

# FROM SHARED TRUTHS TO JOINT RESPONSIBILITY (SHA:RE): COMBINING STORYTELLING, DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION AS A MEANS OF TRUST-BUILDING WITHIN OR BETWEEN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

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In her lecture about reconciliation at EPRIE 2014, Professor Lily Gardner Feldman from John Hopkins University referred to leading political analysts who state that a) the relationships between China, Japan and South Korea will be crucial for the future global security, and b) the way these countries develop their relations depends very much on how they deal with their past, particularly with Second World War atrocities, war remembrance-culture and frozen territorial disputes. Professor Gardner Feldman emphasized that reconciliation efforts on the governmental level have to be complemented by corresponding activities on different levels of civil society, which is very much in line with the state of the art in the field of conflict transformation.

This clearly includes interpersonal, people-to-people dialogues. However, experience, particularly from youth exchange programs, shows that exposure to people from the ›other side‹<sup>1</sup> does not necessarily lead to overcoming prejudices or a move towards reconciliation – even if people are coming together with these aspirations. In many cases, there is a risk of an adverse dynamic for many dialogue projects: When confronted with the perspective of the other group, participants time and again become reluctant, feel blamed and therefore refuse to

accept it. This frustrates members of the other side who then accuse the interlocutors of not being interested in a truthful dialogue. Sadly, this holds true even for very open-minded representatives of each group who have every intention to move towards reconciliation.

A dialogue project in the Japan-China-Korea context would face the risk of initiating the same destructive dynamic. This is why we have to look for a way to design dialogue processes so that the risk of conflicts being reinforced is minimized. This is an even bigger challenge if both sides try to counterbalance their own experience as victims and their own suffering with the other side's sorrowful experiences. Every attempt to obtain recognition for one's personal history of suffering is then answered by a reference to the atrocities that the others have lived through. If this vicious circle is not interrupted, none of the parties obtain the recognition they seek, and no steps are made towards reconciliation.

The approach ›From shared truths to joint responsibility‹ (sha:re) is a design for a dialogue project that makes it possible to engage with the experiences of suffering of each side without the risk of creating the dynamic that was explained above. The new understanding between the participants often leads then to a greater willingness to work together towards a better future. This motivation is used to plan the implementation of concrete activities. In order to achieve joint responsibility for projects, especially in complicated settings, conflict analyses that integrate each group's perspective are essential. Such methods include scenario techniques, systemic feedback-loops, mapping or conflict-perspective analysis.

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*When speaking of ›others‹, we emphasize a difference (gender, religion, nationality) between groups. This harbours the risk of fueling the reconstruction rather than the deconstruction of differences, even if one wants to do the latter. However, if one wants to address an explicit conflict, one has to label different conflict parties. Simplifications are inevitable in this case because without them, it would be impossible to develop a strategy of whom to engage with so as to establish a dialogue. On the other hand, when dealing with people who don't see themselves as part of a conflict, addressing them as conflict parties might be counterproductive.*

The share approach is one way to re-establish trust within torn societies through a combined approach of mediation, dialogue and story-telling. A project in Nepal that focused on fostering the re-integration of former Maoist rebels illustrates the potential of this method, and providing interesting insights for the Japan-China-Korea context as well.

## INTRODUCTION

*Chitwan, southern Nepal, December 24th 2013: Around 60 guests are sitting in the audience, the atmosphere is rather tense. All of the guests are inhabitants of the four surrounding communities. Half of them are long-standing residents of the communities. The other half consists of former fighters of the Maoist Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) who have come to settle in the communities. A short play is being performed by freshly trained mediators and facilitators. On stage, we see two groups glaring at each other aggressively. The host briefly introduces them to the audience: One is a group of former Maoist combatants, the other a group of long-standing residents. The dispute escalates quickly and the parties start pushing and pulling each other around with the former combatants shouting: »We also are in need of water! Water is a human right!« and the villagers shout back: »We don't have enough water for ourselves! Start building your own plumbing systems! After all, you received plenty of money from the government!« At this point the curtain falls and the host wants the audience to guess how the scene will continue: »There'll be more and more people joining!« »They'll kill each other!« Having heard this, the host curiously peeks behind the curtain... and even peeks twice...*



*Caption: Black box theatre (in reference to Boals »Forumtheater«): The decisive action is not displayed on stage. Credit goes to Amir Vitis (Bern), mediator and educator, for the idea and implementation. Photo: inmedio*

*The curtain rises again and what we see is the opponents chatting with each other in a friendly manner, arranging get-togethers. The host turns to the audience: »This must be a miracle! But no,*

*it's not a miracle, it's mediation!« At this point a mediator enters the stage and briefly describes mediation. At the end, he says »However, one doesn't have to wait until a conflict occurs— we also work with dialogue groups. This is where we prevent conflicts from escalating by talking about the past, present and future together«. Having heard this, we see the end of the play: a short scene of such a dialogue group meeting, with all participants sitting together on the floor in a circle and talking with each other.*

## BACKGROUND

The civil-war in Nepal lasted 10 years, with a Maoist rebel army – the so called Peoples Liberation Army, PLA – fighting the king's royal army and police aiming at taking down the widespread semi-feudal system of Nepal. Citizens disappeared or were massacred, tortured or raped, and children were recruited as soldiers. In November 2006, a peace agreement was signed and consequently the estimated 19,000 Maoist combatants were assembled in so-called cantonments. Against all original expectations, it took another six years to come to a political agreement which led to the re-integration of the ex-combatants and the dissolution of the so-called cantonments in April 2012. A small number of the former Maoist Combatants were integrated into the Nepalese army. The larger part decided to re-enter civilian life and settled down as larger groups within the communities close to former cantonments.

