NEPAL TRANSITION TO PEACE

TO PEACE

A DECADE OF

THE COMPREHENSIVE PEACE ACCORD

(2006-2016)

From shared narratives to joint responsibility

Supporting reintegration of former Maoist army combatants and community resilience to violent conflicts through mediation, dialogue and storytelling[1]

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"I felt the pain that we caused to each other and after we shared our stories we felt relieved." (Ex-combatant,Nepali Times, 2013)

"From shared truths to joint responsibility"(share) is an approach for interpersonal dialogue, which was co-designed by a group of Nepali facilitators and the authors of this article in the framework of a project to support the reintegration of ex-combatants after the dissolution of the cantonments. It combines mediation with dialogue and dealing with the past by making use of story telling methodology.

Background

One of the major challenges after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was the question of rehabilitation and reintegration of Maoist combatants. It took years until a political settlement about the modalities was reached and the cantonments were dissolved in April 2012.

Some 15,000 former combatants settled in mostly large groups of up to 700 people (Martin Chautari 2013) in VDCs, most of them near the cantonments. The majority did not want to return to their original communities because they "complained of being discriminated against by their communities and families" (C. Bhandari, 2015).In many cases, their presence significantly changed the demography of the VDCs. Donors' concerns — based on international experience — that the retirement money might be used in a short-sighted manner did not materialise: most ex-combatants used the money wisely to buy land or shops and create job opportunities. The reintegration can be seen as very successful in this regard (Timalsina, 2014; C. Bhandari, 2015).

Nevertheless, tensions and resentments have existed under the surface and in some cases they have become explicit. "The relationship between ex-combatants and local communities has been marked by tensions, and many communities have expressed serious reservations about accepting former combatants into their midst. This has created a dynamic that had led to many ex-combatants being alienated from wider society" (C. Bhandari,2015). In a situation where many resources are already scarce, a sudden influx of people is likely to cause problems. And this is only the superficial layer. The underlying issue is related more closely to the past grievances and exposure to violence during the civil war. While some former PLA members feel that they risked a lot for a good cause and should be better rewarded for this by society, others do not trust them due to painful experiences in the past. In that case, mistrust, fear and trauma are likely to shape the relationship between the longstanding community members and the newly arrived ex-combatants. Fuelled by these resentments, minor conflicts can quickly escalate into community conflicts.

Anticipating these types of conflict, in January 2011 GIZ — the German international cooperation agency which had been working in the cantonments for many years (Gutsche 2013, 2015) — and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), which had supported psychological counselling for the 'discharged minors' after their release from the cantonments in 2009 — consulted with the authors of this article,who shared their experience from mediation and dialogue projects in various countries. Applying the insider-partial model of mediation (Mason and Wils 2009, Lederach 2015), we thought that the only effective way to resolve conflicts and improve trust between ex-combatants and community members was to have teams of mediators from both groups who would be able to work together constructively. No single mediator from only one side would be able to gain trust from both groups, according to the underlying hypothesis. Although many community mediation projects had been working successfully in Nepal before (see, for example, Lederachand Thapa 2012; Suurmond and Sharma 2012), they did not involve ex-PLA as mediators: this was simply not possible before 2012 because the latter were concentrated in the cantonments.

Secondly, assuming that conflicts would be influenced and triggered by a general mistrust related to the past,we thought that mediators should be able to tackle this layer of mistrust not only in acute conflicts, but also as a preventive measure, combining mediation with dialogue and dealing with the past.

Thirdly, if ex-combatants and longstanding community members were to work together as mediators, one would have to assume that this mistrust applies to them as well, so they would need to undergo the process of dialogue and trust-building themselves first.

In April 2012, shortly after the first ex-PLA members had arrived in the communities, these preliminary hypotheses were tested in a workshop with GIZ field staff who had witnessed the process on the ground. Conflicts and tensions were mapped and analysed. It became clear how conflicts about access to resources are influenced by underlying fears and mistrust, rooted in past events (see Box: Water Tap Conflict). On the one hand, many community members took the view that the Maoists originally aimed to change the country positively and thus should be warmly welcomed. However, elite groups within the communities seemed to regard them as a potential threat to traditions such as the caste system, largely due to the Maoists' practices such as inter-caste marriage. Most of the longstanding residents considered the amount of money paid to ex-combatants as a retirement package to be far too high while the ex-combatants felt humiliated by the fact that they had never officially been honourably discharged from the rebel army. Rather than returning as heroes of a victorious struggle for social change, they re-entered civilian life as part of an unwanted minority of strangers and losers.

