

# **The vicissitudes of empowerment in conflict-afflicted Nepal**

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## ***Abstract***

*While trauma work in crisis areas usually starts during acute conflict, the large aid community in Nepal has, after 10 years of civil war, yet to acknowledge that it has to deal with trauma. Although it is an advantage that Nepal has been spared the trauma boom with its medicalization of suffering and transfer of Western treatment methods the question has to be asked why in Nepal almost no means exist to support people in dealing with their experience of war.*

*This paper will explore how the logic of development agencies and the dynamics of the highly hierarchical Nepalese social system play on each other and reinforce each other's denial of chronic fear and extreme suffering. The paper suggests that aid organizations should integrate a psychosocial understanding of disempowerment caused by trauma, loss and grief so as to develop practical measures of addressing the social and collective fragmentation within the framework of their ongoing projects. By initiating such a process they will be able to also gain a better understanding of how to work with the structural violence of the social exclusion of large parts of society that is an underlying cause of the war.*

# **The vicissitudes of empowerment in conflict-afflicted Nepal**

## **1. Introduction**

Usually, in crisis areas, trauma work is initiated during the acute conflict. But the phenomena observed in the Balkans or in Africa's Great Lakes region where scores of relief organisations flew in to set up operations did not happen in the 10 years of civil war in Nepal. The streams of internally displaced people were not visible enough to be shown on international TV screens and the hunger is hidden away in the hills and mountains, often many hours or even days of walking distance from the nearest motorable road. Although over 13,000 people were killed and at one time forced disappearances in Nepal ranked highest in the world, the war between the Maoist guerrilla and the government's security forces did not make much of a splash in the international media.

Nepal thus has so far been spared the trauma boom. This is to be seen as an advantage: The medicalization of war experience and the transfer of Western treatment methods have extensively been criticized as counterproductive in other war areas<sup>1</sup>. Although I fundamentally agree with this critical view I will, in this paper, ask the question the other way round: Why is it that in Nepal there is such a paucity of means to support people in dealing with their experience of war?

There are very few professionals who could help develop a context-adequate form of dealing with the extreme suffering caused by the conflict and if someone gets really sick, they have nowhere to go. There are a little more than two dozen psychiatrists for 25 million people. Some, mostly child-focused agencies, have recently started a few psychosocial projects but their reach is limited. The bigger organizations have not responded to this dire need with any urgency. They have instead tried, often with great difficulties, to continue their development work throughout the acute phase of the war. Hardly any of their programs responded to the trauma and immense fear in the villages and the subsequent disintegration of community structures.

In this paper I will explore how the logic of development agencies and the dynamics of the highly hierarchical Nepalese social system play on each other and reinforce the denial of the suffering of victims of political violence. I will discuss measures that address the chronic fear of development workers and enable them to acknowledge the fear, trauma and loss in the people they work with. I believe that with this approach it is possible to sensitize and prepare staff to contribute to the transformation of the political and social conflicts at the level of their projects. The paper is based largely on my work with the Swiss Agency for Development and

Cooperation in Nepal (SDC). SDC is one major agency that is showing willingness to start addressing the psychosocial effects of the war.

## **2. In pursuit of equality and democracy**

In April 2006, hundreds of thousands of Nepalis marched all over the country for peace and for an end to King Gyanendra's autocratic rule. When he finally surrendered to the people's movement and reinstated the parliament which he had dismantled 15 months before in a royal coup, people were optimistic that the 10-year-old civil war would end and that, this time, democracy would work.

The victory of the April movement initiated a complicated transition process that should lead to the election of a constituent assembly and the end of the war between the guerilla of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the government forces. A new constitution, written by representatives of all sectors of society is a Maoist demand that has subsequently been adopted by the democratic parties. In none of the several democratic interludes in Nepal's history has a constitution been drafted by the people. The document that formed the basis of the 12 years of democracy preceding King Gyanendra's takeover has been interpreted as a symbol of an unfinished transition process from the feudal order to democracy.

In describing the long drawn-out political and social struggle of Nepalese to transform themselves from subjects of an absolute monarch to sovereign citizens, the Nepali writer, Manjushree Thapa, draws allusions to the French Revolution: "For over 75 years now, our liberal revolution has surged forward along the popular uprisings of the 1930's and 40's, and of 1978, 1989 and the past few years. We have a similar cast of characters: monarchs, clergy and nobility, bourgeoisie, and sans-culottes: the increasingly radicalized masses. We have the same struggle between elite self-interest and the enlightenment aspirations of ordinary people. And like the French revolution, our liberal revolution has been blighted by violent radicalism, regression and counterrevolution"<sup>2</sup>.

Throughout the 1990s and in the framework of a constitutional monarchy the king had limited powers but remained in command of the army and the country remained a Hindu kingdom. While the traditionally oppressed and marginalized social groups - women, the ethnic groups or Janajatis and the "untouchable" castes or Dalit - were now able to express themselves and to organize, "the political parties continued to operate on the basis of deeply embedded and mutually reinforcing feudal, caste and patriarchal norms and networks"<sup>3</sup>. Large parts of society remained excluded from the

political sphere, economic opportunity and development resources. The Maoists capitalized on a growing and wide-spread sense of injustice felt by the citizenry and included the gender-, ethnic- and caste-based disparities in their political agenda. Although the Maoists' "controlled state model has little space for individual or group freedoms or effective social change, they have been able to provide important symbolic recognition to disaffected women, Dalits and Janajatis and to bring their demands into public debate"<sup>4</sup>.

