present conflict situation. This seemed to be the most logical funding opportunity for the kind of work Nagarik Aawaz was beginning to do, so a proposal was duly submitted. Though past experiences with donors had not always been positive, we thought that such urgent needs would draw forth a more effective and rapid response. One of the main lessons we have learned in our peace-building efforts is that we must be able to improvise and be innovative in order to respond as quickly as possible to the ever increasing human needs in conflict-torn areas. However, in the past ten months of having submitted our proposal to the UNDP, and even though we have been assured of receiving funds, they have made us revise our proposal three times. Despite the commitment of UNDP financial support, we still do not yet have a confirmed date/time for the grants. This leaves us in a limbo. When can we recruit staff? When can we launch these badly needed programs? What activities can we and can't we initiate? Furthermore, the option of trying to approach other donors is not available to us, because all of the donors have allocated their peace-building funds to the same basket fund. Who can make-up the lost time to the victims of conflict? Who is responsible? Of course the intention of the donors and the UNDP is to ensure the funds are correctly and carefully handled, but when resources meant for urgent response work in conflict zones are tied-up like this, the delay of a day may literally mean the lives of many. If it had not been for the timely grant Nagarik Aawaz received from the Urgent Action Fund which, though small, came in at the right moment and with the right amount of flexibility as feminist funds generally do, Nagarik Aawaz would have been unable to do the work we have already done.

Elinor: Rita, one of the hopes I have for "development" work lies not with the big agencies, but rather in the partnerships forged between feminists fighting similar battles on different global fronts. Whether it be class oppression, racism, patriarchy, violence or environmental degradation, the more feminist networks and organizations can support each other the more feminists are able to work on their own terms. The fact that feminist funds like the Urgent Action Fund have been the most responsive to funding your peace building work, I think speaks volumes about the need to build feminist to feminist partnerships. The fact remains however, that many activists, women's organizations and community-based development efforts remain dependant on funding from international development donors to continue their work. Given this, and the issues we have discussed, how do you see the possibility of building meaningful partnerships between development aid and local initiatives, that are truly based in the needs, and priorities of local people?

Rita: According to my experience, meaningful partnerships can only be built on equal ground, and in an environment of mutual respect and trust. Until this condition is created in the world of development aid, I personally do not see the possibility of a meaningful partnership. Even as the world is seemingly converging as a global village in some ways, it is also getting more and more polarized in its realities of inequity and injustice. If development is going to make a difference in the world it has to look deeply into its own structures and assumptions and ask itself if it is

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really addressing the root causes of injustice.

Rita Thapa has over 20 years experience as a feminist educator and community activist initiating and supporting institutions relating to women's empowerment in Nepal as well as internationally. She is widely recognized for her ground-breaking work in founding Tewa the Nepal women's fund, and is currently involved in founding Nagarik Aawaz an initiative for conflict transformation and peace-building in Nepal. Rita is the Dame Nita Barrow Visitor 2002 to the University of Toronto, a Board Member of the Urgent Action Fund/U.S.A., and is an Ashoka Fellow.

Elinor Bray-Collins has studied and worked in international development for more than a decade. Her work in feminist activism, research, and popular education has taken her to communities in Canada, Thailand, Lebanon and Tanzania. At present she is working with a women's NGO in Beirut, doing research on the impact of foreign aid on feminist organizing in the Arab region. Elinor is a Ph.D. student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

[1]Both Mama Cash and Urgent Action are examples of what is referred to as "feminist funds." These are independent feminist funding organizations that fund activists and projects that directly support women's rights. Mama Cash was founded in Holland 20 years ago. It provides grants to women's groups internationally on issues pertaining to women's human rights. The Urgent Action Fund. based in Denver, U.S.A., is a much younger fund addressing urgent needs in terms of women's human rights issues. Both organizations have funding structures that are more flexible than other agencies in order to allow feminist activists to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities or situations where women's rights must be advanced (see www.urgentactionfund.org and www.mamacash.n1).

[2]Initially Mama Cash in Holland and The Global Fund for Women in the U.S. were the only funds in Europe and America that gave to women's organizations outside of their countries. But in last seven to eight years there has been a growth of women's funds internationally. Today there are over 30 indigenous women's funds scattered in Asia, Africa, South America and Eastern Europe.

ALEXIS EASLEY

White Garden

That summer you planted a garden for each of us:
delphiniums for one daughter, butterfly flowers
and potted roses for the others.
On the telephone, you told me
about the sweet alyssum you planted for me
in an all-white garden, best viewed at night
under a summer moon.

Somehow we forgot that in July
the sun never sets,
the moonlight would never make
those petals glow.

Now as icicles hang from black boughs
and the stalks of last year's growth
cast shadows on the snow, I look up and see
the moon we had imagined together.

Like a searchlight, it finds me walking alone,
shining down on me instead of white flowers,
on a world no longer tended by your dear hands,
a garden run riot, now frozen over in silence.

But as moonlight illuminates my face,
I imagine all you planted coming into blossom
all at once—white flowers under this winter moon—
and know that the promise of spring is in your hands.

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