BOX 1	**Water Tap Conflict (Reported in April 2012)**

A group of ex-combatants who had just settled in a VDC near their old cantonment asked for access to the existing watertap. Old community members rejected this request, arguing that water was scarce and with the retirement package, the ex-PLA should have enough money to install their own watertap. The latter argued that this water tap was built in the framework of a project supporting the cantonment and nearby communites— so without them it wouldn't exist. Secondly, there would be enough water for everyone if only it were not being wasted. Underlying needs, fears and emotions of the two groups were analysed and mapped, using the twoicebergsmetaphor (in boxes: common needs/fears of both groups).

BOX 2	**Statements from the focus group interviews (Pro Public 2012)**	
ex-combatants	**community members**	
want access to existing water tap	want them to build separate water tap	feel threatened, because we have been victimised by Maoists before
I feel ... Want to be part of community	Fear of violent eruption	We feel dominated, treated unfairly (less money)
I fear ... angry	We wish to live in harmony	We wish to maintain our culture; afraid of cultural demolition by Maoist culture
I wish ... Fear of being rejected	We want recognition of our suffering	We want recognition of our suffering

This was corroborated by a baseline study from September 2012 conducted in five districts by Pro Public on behalf of GIZ (Pro Public 2012) and by subsequent research (Martin Chautari 2013, Timalsina 2014, C. Bhandari 2015, Bogati 2015) and media reports (e.g. Republica 2014). The baseline study showed that in general, positive attitudes were displayed by ex-combatants and old community members towards the other group. However, a significant number of comments indicated the underlying level of mistrust. We assume that this level must have been much higher due to a methodological research problem: When we asked people about reintegration and their relationship towards the other group, we often found that people would in a first encounter respond very positively, presumably because this was thought to be most face-saving. To reveal problems would be seen as embarrassing. Only after an intense dialogue and trust-building would they reveal in hindsight that there had been mistrust before. Even three years after the cantonments were dissolved, some participants in dialogue groups report that this was the first time they had actually met any ex-combatants.

Box 3   Statements from the focus group interviews (Pro Public 2012)

"They welcomed us with thoughts of harmony."
(Ex-combatant in Banke talking about how he was received by the community)

"I promised them that I will not engage in war again"
(Ex-combatant in Sunsari, explaining why he thinks the community has a positive perception of him)

"They have a negative attitude towards us, because we have been engaged in warfare"
(Ex-combatants in Kailali, explaining why they think the community has negative perceptions of them)

"The ex-combatants must not settle in a new community. They have to go to their home. Why aren't they going back to their home?"

(Senior Police Officer, District Police Office)

"ECs might secretly keep some old weapons, so there really is a challenge of insecurity among the people. They were the victims of the Maoists in the past, and they still have feelings of revenge."

(Former Chairperson, Nepali Congress)

"ECs have arrived. There is a kind of a fear due to their past history, but gradually things will go well."

(Social activist)

"People can't say 'NO' to them. They are accepting them unwillingly... The VDC needs extra police force and more safety measures since their arrival"

(Secretary, Mother Group)

"ECs have started a small business in this VDC. They are providing modern and quality services. Old businessmen are feeling the competition. So the community people are not accepting them."

(Principal, Higher Secondary)

"Accepting those persons, who created lots of problems in the community, is really difficult. The feeling of revenge may arise."

(Coordinator, Local Peace Committee)

"They were used to getting a free lunch. But now they have to do something with the money they received for their livelihood and family."