The elections to the constituent assembly will represent a landmark en route to a post-conflict society. But even if the UN should be able to satisfactorily manage the arms of both the Nepal Army and the People's Liberation Army and handle the Maoist militia that still controls large parts of the country, this democratic exercise will be overshadowed and influenced by the chronic fear of voters in the rural areas.

### **3. Fear in the villages**

Serious human rights violations have been committed by both conflict parties. An estimated 13,000 people were killed between the start of the war in 1996 and the beginning of the transition phase in April 2006<sup>5</sup>. Extrajudicial killings, torture, rapes, abductions and illegal detentions were widespread. Forced disappearances ranked the highest in the world in 2003 and 2004<sup>6</sup>.

When asked about their main fears, people in the rural areas where 80% of Nepalese live, often mention 'crossfire'. In fact, their fear of being caught in a shoot-out between the conflict parties is substantially larger than the likelihood of it happening. But 'crossfire' is a metaphor for the predicament of being trapped between the demands of the insurgents and the retaliation of the government forces as a way of life. For years, the Maoists controlled most of Nepal's rural territory away from the main roads and implemented with violence their heavy taxation system with which they financed the war<sup>7</sup>. Their ranks are filled with recruits many of whom have been forced to join in accordance with the policy "one family, one person". The self-organisation in the villages was and is seriously affected by the Maoist demands. Citizen's groups had and still have to negotiate with the rebels regarding financial contributions, activities and leadership and are as a result often disintegrating.

The government forces on the other hand fought the Maoists using indiscriminate violence against the civil population. Although the situation slightly improved 2005, when growing international pressure led to the establishment of the UN Office of the

High Commissioner for Human Rights, security forces continued to enjoy near total impunity from prosecution for human rights abuses.

As a result of living with constant threats and the accompanying fear, thousands have left the villages. The line between migration in search of more safety and in pursuit of better economic prospects is fine and often blurred. But then the war had economic consequences. Restricted mobility made market access for farmers more difficult, and seasonal labour opportunities disappeared with the flight of the landlords and the withdrawal of development activities. The already significant Nepali migrant labour force increased substantially over the last few years and the remittances from India, the Gulf countries and East Asia are clearly becoming the backbone of Nepal's crumbling economy<sup>8</sup>. In the villages, the women, children and old people struggle for survival. The agriculture on the terraced slopes in a rugged terrain is hard to manage when everybody joins hands, but it breaks the back of those who have been left behind to fend for themselves. The impact on the health of women and children has not yet been assessed but it might be substantial.

#### **4. The loneliness of victims of political violence**

The war has played out differently in each part of the country and in each village. In one settlement several people may have been killed or beaten, raped or disappeared. In another hamlet, a few hours walk away, only one family may have been directly affected. But what they all share is the experience of having been singled out by the perpetrators and as a result, set apart by society. Of the endless forms of harm and violations caused by this war, I will concentrate here on the anguish of relatives of killed persons because the "contamination" with death and terror provokes particularly strong reactions in their communities.

Suffering is traditionally addressed in different ways by the more than 50 caste and ethnic groups in Nepal. But a common response is "to immerse the person in human company and offer gifts. People come to sit all night with the bereaved after a death, and friends and neighbours will also fill the house of someone who has suffered lesser misfortune like a robbery or the elopement of a child...The presence of others and gifts that acknowledge relationship bring comfort to those in distress"<sup>9</sup>. According to the observations of Nepali development workers, in many villages relatives and neighbours come to comfort the mourning family and attend the death rites of those killed by the conflict parties but afterwards the affected families are mostly left alone to take care of themselves.

One key issue for families of killed persons is in Nepal, as in many other war areas, the missing bodies<sup>10</sup>. Sometimes, the family learned of the killing only days or weeks after the event as when a person was killed far away from home. But even when they killed him or her in front of the family and community, the perpetrators often dragged the body away, threw it into a river or left it nearby, but they forbade cremation. Not knowing the circumstances and the date of death or not having access to the body makes the performance of the necessary death rites difficult or even impossible. For Hindus, it is important for the dead to be cremated immediately and death rites to be performed for 13 days to help the soul in the afterlife. If the rites cannot be performed as prescribed, Hindus believe the dead will not find peace and will haunt the living. It is a fundamental belief that the unappeased spirits of the dead affect the well-being of the living and are cause of mental and physical disturbances they might be afflicted by.

The victimization sets in motion a traumatic process that often includes further impoverishment and economic deprivation, and sometimes a drastic change of family relations or displacement. The sudden and brutal death, mired in political controversy, causes extreme fear in the family members. They are frightened of further persecution, of a life without the loved one, of the future and the present. They feel guilty for their inability to have protected the person when he was alive and for not being able to help the dead find peace. Their inability to accept the death and their pain are exacerbated by the fact that they cannot share their distress with others who stay away as they try to protect themselves from potential retaliations by the perpetrators. Also, the extreme suffering of the affected family members frightens others and provokes in them feelings of shame and helplessness.