Civilians in the villages of the war-affected regions at times displayed sympathy for the Maoists. However, as is usually the case in guerrilla wars, they had to suffer atrocities from both sides. Not only were they threatened by national security forces which bombarded their villages and arrested and detained alleged supporters or actual supporters of the Maoists. They also were threatened by the rebel army which was in need of hide-outs, violently acquired money and food and also executed community members who they suspected to be traitors. This explains the ambivalent feelings between the communities and the former combatants who arrived to settle there. On the one hand, there are a lot of people who hold the opinion that the »Maos« originally aimed at changing the country positively and thus should be warmly welcomed. On the other hand, mostly the elite parts of the communities regard the »Maos« as a potential threat to traditions, such as the caste system.

Most of the long-standing residents consider the amount of money paid to ex-combatants as a retirement package to be way too high. The latter feel harmed and humiliated by the fact that they have never officially been honourably released from the rebel army. Rather than returning as heroes of a victorious struggle, they re-enter civilian life as part of an unwanted minority of strangers. Daily interactions are



still full of distrust, and smaller disputes escalate rapidly into full-fledged conflicts between the groups.

## THE ROAD ACCIDENT - AN EXEMPLARY CONFLICT

At a road crossing in a village, a young girl is involved in a road-accident and dies on the spot. The perpetrators escape quickly. Residents of the village report that they witnessed two drunken motorcyclists at the same time who were loudly singing Maoist propaganda songs and undoubtedly part of the group of ex-PLA. Within hours the situation escalates to such an extent that some of them start to hide in fear of being lynched, while some senior representatives of the community start protesting and demand that the perpetrators be turned over to them. A mediation tandem happens to be close by and is able to intervene quickly. Working with representatives from both groups - first separately, then jointly, they are able to deescalate the conflict and even re-establish peace. Later on, the perpetrators, who actually do turn out to be members of the former combatants, are taken into custody without being subjected to violence. Most importantly, a larger conflict between both groups was avoided.



Photo: inmedio

## THE PARTY OFFICE - ANOTHER EXEMPLARY CONFLICT

In the run-up to the highly controversial elections of the constitutional referendum in November 2013, a local party office is being completely destroyed. 16 motorcycles which were parked outside the office are rampaged. Many of the ex-combatants in this area are close to a party which boycotts the elections as a form of protest and is responsible for many similar incidents in the whole country. The local team of facilitators issues a press-release, conducts talks with each of the political parties and thus motivates them to issue a joint

press release in which they call for peaceful elections. This effectively calms down the situation, and the elections within this community are ultimately conducted very peacefully.

## THE UNDERLYING CONCEPT OF THE PROJECT

Given these circumstances, talks with the German GIZ (German Association for International Development Cooperation) led to an idea: to support the communities in dealing with the re-integration by strengthening their knowledge, skills and their resources for conflict resolution. The goal was to build a pool of mediators who had mixed backgrounds concerning their role during the civil war. Also, these mediator teams should be able to respond to rapidly escalating group conflicts or to pick up on and pacify conflicts already in their early stages.<sup>2</sup> Under the commission of the Nepalese ministry of peace and reconstruction and with the financial support of the German ministry of cooperation, the GIZ had already been working in the cantonments since 2007 and had already acquired a reputation as a trustworthy partner amongst the ex-combatants and the government.<sup>3</sup> Ever since the cantonments were cleared in April 2012, the GIZ has supported the re-integration of ex-combatants in selected communities.

During 18 days of training, a pool of facilitators was created, consisting of former Maoist combatants and representatives of the communities they settled in. They worked together in four teams divided by districts. Their cooperation as co-mediators increased their credibility as facilitators between both groups and as role-models. During the course of their training, they themselves had gone through a dialogue process to build up trust between each other, and they personally tried out and experienced the effect of exercises and methods that they are now employ when working with dialogue groups. Mediation and dialogue largely require the very same skills and mindset. Therefore, it was possible to combine both during the training.

## SHA:RE DIALOGUE GROUPS

The underlying thought is: When dealing with collective atrocities and trauma, a fundamental improvement of relations and a true reconciliation with the past won't happen unless the painful memories, the gruesome (war-) experiences and stories of the victims are shared. When experiencing the authenticity of the storytelling and the authenticity

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There were well-functioning community mediation projects already in place in Nepal, however without the participation of ex-combatants, as they lived separately in the cantonments. (See the article Schraewer 2013).