(Chief, District Veterinary Office)

Project design

Based on these preliminary findings and considerations, four districts were chosen, according to where GIZ had been active before and had been seen as a trustworthy actor, and the numbers of incoming ex-combatants. Among these four districts were the three with the highest number of PLA in the cantonments: Kailali, Chitwan and Surkhet (Timalsina 2014), with Saptari being the fourth project district. It could thus be assumed that these districts would be particularly challenged by the reintegration. Pro Public set up a group of potential mediators/dialogue-facilitators, consisting of new community members[2] with a PLA background as well as longstanding members of the communities and local NGOs. They underwent 15 days of training, conducted by inmedio on behalf of GIZ, between November 2012 and April 2013. Based on the experience gained on the ground and during training, as well as experience in other countries, the methodology for combining elements of mediation, dialogue and dealing with the past (storytelling in particular) was developed through collaboration. We later started to refer to this approach as share – from shared narratives to joint responsibility. After completion of the training, which was funded by GIZ and coordinated by Pro Public, the group members started to offer their services with the aim of supporting the reintegration process in their districts by

- conducting informal dialogues/mediation in acute conflicts, particularly group conflicts related to the settlement and reintegration of the former combatants,
- organising peace events and interactions,
- initiating and facilitating dialogue groups and dialogue camps in which members of different parts of society undergo an intense trust-building process.

In late 2014, the group of facilitators decided to be independent and started to found their own NGOs in the four districts, now known as the share centers for mediation and dialogue facilitation. They successfully expanded their activities in 2015 and 2016, supported by inmedio and the Berlin-based NGO Culture for Peace, funded by the German Institute for Foreign Relations with support from the German Federal Foreign Office. By April 2016, they had conducted five dialogue camps and facilitated 32 dialogue groups, more than 50 informal dialogues/mediations and other interaction programmes.[3]

The sha:re trust-building process

The approach that we chose for the training sessions,which was later modified and further developed in a joint process with the group, was based on our own experience of working with war refugees from the former Yugoslavia in the late 1990s (Wuestehube 2007). It was inspired by the work of the Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On, who initiated dialogues between survivors of the Holocaust and children of Nazi war criminals and, later, between groups of Israelis and Palestinians (Bar-On/Kassem 2004), and by the socio-therapy groups in post-genocide Rwanda (Richters 2010).

The underlying thought is:

When dealing with collective atrocities and traumatic experience, a fundamental improvement of relations and a true reconciliation with the past will not happen unless the painful memories, gruesome (war) experiences and stories of the victims are being shared in front of members of the 'others'. When experiencing the authenticity of the story telling and the authenticity of the reactions of listeners, a change of mind and sometimes even a change of perspective can happen. This is the basis for the development of new trust and readiness to cooperate when working for a better future.

While this seems to be common sense, a 'forgive-and-forget' approach was being discussed by a significant number of politicians in Nepal at that time (Spring 2012). In peace/dialogue events, the desire for peace was often expressed but the problem of mistrust was not addressed. There was hardly any culture of 'working through' the conflict, which seems to fit into a common stereotype that encouraging people to express feelings of anger and sadness was not culturally appropriate in Asia. This results in a shying away from openly dealing with the past. However, other experiences were also gained, not only in the project at hand. John Paul Lederach (2015) refers to the MSBKProject (Mahila Shakti Kendra Nepal), which used a storytelling approach with rural single women:

"(...) women from different sides of the warring parties who had lost husbands to the other side were suspicious and angry with the other women. Only after hearing other women's stories could the feelings of anger be reduced. They initially wanted to be in separate groups, but once the stories emerged, the women realised that friendship could develop" (ibid, p. 72). Similarly, the Hatey malo Accompaniment Program, ICRS's psycho-social support programme for families of missing persons in Nepal, found that sharing their painful stories was very much appreciated by the victims' families.

Unlike official hearings in truth commissions, Gacaca courts (Rwanda) or victim offender mediation, in this type of dialogue, individual perpetrators are not confronted with 'their' victims. Typically, however, people who have been victimised emotionally view any member or proxy of the other group as a representative of 'the perpetrators'. The process is challenging, but it has its own healing effect.

Sha:re dialogue groups

The idea of sha:re dialogue groups came into being: Up to twelve old and new community members meet for five to ten sessions, which are led by at least two facilitators. Their objective is to contribute to a smooth reintegration of the ex-combatants in the VDC, to the creation of trust and to the resolution of conflicts within their communities. They would undergo an intense trust-building process and – if things turned out well – plan and implement joint activities for the community. After some preliminary trust-building and the joint assessment of the current situation, the sharing of painful memories (usually related to the times of the insurgency) is at the core of the approach ("From shared narratives ...").