Victims of political violence may generally not be embraced by the communities, but the stigma is especially strong for the widows. In Hinduism, women are responsible for the health and well-being of their husbands and are even blamed for something happening to him. Such attitudes towards widows are reflected in the words used to humiliate them: "witch, eater of husband, she who makes others impotent, destroyer, bearer of bad luck, the one who should have died"<sup>11</sup>. In most social groups, a widow is not allowed to wear red clothes, bangles or *sindur* (the symbols of adult, married women). People laugh if a widow wears new clothes. They consider it a bad omen if they see a widow in the morning or if they have to sit next to a widow, e.g. on a long bus journey.

In spite of this general attitude, however, development staff also report that widows are often accepted by their neighbours. The picture that emerges is not consistent, as in some places widows are more marginalized than in others, and in some social groups remarriage is easier than in others. But even when society accepts an individual widow, the prejudice is deeply rooted and self-recrimination is often internalized by the widow about her status and about herself. In addition, it is socially difficult to live as a single woman. Women not protected by a husband or a senior male in the household are socially and economically vulnerable and insecure.

## **5. Exclusion and inclusion in Nepali society**

The marginalization of conflict victims thus adds a new dimension to the problem of social exclusion that characterizes Nepal's society. Who has access to influence and resources has for centuries been based on one's position in the caste system, on the historical and geographic distinction between the hills and the plains and on the geographic distance to the capital Kathmandu.

The caste system is the most prominent aspect of Nepal's social order. At the top of the hierarchy are the Brahmin or priest caste and the Chhettri or warrior caste. At the lowest end of the totem are the occupational groups that are considered "untouchable". They now call themselves Dalit. Members of the highest and the lowest castes, Brahmin, Chettri and Dalit, are originally in-migrating Hindus from India. They spoke an Indo-Aryan language on which modern Nepali is based. The middle ranks were assigned to the indigenous ethnic groups by the ruling Brahmin/Chettri<sup>12</sup>. Within their own societies they have no such ranking and they mostly speak Tibeto-Burman languages. They are often Buddhists or some variations of animists or shamanists. However, the culture of the dominant Brahmin and Chettri has had a significant influence on them in various ways, though the extent to which they subscribe to Hindu high caste values differs between groups and within groups, and depend on their social and geographical position and their aspirations within a political and social system dominated by the high castes.

While the democratic constitution of 1990 declares that the State shall not discriminate against citizens on the basis of religion, caste, sex or ethnicity, it is widely acknowledged that caste- and gender-based discrimination have been codified into Nepal law and governance. For example, an amendment states that "traditional practices" at religious places are not considered discriminatory. In other words, Dalit are still not permitted to visit temples and shrines. Their mere presence would ritually pollute the religious sites. The fear of high-caste Hindus to be ritually polluted through

contact with “untouchables” is managed by the numerous caste rules that keep people apart and that, for example, do not allow Brahmins or Chhettris to accept water or food from Dalit. These values might now be openly questioned but they are deeply-entrenched and have a profound hold on people. I once asked a Brahmin health worker after she came back from visiting a Dalit family whose head of household had a history of reacting aggressively to development staff if he perceived their behaviour as humiliating, whether she was scared to deal with these clients. She replied: “No, I am not scared as long as I don’t have to eat in their home.” Her reaction first perplexed me. Then I realized that the transgression of caste rules cause fear and shame even in outwardly progressive people. Caste is the basis of a highly complex social hierarchy that through modernisation has become entwined with additional factors such as economic status and the educational level. Each contact between individuals is always first a contact between members of their respective social groups. Breaking through these barriers to the person behind the social category is often difficult.

Patriarchal norms cross-cut these hierarchies and place women at the lower end of their respective groups. Until recently, Nepal was among the few countries in which women had a lower life expectancy than men. The structure responsible for this biological paradox is still largely in place although recent data show that women now live 0.6 years longer than men<sup>13</sup>. Women continue to be underrepresented and underpaid. They make up less than 10% of representatives at all the important political levels. Fewer girls than boys enrol in school and women earn about one-third of a man’s salary for skilled labour; in only 11% of all households do women have legal ownership of land<sup>14</sup>. The social values governing gender relations differ significantly between the many ethnic nationalities and social and religious groups, thus, “the Nepali woman” as a homogenous category does not exist<sup>15</sup>. But to a higher or lesser degree, all family and community structures are based on male superiority.