This often paves the way for joint activities that promote development in the community, social harmony and conflict prevention ("... to joint responsibility – sha:re"). The underlying theory of change here is that a change of perspective and trust-building are more likely to happen in smaller groups and cannot be a one-off event. The attitudinal change of the group members will affect the whole community through the joint activities they implement, as well as through their general interactions.[4] The group process is of course flexible – however, certain steps are typical and are generally applied:

1. Getting to know each other/joint assessment of the situation
2. Joint conflict analysis and preliminary trust-building by stepping into each other's shoes
3. Sharing of painful memories
4. Discovering resources: Positive childhood memories
5. Joint activity planning

Two elements proved to be particularly important in this process of developing trust among the groups: The joint analysis of conflict between ex-PLA and old community members using the method of conflict perspectives analysis, and the sharing of painful stories and experiences from the time of the insurgency. These elements will be therefore discussed in more detail.[5]

1. Getting to know each other/joint assessment of the situation

The session starts with a song, poem or ritual and some general information about the participants and the approach and purpose. However, the introduction of the participants and the general assessment are combined by choosing the methodology of partner interviews: Participants team up in pairs, consisting of an ex-combatant and a longstanding resident. They are requested to interview each other on the question: 'What has worked out well with the reintegration of the Maoist ex-combatants, and what difficulties have arisen?' After this, they return to the large group and report what their partner has told them. In this way, the opportunity is provided to slowly start approaching each other and begin to undertake an initial change of perspective.

2. Conflict perspective analysis and iceberg metaphor

The goal of this step is to analyse a typical conflict between two groups in such a way that each side is able to develop empathy for the other. From a methodological perspective, the well-known iceberg model and the 'empathy lists' from conflict perspective analysis are helpful tools in this regard, because they foster empathy and change of perspectives (Splinter/Wuestehubet al.2013, 2015; Walter 2013). After introducing a case study – a specific conflict between old and new (ex-PLA) community members from the participants' VDC or from the facilitators' experience, e.g. the watertap conflict (see above) – the group is requested to split into two homogeneous groups. The participants are asked to step into the other's shoes and express wishes, emotions and fears the other side might hold. Through brainstorming, they are encouraged to speak solely from a first-person perspective; this means that new community members stepping into the shoes of the old community would make statements starting with "We, the old community, feel... (wish .../fear ...)" and vice versa. Facilitators list the statements (see illustration above). Subsequently, the sub-groups unite and present each other with their lists. In the concluding feedback rounds, it is usually highlighted that examining the other side's needs, fears and feelings was a completely new experience for most of the participants. It generally creates a degree of trust and understanding, which paves the ground for the next step.

3. Sharing of painful memories/storytelling

As mentioned before, we regard the sharing of individual stories and experiences, mostly painful memories from the time of the insurgency, as a crucial step in facilitating trust-building, healing and readiness for reconciliation. It is of course crucial to determine the right time in the group process. A degree of confidence is needed, yet it is not possible to wait indefinitely; Facilitators need to assess

whether it is likely that the group members have a certain level of openness and are willing to listen to the others' stories. Naturally, individuals are afraid that others will ridicule their stories, particularly if the listeners are members of the group perceived as perpetrators in that incident. Facilitators have to create a conducive atmosphere through the preliminary trust-building activities (see above) and create a safe space by setting clear ground rules, such as: "We will make sure that everybody's story is listened to – nobody will be interrupted or ridiculed."

Different from most other approaches, whenever possible we chose to work with pictures, meaning that we ask the participants to begin by drawing a picture of the incident/their story. This is very common in trauma counselling, but is used less often in dialogue. It often creates some confusion at the beginning, yet it is very helpful: Firstly, a picture helps participants to stay focused, making the story more vivid and real. Secondly, with a picture it is much easier to actually tell your own story, rather than simply reacting to the stories of others. Thirdly, with a picture it is also a lot easier to keep on listening, even after one has already heard six or seven stories. Fourthly, drawing a picture is to some extent a symbolic externalisation of the story. This creates a greater mental distance to the painful memories. This is already a first step on the way to owning a story as opposed to being overwhelmed by it.