Throughout the democratic period of the 1990s, movements against discrimination and exclusion of the Dalit, the Janajati and the women have gained strength. What convinced the government and the international donors to ultimately get serious about inclusion, however, was the power of the Maoists who mobilized with demands for greater equality. As a result, Nepal’s Tenth Plan (2002-2007) identifies “social exclusion as one of the three main aspects of poverty and acknowledges exclusion as the main reason for deprivation suffered by women, certain caste and ethnic groups and people living in remote areas”<sup>16</sup>

International development agencies that have played a significant role in Nepal's affairs for the last 40 years<sup>17</sup> are now all attempting to address the problem. Recently, they have been hiring more staff from the disadvantaged groups to counteract the gross over-representation of high caste people in their organisations. More efforts are being made to allocate resources directly to deprived communities. Women, Dalit and Janajati are consciously encouraged to participate in development projects. Very often, though, the development workers are trying to mend the deep structural problems with simplistic measures intended to increase the percentage of discriminated persons on their list of beneficiaries. The mere fact that a Dalit woman has been ushered in to attend a previously exclusively high-caste community group does not usually change the traditional communication patterns nor the decisions taken by the group. All too often, the Dalit woman remains silent and the village elites continue their business as they had always done. This pattern is now so widespread in aid projects that it already has a name. It is called "participatory exclusion"<sup>18</sup>.

The aid agencies struggle to effectively address the structural violence of exclusion. Their difficulties to address the effects of direct violence, however, are even greater. Ten years into the war, most organisations are still reacting to the suffering of conflict victims as they had for years reacted to the discrimination of the Dalit: they acknowledge the stigma but are unable or even unwilling to deal with it.

## **6. Developing a psychosocial approach to dealing with the effects of the conflict**

SDC Nepal has gone further than most organisations in dealing with the conflict. The office was a key actor in promoting human rights and has been involved, through a special advisor, in efforts for peace building at the state building diplomacy level. Operationally, SDC has adapted its development projects to the conditions of armed conflict by combining the work for long term development goals with quick impact livelihood-focused interventions. The emphasis on measures to promote social inclusion – starting with hiring more women and people not belonging to high castes – was strengthened. In order to make it possible to work at all, much effort went into continuous monitoring and analysis of risks, security measures for staff and the dialogue with the conflict parties<sup>19</sup>. Yet, SDC has realized that working 'on the conflict'<sup>20</sup> and thus contributing more effectively to conflict transformation would only be possible if it began to take seriously the psychosocial impact of the war on the people it works with. This conclusion is fully supported by the following observations from the field.

## **6.1 Working around the conflict**

A health project, located in the North-East of the capital Kathmandu, has been working with local health facilities and communities in the district since the early 1990s. Women in the villages and hamlets are encouraged to organize in mothers' groups. In these groups women discuss the reasons for their poor health status and learn about relevant health practices. Together, they decide to construct latrines or water taps or to take other measures to improve health conditions. For their health training, the project's field workers have been following a curriculum that includes reproductive health, child health and HIV/AIDS among others. This curriculum has not changed in recent years to include information and discussions on the connection between political violence and health. Field workers avoid speaking about trauma or fear even when the groups are directly affected.

For example, while women were meeting in a health post, the Maoists and the army were battling close by. The women panicked but the field worker was able to block the entrance and prevent them from running out into the bullets' range. Subsequently, the army came to the meeting place and demanded to know why the women were there – the security forces have always reacted with suspicion to people's gatherings. After a long and tense discussion the soldiers left and the exhausted women went home. The incident and the women's fear were not discussed in the group, neither that day or later.

In another village, the Maoists came to a meeting and demanded that the women joined one of their groups. Following that, the women avoided gathering in public, choosing instead to meet in one of the group members' houses. One-third of the mothers, however, preferred to stay away from the group altogether. The staff assumed that they had left because "they might have been scared to be abducted by the Maoists like their children had been abducted earlier" or "they might have feared that the army would come while the rebels were there to renew their call". But the field workers had never contacted these women and were not sure what their reasons really were or whether something could have been done to encourage their return to the group. Instead, one field worker rationalized that "there is no need to have them in the group because the executive committee members are still there and so the work can continue"; and another staff explained that "our rules do not say that we have to bring people back when they don't want to come".

The field workers brought up similar arguments when another incident was discussed: After the husband of one of the executive committee members' in another mothers'

group was killed, she no longer felt able to participate in the group. They thus elected another executive committee member in her place and continued the work. The widow remained absent. She was never visited by the field worker. He, like the other people in the community, tried to avoid contact with a person who had been singled out and victimized.

The reactions of this project's staff are in no way exceptional. The teams of most projects I was in contact with over the last few years had similar strategies of working "around the conflict"<sup>21</sup>. The reasons for adopting this strategy are a complex web of mutually reinforcing factors, but the key issue is fear.

## **6.2 Fear in the organisation**

During the acute conflict phase and, to a much lesser degree also in the present phase of transition, development staff members that visited remote villages were under constant threat of being asked for information or being labeled as spies by the Nepal Army and the Maoists. They were interrogated at each checkpoint and they faced the risk of being shot at; some were arrested by the government forces and hundreds were intimidated or even abducted for a shorter or longer period of time if the rebels didn't agree with the way the project was operating or if the project refused for example to register with the Maoists' "new government". The majority of development workers had to pay a part of their monthly salary to the rebels as forced donations and faced retaliations from the security forces if that was found out.

SDC and most of the big development agencies have taken seriously the risks their employees faced. They hired staff to carry out regular risk assessments and to guide the personnel in the negotiation of risky situations. While it became good practice to train staff on practical measures to improve their safety, personal feelings related to threat and security were given less systematic attention.

Fear protects people from danger and helps them to react adequately. "However, if the threat becomes chronic, then fear becomes chronic too. It becomes part of the individual's psychic structure and gains an existence independent of the original threat; people stay psychologically on guard even if the actual danger has long gone. Chronic fear is the social by-product of living through war and crises. The behavioural patterns it induces are continuous watchfulness and reserve. Feelings and opinions, especially if they draw attention to one's own weakness, are only expressed with great reticence"<sup>22</sup>. The collective silence protects people from each other but also

isolates them because it stops them from sharing what is in fact their common preoccupation.

Chronic fear prevents people from judging situations realistically; it becomes very difficult to distinguish safe and dangerous situations. Some become overcautious and others deny their fear and the extent of the risk entailed. But every situation has to be judged on its own before it can be decided, for example, whether it is possible to visit a family after the daughter was disappeared by the government forces or in what form it is possible to speak with a health group about for example the recently abducted school children. Field workers felt much safer avoiding such unclear situations, all the more so as field staff had never been prepared to understand and address the psychosocial effects of the war. They had not been enabled to lead a group discussion on how fear influences children's health or what kind of support the widow who had left the group would need. The fear, therefore, was not only of possible retaliation by the conflict parties but equally that of confronting themselves with the powerful emotions and the suffering expressed by groups or individuals that had been targeted.

The multitude of unaddressed fears finally also led to security lapses. In SDC as in many organisations it was a problem that field staff did not report serious incidences such as the abduction of district team members to the central office in Kathmandu. When I discussed the reasons for this with a group of Nepali middle-level employees of an international NGO, they cited their fear of being reprimanded and losing face because the abduction might be perceived by their supervisors as the kidnapped persons' failure to react correctly in the situation or the team leaders' misjudgement of the security situation; they also feared losing their jobs if the head office closed down the project in response to the intimidation by the Maoists.

The Nepalese have learned all their life that in a strict hierarchical system it is safer not to trust in the empathy and understanding of the higher-ups. Instead, it is better to hide problems and keep up a brave front. The chronic fear as a result of the conflict thus became entwined with the chronic suspicion of the motives of those higher or lower than oneself. The hierarchically structured social experience of Nepali staff and the hierarchical organisational structure of international aid organisations mutually reinforced each other and aggravated the risks but also the loneliness of those suffering from chronic fear.

### **6.3 Groups versus individuals**

SDC was originally reluctant to work with the psychosocial effects of the conflict, because they assumed that this would imply greater focus on individuals, and to make things more difficult, on the emotional problems of individuals. Development professionals are almost always suspicious and scared of psychological processes. They believe it is too complicated, too private and too messy a thing to get involved in<sup>23</sup>. In addition, aid agencies have to justify their spending in terms of the number of people they reach and that, it seems, would contradict the focus on individual problems.

Development efforts are geared to helping citizens improve their living conditions. People are supported to acquire knowledge, skills and capacity to better their livelihood and to pressurize institutions into delivering adequate services. In this process, all sorts of groups have been formed and facilitated: groups that motivate people to accumulate savings and give each other loans, groups to manage community resources such as water or forest, groups to overcome illiteracy and to learn about one's rights, among many others. The World Bank has in a recent study estimated that Nepal has about 400,000 local-level sponsored groups that are being monitored by development agencies<sup>24</sup>. The group approach helps people to realize their power to change together with others that have similar interests and experiences. But it can also be a powerful instrument to keep the weaker individuals out. As has been pointed out above, groups are often "elite-captured"<sup>25</sup> and real participation by the marginalized is difficult

In one project I was told that there were no persons in their groups that had been victimized by the conflict parties: "These people have either left the district, or they belong to the disadvantaged groups of whom many are not participating - or maybe they don't feel like coming." This was an assumption on the part of the field workers as they did not know well the history of all the participants in the many groups they facilitated or monitored. And this is exactly the crucial point: The development workers see the groups, not the people who make up the groups - or those that stay away. And these people are more than representatives of high-caste or Dalit, women or Janajati. The group approach seems to enforce the cultural tendencies of seeing the other as representative of a social group rather than as a person with an individual history, with personal values, hopes and fears that either hinder or further his or her participation.

Often, the relationship between facilitators and group members is ritualized and reduced to passing on development messages or technical skills. This prevents facilitators from establishing the genuine contact required to help understand and address what really preoccupies the group participants. For example in a project that extends vocational training to young people, I asked the staff why they knew so little of their trainees beyond their caste, their age and their educational background. One young man said: "If we ask them, they will tell their problems and will expect us to provide solutions. But we can't fulfil such expectations." This answer sums up the misunderstanding about empowerment. People will find their own answers if they have a space where they feel accepted and secure enough to explore their problems.

Development workers must start to create such spaces, if they really want to make a contribution to overcoming the emotional and social fragmentation caused by the direct political violence and also by the structural violence of the social order.