The guiding question is:

"What happened in your own or your family's life that shaped your view of the other group (here the former Maoist combatants/the civilians) and/or your beliefs regarding the conflict/the insurgency? Please think of one specific incident and draw a picture that symbolises the incident."[26] Usually, the old community members would tell stories of how they/their friend or family members were victimised by the Maoists or the National Army[27] – how they witnessed killings or lost loved ones. Ex-combatants would often tell stories of how they happened to become PLA members, how they were sometimes falsely accused and put in prison for being Maoists and became Maoists later; stories of how they were afraid for their lives in skirmishes, how they were wounded, tried to save their comrades' lives and sometimes lost them.

Everybody is asked to share his or her story and present the drawing. The drawing of the person who is telling the story is placed in the middle of the circle and participants usually take five to thirty minutes per person and story;

If the person's story is very short, facilitators encourage her/him to go into more detail. They do so by asking questions which explore the background and emotions of the story, focusing, for example, on specific details in the drawing or how the person felt in a particular situation. They reflect back the emotions that have been expressed between the lines, e.g. "So you must really have been afraid for your life in that situation?" and thus demonstrate their understanding. In this way, they act as a role model for the other participants, showing how to acknowledge the stories.

Often, people start from a certain incident but then they happen to tell their whole lifestory. Sometimes the storyteller gets sucked into the whirl of events that they experienced and drifts off into more and more details, finally getting stuck in the story. If the participant gets lost in his/her emotions, the facilitators ask some factual questions that relate to the present (e.g. "Has the village been rebuilt now?", "How many years did you spend in prison before you were released?", "What is that person doing these days?").[8]

After the storyteller has finished the story, showing appreciation is crucial. We recommend starting by simply saying "thank you for that story". The facilitators continue by commenting on each story with much empathy and compassion. They then encourage the other participants to express their feelings of compassion and empathy. Many listeners find themselves shedding tears. When we conducted a storytelling session with a group from Odessa (Ukraine), one participant commented: "We learned how to shed tears together." We call this the 'compassionate sharing round'.

Box 4   BOX: Resource-oriented reframing

A person who has just told the story of a situation in whichhis/her life was in danger will be asked by the facilitator: "How did you manage to survive in that terrible situation?" The person explains, for example, that she managed not to panic, but to stay calm and react in a very focused way. Facilitator: "So thanks to your ability to stay calm and focused – even in such a horrible situation – you managed to survive that incident." The underlying psychological assumption here is that it will be very helpful for the person if she doesn't see herself as a completely helpless, victimised person, but as somebody who could do something in order to survive. The facilitator might also add: "And I'm glad you survived and that you are here with us today". That focuses again on the present.

After everybody shared his/her story, including the compassionate sharing rounds, facilitators would wrapup with a quick reflection: "How did you feel before you shared your memories, and how do you feel now?"Here are some typical statements that also explain the rationale and effect of that approach:

- Felt pain and sadness.
- I remembered friends or loved ones with sadness.
- I was in a dilemma about how to tell the story.
- I had to muster courage to share my story with my friends.
- There was a fear that friends might ridicule my story.
- Before, I had the feeling that I was the only one who is in pain – now it's different.
- There was a sense of pain but that has gradually eased with the storytelling process.
- When others listen to my story attentively, it eases my pain and gives me hope.
- This was the first time I told this story to anybody. I felt suffocated before. Now I feel much lighter.
- I understood that everyone has the same pain.
- I felt that the other side of the war also has all these feelings.
- Before, we thought that journalists and human rights activists falsified the truth, but here we got to know Mr....whom we now respect very much.
- The impact of the conflict has lasted longer and we cannot see the pain from the surface.
- Each individual has to face suffering, pain, ups and downs, in their life. It gives us courage that even in such a situation, we can move forward as human beings.
- It gives us strength to deal with the difficulties.
- It helped to develop a consciousness for the future generation on the way to peace.