#### **6.4 Disempowerment and Empowerment**

As most development programs aim at the empowerment of project participants, the question has to be asked what empowerment means for the work with conflict-affected people in Nepal. In the context of highly disempowering traumatic experiences caused by socio-political processes, recovery is linked to regaining the power to control one's situation and to address and reduce social injustice. I have pointed out earlier that the key issue in the disempowerment process in Nepal is chronic fear. Although trauma and fear are closely linked though not identical, I will not focus here on the differences as I am mainly interested in exploring the relationship between the processes of disempowerment and empowerment. On a working level, I propose to understand trauma as a process of extreme disempowerment that is always accompanied by intense and chronic fear.

`Power` in the word empowerment has several dimensions. It relates to the `power from within`, i.e. the self-acceptance and self-respect that come from understanding one's history and present situation and from the ability of recognizing how one's interests are related to those of others. Power from within is connected to the perception of oneself as being entitled to make changes and having the ability to take the necessary action<sup>26</sup>. Closely connected to power from within is `power with`. It is based on the realization that individuals are not alone but part of a group and that change can take place when people work together. Finally, `power over`, in the context of empowerment, relates to power relations that need to be changed and to the "aim of bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it"<sup>27</sup>.

As described above, many present development efforts focus mainly on 'the power with' and the 'power over'. The three 'powers' are connected, however, and one will not be effective without the others. Moreover, empowerment is not likely to be achieved if the extent of the disempowerment is not fully understood and acknowledged. Development workers usually just focus on those social and material aspects of a person's or community's situation that seem to be relevant for the issue they are concerned with – for example vocational training or health or literacy. They must, however, begin to look at a person or community more holistically. In this, it is crucial for them not only to expand their analysis of the social and material disempowerment but to also understand how this is linked with the emotional fragmentation. If people are helped to face their feelings of helplessness and despair, their losses and adverse life changes, they will develop and make better use of their own resources.

To support successfully the empowerment of conflict-affected people, the development workers must become capable of listening, building trust, and supporting people to make changes. The facilitation of empowerment in groups and with individuals requires three basic attitudes<sup>28</sup>:

- *Respect*: The listener should take an interest in the specific situation and history of the people he or she works with and respect their way of expressing themselves. Instantly trying to calm them or telling them what to do will not help but add to the traumatized persons' feelings of rejection and inferiority. Treating people with respect means acknowledging their destruction as well as their capacities for continuing through life. When people truly start to talk, respect means staying with them instead of leaving them alone with their grief.
- *Comprehension*: The facilitators should have a minimal understanding of how fear and trauma changes people and communities and what factors will influence these psychosocial processes in a healing or destructive sense.
- *Relationship*: Most important, the person that facilitates the empowerment process should be ready to enter a real relationship with the traumatized persons. If the relationship provides the framework for trust and protection it will allow the person to develop initiatives and to start helping herself.

Empowerment can only be successful if the facilitators themselves are empowered. It is thus essential for development workers to have a space to look at their own experiences of fear and loss. In the context of the hierarchical social order of Nepal,

they have to start reflecting on their position of power and dependency vis-à-vis their organisation as well as to the persons they work with.

## **6.5 Key issues in transition**

As Nepal has been spared the trauma boom (so far), we have a chance of developing an approach to dealing with the suffering of conflict-affected people and communities that is appropriate to the context. This means on the one hand addressing the key issues of traumatized people and on the other hand taking seriously the possibilities and constraints of development workers who will have to do the job. In this regard, I have been working with the field staff of selected SDC-projects in an action research mode.

Initially, staff members were highly ambivalent. They showed interest in overcoming their helplessness but also feared getting involved in a dangerous, unknown field. The first step thus was to actually confront them with what they were so afraid of and to motivate them to get in contact with project beneficiaries that had been targeted by the conflict parties. Identifying these people was sometimes complicated as many choose to keep their experiences private out of fear and shame. But finally the staff members sat down and listened to what the people wanted to tell. And they wanted to talk. The workers came back overwhelmed and shocked, but also touched and alive. They had not expected to find so much distress among the people they work with but they also were surprised at how easy it could be to find out. For each of the staff, without exception, it was the first time they broke through the usual social and professional distance and had an intensely emotional and personal talk with 'beneficiaries'.

Subsequently, we had to work on understanding the key issues of the people they had talked to and thus looked in detail at each person's relationship to family members, relatives and neighbours, at his or her emotional problems and material assets and needs<sup>29</sup>. This demonstrated to the field workers how closely interlinked the emotional status is with the social and economic situation and that most families need support in all three areas.

As a result, the employees all wanted to learn counselling. That was unrealistic as staff could not be sent for longer periods of time to training courses. Instead, they attend short workshops and regular supervision sessions where they can learn communication, particularly listening skills and some very basic psychosocial concepts that will enable them to better understand the people they work with, and, equally

important, their own reactions. Development workers will never become counsellors or therapists but they can learn to befriend people in need, to break their isolation, to form a bond and expand the boundaries of trust. In this process, they will listen when people share their pain and worries and will also help them practically in accessing required resources e.g. a loan to improve their economic situation or advice from an agricultural expert on how to improve the yield of their small field etc. Families also need to be encouraged and assisted to report their case to human rights organisations. At the moment, these organisations pressurize the army, the police and the Maoists to disclose the whereabouts of the disappeared persons and will continue to work towards finding the truth about the atrocities of the past ten years. However, many violations have never been reported.