4. Discovering resources: positive childhood memories

In order to contrast the painful memories with something beautiful and to strengthen the bonding process within the group, it is good to examine positive childhood memories. This frequently evokes the feeling of having something in common: Despite all the differences in political beliefs etc., we were all children at some point. Usually this insight leads to an impulse of parental care for one's own children and the future in general.

Share facilitators usually start with a relaxation exercise, focusing on body awareness. Then they ask participants to take a 'walk' through their childhood memories and stop at a place where, as a child, they felt really good and secure. Even if their whole life has been one of suffering so far, there must have been (at least) one happy moment. Sharing these stories about happy childhood moments usually brings up a lot of laughter, as these stories are about love and care or funny incidents.

5. Joint activity planning

Building upon this positive energy, it is now possible and often desired by the dialogue groups to start working on plans to organise joint activities that will help the community and spread the trust that was built within the dialogue groups. These activities might consist of joint celebrations, working together on community infrastructure or sports events.

Future prospects and challenges

The approach based on a trust-building dialogue which includes individual storytelling, discussed above, can and should be combined with arts- and media-based activities in order to reach more people; it should be applied to other social divides, the most urgent being the current ethnopolitical tensions in the Terai; it should be linked with the official transitional justice process in Nepal; and it should explore how political dialogues on track 2 and track 1.5 could benefit from integrating elements of storytelling.

a) Arts- and media-based outreach

While the described approach has proved to be effective for the people it is working with, it is clear that it only reaches a limited number of people directly. One of the challenges is how to reach more people in order to transform a whole community. On the one hand, this is already part of the approach because the members of the dialogue groups are supposed to design joint activities and will spread the message of trust-building in this way. However, it could be followed up

more systematically. Since 2015, we have therefore encouraged dialogue groups to usean arts-/media-based approach more systematically – which means using arts and media for the joint activities and involving relevant experts, producing radio clips, videos, photo exhibitions, plays, booklets, poems etc. It is not new to use arts and media for peace building activities, but here the merits lie in the combination with the share-dialogue, because it is more powerful if the message of peace is conveyed not only by those who already believe in the process but also by former 'enemies' who have only recently experienced the dialogue themselves and can authentically report about it. An interesting methodology for combining storytelling with playback theatre in order to bring ordinary peoples' stories on stage and reach more people has recently been introduced by Anne Dirnstoerfer from the German NGO CSSP in cooperation with Pro Public'. Close networking between artists, journalists and dialogue facilitators is essential to combine dialogue with arts- and media-related activities. This still poses a challenge in many districts.

b) Relevance: What is the role of ex-combatants in relation to current and potential future tensions?

Another question concerns the potential impact of the described community-based trust-building and reconciliation work on the national level. After the violent protests since August 2015, to what extent is the relationship between ex-combatants and their communities still relevant to the overall security situation? On the one hand, the fears that former PLA members would take up arms or join or establish armed groups have not materialized in the short term. On the other hand, the high level of frustration and pessimism among ex-combatants (Boginda 2015, Timalsina, 2014; C. Bhandari, 2015; Women ex-PLA struggle for living, social acceptance, 2014, April 2) could fuel a readiness to resort to violence and increase the likelihood that protests in Terai districts will turn violent. Even if ex-combatants were not directly involved – although this has sometimes been the case – they might influence others. It is well-known from conflicts worldwide that a social group's sense of frustration can trigger violence which may then be carried out by others as well, often young people. Little evidence-based research is available on whether this applies to Nepal or not. More in-depth analysis is needed.

c) Tackle current tensions

Despite the unanswered question of therole of ex-combatants in relation to current tensions, it is obvious that the most dominant social divides in most of the Terai region after the promulgation of the constitution and the violent clashes in August/September 2015 are not between old community/new

community members but, rather, between Tharu and Madheshi and Pahadi, and between Tharu and Undivided Far West etc. It goes without saying that in order to promote effective dialogue between these groups, trust-building is essential. The more violent incidents took place, the greater the need to include dealing with the past elements in trust-building processes. The share approach can easily be applied not only in trust-building between ex-combatants and longstanding community members but also to any opposing identity, religious or political groups in polarised societies. It has been applied in Ukraine (pro-European/Russian-leaning groups), Egypt (Islamists/secular regime critics/regime supporters) and South Caucasus (Armenian/Azerbaijanis) so far. We believe that this approach has great potential to reduce the current tensions. Immediately after the tragic events in Kailali, the team at the Kailali sharre-center decided not to carry out any activities because it was seen as too risky, apart from technical problems due to the curfew. However, they later started to engage with political stakeholders in order to promote dialogue. Specific results are still awaited. This is not to say that sharre dialogue can replace the settlement of the disputed issues at a national political level. Rather, it can complement it and increase actors' readiness to support political dialogues and their respective agreements and to overcome the repercussions of the violent incidents at the local level, which can otherwise even have an effect on the next generation(s). It is important not to repeat the frequent mistake of postponing the local reconciliation-oriented dialogue until a political settlement is reached.

d) Link with official transitional justice process

Furthermore, we believe that it is a great opportunity to link up community-based storytelling dialogue with the official transitional justice process in Nepal. The latter has often been criticised for being too Kathmandu-centrist and not sufficiently focused on the needs of the victims and people affected by the conflict. Furthermore, the public debate is very much focused on the question of which type of atrocities should be dealt with solely by prosecution and punishment, and under which circumstances amnesties can be considered. Research, however, shows that apart from the question of punishment, other aspects are important from the victims' perspective, such as compensation, economic prospects, social inclusion, symbolic acknowledgement, and different forms of remembering those who died, e.g. naming squares after them or memorial sites (ICTJ 2014). A wide range of scholars and institutions agree that transitional justice processes should be holistic and integrate formal and informal mechanisms (see, for example, Fischer/Petrovic-Ziemer, 2013; Hamber 2015, UN Security Council 2004). There is a substantial body of inspiring international experience of community-based bottom-up reconciliation and truth-telling

initiatives, e.g. REKOM, a regional commission for truth-telling about war crimes in the former Yugoslavia initiated by local civil society organisations (Fischer/Petrovic-Ziemer, 2013), the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REHMI) in Guatemala, the community-based Fambul Tok in Sierra Leone (see Hamber, 2015)and the Ardoyne Community Project in Northern Ireland (Bickfors, 2007). Yet if official transitional justice processes are to be accompanied by local bottom-up dealing with the past efforts, dialogue comes into play, because financial or other form of reparation that comes without acknowledging the truth about a certain event or doing justice will inevitable result in the accusation that this is 'blood money.'"

Similarly, naming places after missing people or creating memorial sites, for example, can have a very powerful effect and can be decided at a local level (assuming that a framework for such decisions exists); however, it is much more effective if it is the outcome of a dialogue process rather than being imposed by a few decision-makers. The share approach to dialogue could play a strong role in this regard. However, a framework (legal and financial) needs to be put in place in order to facilitate this type of local dialogue-based transitional justice mechanism on a broad scale. Conflict victims' organisations and international agencies need to keep advocating and demonstrate how this can be done. The Conflict Victims Common Platform (CVCP) recently hosted a conference on unofficial truth-telling in Kathmandu with support from UNDP, which was a step in the right direction (Victims initiate unofficial truth-telling activities. March 25, 2015)

e) Integrate into political dialogues

Looking at peace processes in general, we firmly believe that elements of this approach, namely the sharing of individual stories, have great potential to enhance dialogues, not only in relation to grassroots interpersonal dialogues but also at a political level, not least because political dialogues and mediation processes on track 2 or 1.5 often end up in stalemates because deep-rooted mistrust cannot be overcome. Meeting the others as individual human beings and learning more about their background and aspirations — by storytelling! — can significantly change dialogues and bring them back on a constructive track. There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence about how negotiators were able to deal with each other on a more personal level when they found some common ground (see, for example Lederach, 2005), which in turn gave new momentum to the talks. Sometimes facilitators try to make these moments more likely by offering spaces where members of negotiation teams can have more informal

exchange. However, whether they actually make use of it is not something that can be planned. Is there a more systematic way of offering this space for a more personal exchange in the sessions themselves? Of course this is a sensitive issue. This is a context, where participants meet each other with a significantly different motivation than in individual grassroots dialogue. Here it is clearly not about exchanging personal stories, but about exploring possibilities for cooperation, enforcing or convincing others of political positions. 'Exercises' which seem to have a 'pedagogical' agenda are not really appreciated in that context.