The introduction of such accompaniment is easier in projects that foresee work on an individual level as for example in the coaching of people to improve their livelihood. Most projects, however, have a very limited scope to support individuals. Therefore, it is the work with the collective that has to be adjusted. While discussing key issues that needed to be addressed to help conflict-affected persons to recover, it quickly turned out that many of the identified concerns were equally valid for other project participants. For example, in a vocational training program for future migrant labourers, the separation from their families and the fear of future living and working conditions in the Gulf countries caused distress for trainees that left their homes in search of better economic opportunities - as much as for others who fled persecution. Thus, the project has now decided that they must not only pass on technical skills but help trainees to reflect on and prepare for the migration process. In a project for the improvement of living conditions in the brick kilns of the Kathmandu valley, the staff discovered that young workers are preoccupied with the many insecurities connected to adolescence and with their uncertain economic perspectives. - In other words, by listening to the fears and apprehensions of traumatized people, project staff has begun to understand better the psychosocial needs of the people that participate in their projects. The work with the collective can thus become more meaningful as it will more effectively facilitate the gaining of 'power within' and the power to change together with others. At the same time, addressing common key issues helps in the reintegration of victims of political violence.

The big question that remained, however, was how to actually address the conflict issue. Was it safe to talk openly in a group of trainees among whom there were Maoists while others had been victimized by the rebels? Was it safe to speak to a women's group in a Maoist-controlled area about the psychosocial effects of political

violence? This fear did not subside after the victory of the April movement and the beginning of the transition. Although the threats clearly decreased and the space for open discussions grew, the situation, especially in the rural areas, has remained volatile. The project staff argued rightly that they did not want to take any actions which could provoke the conflict parties as there was no guarantee for the ceasefire to last.

Chronic fear will remain part of the psychic structure even if the political actors reach a satisfactory agreement. At the same time, it is this fear that prevents people from transforming the conflict. It will prevent them from beginning to share their experience of the past 10 years and it will hinder them in exercising their democratic rights, such as expressing their views or voting freely. If staff should contribute to help communities deal with these dynamics, they must first be helped to understand better the complex weave of their own fear structure: some of the strands are related more to the political violence, some are strung to the dependencies and insecurities of the hierarchical social order; and for the psychosocial work, fears are related to the confrontation with extreme suffering. With regular discussions and periodic supervisions we try to raise the development workers' self-awareness but also their confidence in relating to conflict-affected people. We try to work consciously towards building more understanding and trust between the hierarchy levels in the projects. In the initial phase of exploring the options for psychosocial activities, middle-level staff members are involved in what they usually do not involve themselves with, such as group facilitation and visiting individual families. This is one small step to help them comprehend what their subordinates are faced with and will, hopefully, enhance empathy and team work. If we succeed better in dealing with the development workers' chronic fear, it will slowly be possible to expand the boundaries of what is possible to talk about with individuals and groups in the villages.

In many conflict areas, aid organisations send traumatized persons to psychosocial programs and do not in their "normal" projects address the suffering of people. They, thus, split off difficult histories and emotions by delegating them to the care of specialists. In the above described work with SDC-projects, we too need specialized professionals. Their expertise is required to build the capacity of field workers in addressing fear, trauma and loss, and if staff does not have the resources to assist a severely traumatized person they must have the possibility to ask for professional support. But in our model psychosocial specialists remain a back-up for the field workers who acknowledge and address the war experience in their ongoing work with

communities. With this approach we contribute to overcoming fragmentation, to integrating trauma instead of splitting it off and denying it.

## 7. Conclusion

The difficulties of development agencies in Nepal to acknowledge and address the extreme suffering of victims of political violence is closely linked to the difficulties they have had for years to deal with the structural violence of the socio-political exclusion of women, Dalit and ethnic nationalities. One factor that prevents aid agencies from integrating the marginalized - including traumatized - persons is their insistence on only dealing with the collective. Although groups are an effective vehicle for empowerment, they can be equally effective in reconfirming existing power structures and in keeping the weaker members of society out. In order to deal with such contradictions, the complex disempowerment processes of social groups and equally of the people who make up these groups must be better understood. If development agencies and their staff could overcome their fear of the individual and start looking at how to address fear, trauma and loss, they could get engaged in a process of understanding and taking seriously the vulnerabilities and the needs of individuals across boundaries of caste and class<sup>30</sup>. With this, the agencies could truly contribute to the process of democratization and make an important step towards a more human form of aid.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Summerfield, Derek. The Impact of War and Atrocity on Civilian Populations: Basic Principles for NGO Interventions and a Critique of Psychosocial Trauma Projects, *Relief and Rehabilitation Network*, Paper 14, (1996); Becker, David. *Die Erfindung des Traumas – Verflochtene Geschichten*. Freiburg: Edition Freitag, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Thapa, Manjushree. Realism and Revolution, in: *Kathmandu Post*, 24 January 2006.