However, what if, in a moment where the dialogue/negotiation is stuck and people have a certain readiness to try something new in order to overcome the stalemate, dialogue facilitators were to suggest putting the substantive issues aside for a while and focusing more on personal stories of how the individuals came to hold a certain political view and struggle for the one or the other political cause – simply in order to make the subsequent discussion more effective? When we worked with political party representatives and parliamentary candidates in Egypt who had fundamentally different views, we asked at one point:"What kind of experiences caused you to hold your political opinion?" The storytelling that followed had a very positive effect on the subsequent discussion. Similarly, a colleague who works in a Southeast Asian country with insider peacebuilders who cover the full spectrum of the conflicting parties one day asked them: "How do you continue doing your work despite the fact that it is so nerve-wracking, tedious and may even be in vain?" What followed was an exchange about their personal biographies and relationships to the conflict, clearly generating trust-building momentum. We firmly believe that more of this should be tried.

Conclusion

As the experience of the share centers, on which this article is based, shows, dialogues that deliberately include a dealing with the pastdimension through a storytelling approach can help to build trust not only between ex-combatants and longstanding members of communities where they have settled, but also between opposing identity groups in relation to the current ethnopolitical tensions in Nepal. This type of dialogue can, furthermore, be seen as a community-based bottom-up transitional justice mechanism and thus complement official transitional justice processes. It has potential to be integrated into political dialogues as well. Often, people fear that the sharing of personal painful narratives wouldn't work because it would not fit into cultural patterns and the wounds of the past were'too fresh' or – if it worked elsewhere –it wouldn't in

Nepal. Yet the experience describes in this article clearly indicates that it does work in Nepal and elsewhere. It is possible. It just needs to be done.

Notes

1 The authors express their thanks to Raphael Vergin from Culture for Peace and to JyotshnaShrestra for their many helpful ideas and constructive feedback and to all the share center dialogue facilitators on whose experience this article is built.

2 When reflecting on conflict, it is important to have names for the groups in conflict. One of the obstacles in this regard was that many ex-combatants did not like to be labelled as ex-PLA or 'Maoists' because they saw it as stigmatising (see also Timalsina 2014). Others felt 'ex-PLA' was at least much better then 'ex-combatants' (the official government and 'donor speak'). In fact, the common distinction made at that time between ex-combatants (or ex-PLA) and community members implies that the former are not community members. From a linguistic perspective, the social divide that needs to be overcome is reinforced by this. So the trainees decided to refer instead to the groups as old community members and new community members, which emphasises that the recently settled ex-combatants are now members of the community – at least they should be seen as such.

3 For more information see www.sharecenternepal.org, www.inmedio.de/ papers/The%20Share%20Center%20Broschuere.pdf, www.youtube.com/w atch?v=TolIuDMbiMw

4 We later found that this process of 'spreading the news' to the broader community needs more systematic support, e.g. through arts- and media-based activities (see 'Future Prospects and Challenges').

5 For a detailed methodological description, see Wuestehube/Splinter 2016.

6 Facilitators emphasise that it is not a drawing competition and demonstrate that just using symbols and child-like drawing is perfect, averting participants' fears that they would not be able to draw properly.

7 When we did this exercise the first time with the core group, many old community members told stories of how they were victimised by the state security forces, rather than directly confronting the PLA. When we did it again six months later, significantly more of them told stories in which the Maoists were perpetrators. We see this as an indication that trust had grown in the meantime.

8 There are widespread fears that re-traumatisation and flashbacks might occur. One could argue that only fully trained psychotherapist should deal with potentially traumatised people. While we agree that facilitators should be sensitised and know how to deal with flashbacks, we do not agree that those flashbacks are more likely to occur during such activities. The point about flashbacks is that they cannot be controlled by the person and they can happen

a certain incident in the storytelling exercise makes flashbacks rather unlikely. Since they could happen any time it is also inevitable that non-professionals have to deal with them. Rather than only focusing on a few highlyqualified professionals, many people need to be sensitised.

9   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeLF-nr7FSA

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