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank and DFID, Unequal citizens, Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal. Summary. Kathmandu: 2006, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Nepal's Civil War. The Conflict Resumes*. HRW Briefing Paper, March 2006.

<sup>6</sup> "Nepali security forces have established themselves as one of the world's worst perpetrators of enforced disappearances ... According to [the] United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances, in 2003 and 2004 Nepal recorded the highest number of new cases of 'disappearances' in the world", statement by Human Rights Watch, New York, 1 March 2005, available online at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/03/01/nepal10224.htm>

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<sup>7</sup> The Maoists collect 5-25% of everybody with a cash income such as teachers and civil servants and demand in-kind contribution from framers who have to feed the combatants. From: International Crisis Group, Nepal's Maoists: Their Aims, Structure and Strategy, *Asia Report*, 104, 27 October 2005, 17. Also available online at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3768&l=1>

<sup>8</sup> Singh, Pranab M. Remittance Economy. *Himal Southasian*, March 2006. Central bank statistics reveal that the Nepali economy in 2004/05 earned over USD 922 million in remittances from overseas workers – accounting for 12.4 percent of national GDP.

<sup>9</sup> Pettigrew, Judith. “Guns, Kinship and Fear: Maoists among the Tamu-mai (Gurungs)”. In: *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences*. Edited by D.N. Gellner. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2003. Similar forms of dealing with suffering are described in Desjarlais, Robert R. Body and Emotion. The Aesthetics of Illness and Healing in the Nepal Himalayas. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1994, 305-325.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication by Mandira Sharma, Advocacy Forum, and by field workers of the emergency project for conflict-affected children in 10 Mid-Western districts of Nepal, funded by Terre des homes, August 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Statements by field workers of the Terre des hommes funded project, quoted in CMC, Workshop report, May 2006 (internal document).

<sup>12</sup> The World Bank and DFID, op.cit., 5-6

<sup>13</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics. *Gender Disaggregated Indicators, Nepal*. Kathmandu: National Planning Commission, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> World Bank and DFID, op.cit. Women gained at the most 6% of the seats in the Lower House throughout the 1990s, at the local level (Village Development Committees and District Development Committees) women's representation was about 7% and all of the democratic parties had less than 10% women in the central executive committees.

<sup>15</sup> Tamang, Seira. “The politics of ,Developing Nepali women’”, in: *State of Nepal*, edited by Kanak Dixit and Shastri Ramachandaran, Lalitpur: Himal, 2002, 161-175.

<sup>16</sup> World Bank and DIFID. Op.cit., 49

<sup>17</sup> Nepal has received more financial aid per capita than any other country according to McFarlane, Alain. Development and Fatalism, in: *Nepal in the Nineties*, edited by Michael Hutt, New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1993,111.

<sup>18</sup> Agarwal, Bina. Participatory Exclusions, Community Forestry and Gender: An Analysis for South Asia and a Conceptual Framework, *World Development*, Vol 29 No 10, (2001): 1623-48.

<sup>19</sup> Pfaffenholz, Thania. Conflict-sensitive Development in the Swiss Nepal Program. Summary of main results of the CSPM mission to Nepal, 10-25 February 2006. [www.sdc.org.np/resources](http://www.sdc.org.np/resources)

<sup>20</sup> ‘To work in the conflict’, ‘on the conflict’ and ‘around the conflict’ are terms to describe different levels of conflict-sensitivity of a development program in situation of armed conflict. While working around the conflict means looking at the conflict as an obstacle and trying to work around it, working on the conflict implies that the program contributes actively to conflict transformation. From: SDC, Conflict Sensitive Programme Management CSPM. Integrating Conflict Sensitivity and Prevention of Violence into SDC Programmes, January 2006. [http://162.23.39.120/dezaweb/ressources/resource\\_en\\_24650.pdf](http://162.23.39.120/dezaweb/ressources/resource_en_24650.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Becker, David und Barbara Weyermann. Gender, Conflict Transformation and the Psychosocial Approach. Bern: SDC, 2006, Sheet 2. Also available online at: [http://162.23.39.120/dezaweb/ressources/ressource\\_en\\_91135.htm](http://162.23.39.120/dezaweb/ressources/ressource_en_91135.htm)

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<sup>23</sup> Becker, David. Die Erfindung des Traumas – Verflochtene Geschichten. Freiburg: Edition Freitag, 2006, 276.

<sup>24</sup> World Bank and DFID, op.cit. XXV

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Rowlands, *Questioning Empowerment*, Oxford: Oxfam, 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Rowlands, 13

<sup>28</sup> Becker, David. Dealing with the consequences of organised violence in trauma work. 2000.  
[http://www.berghof-handbook.net/uploads/download/becker\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.berghof-handbook.net/uploads/download/becker_handbook.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Analytical framework for disempowerment – empowerment processes, see Becker, David und Barbara Weyermann, op.cit., Sheet 5a

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the connection between trauma discourse and democratic values see: Brunner, José. Politik der Traumatisierung. Zur Geschichte des verletzbaren Individuums. *WestEnd*, Heft 1, 2004, 7-24.

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