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GIZ (2013): »Vom bewaffneten Kampf zur zivilen Verantwortung – Ein Beitrag zum Friedensprozess in Nepal«



of the reactions, a change of mind and sometimes even a change of perspective can take place. This is the basis for developing new trust and a readiness to cooperate when working for a better future.

Based on this logic, we chose to name this approach 'from shared truths to joint responsibility', in short 'sha:re'. It might be important to point out that we especially speak of 'truths' in plural and not 'truth' in singular, as this is not about uncovering such a thing as an 'objective' truth, but rather about making subjective truths accessible.

## GETTING STARTED

The session usually starts with a round of introductions and some sort of ritual. Then we proceed to a rather loose summary of the situation with the help of the following question: »What has worked out well with the re-integration of the Maoist ex-combatants, and what difficulties have arisen?« This may take place in partner interviews, meaning that the participants team up in pairs of two consisting of an ex-combatant and a long-standing resident. After this, they return to the large group and report what their partner has told them. This way we provide the possibility to slowly start approaching each other and begin to undertake an initial change of perspective.

## CONFLICT-PERSPECTIVE-ANALYSIS AND ICEBERG METAPHOR

The goal of the second session is to analyse a typical conflict between two groups in such a way that each side is able to develop empathy for the other side. During the Chitwan dialogue event, we used the conflict of the water plumbing, as described in the black-box play. From a methodological point of view, this calls for the use of the well-known iceberg model and the empathy lists from the conflict perspective analysis (KPA)<sup>4</sup>: Split into two homogenous groups, the participants are asked to express wishes, emotions and fears the other side might hold. In accordance with the KPA model, they are asked to stick strictly to talking from a first-person perspective. During the concluding feedback, we learned that it was a completely new experience for most of the participants to examine the stories behind the conflicts.

## STORYTELLING

Whenever possible in this part of the session, we choose to work with pictures, meaning that we ask the participants to begin by drawing a picture of the incident/ their story – a choice that very often creates resistance in the beginning. However, we still regard it as very helpful: Firstly, a picture helps to stay focused, making the story more vivid and concrete. Secondly, with a picture it is a lot easier to actually tell your own story, rather than 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 to some extent is a symbolic externalization 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 drawing of the person who is telling the story is placed in the middle of the circle and we usually take between 5 to 30 minutes per person and story. Sometimes the individual gets sucked into the whirl of events that they experienced and drifts off into more and more details, finally getting stuck in the story. In such a case we usually intervene with a rather brisk: »...and then what happened?« or »and how did this situation finally end?«

Having reached this point, an appreciative way of dealing with the stories is crucial. We recommend starting by simply saying »thank you«. Also it is part of the facilitators' role to encourage the participants to show empathy and consternation, leading by example. Usually this is accompanied by a lot of tears, and our Nepali facilitators were surprised to realize that showing tears as a facilitator actually had a beneficial effect, rather than decreasing their authority. The facilitators continue by commenting on each story with much empathy and compassion. However, it obviously is a lot more effective if these comments are expressed by the participants themselves. We call this the »compassionate sharing session«. Resource-oriented reframing by the facilitator is vital to help people overcome their sense of helplessness. This means the facilitator emphasizes aspects of how the storyteller managed to survive and cope with the situation (i.e. his or her inner resources). When listening to a person who experienced an absolutely life-threatening situation and believes that his or her survival was up to pure chance, one might ask, »And what helped you overcome this situation?« In another case, a woman who often tended to feel rather helpless and insecure shared how during her childhood her sister died when fetching water at a crossing strewn with landmines. Amongst other compassionate comments, the facilitator declared her to be an expert on how to cope with severe loss, as she had experienced it herself. Under tears this woman began to radiate, realising that she actually had already comforted and counselled many people who had undergone such situations.

<sup>4</sup> Walter, Willibald (2013): »Durch Einfühlungslisten zum Perspektivenwechsel«, in: Peter Knapp (Hg.), *Konflikte lösen in Teams und großen Gruppen*, Bonn. GIZ-ZFD (2013): »Shimgelina under the shade – merging Ethiopian wise-council mediation and facilitative mediation«. Trainers Manual, Addis Abbaba, 71-75, <http://www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org/sites/ziviler-friedensdienst.org/files/anhang/publikation/zfd-merging-ethiopian-wise-counsel-mediation-and-facilitative-mediation-1949.pdf> [5 October 2014].



## POSITIVE CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

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

First of all we start with a relaxing exercise of body awareness. Then we 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 when the whole life has been one of suffering so far, there most likely must have been (at least) one happy moment. Diving into these stories usually brings up a lot of laughter, as these mostly are stories of love and care or of funny incidents. This is a good point to ask participants to think of something small they would like to undertake with their own children or even the children of friends or relatives during the following week.

## JOINT ACTION PLANNING

During the course of the sixth session we build upon this positive energy and 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 festivities, working together on community infrastructure or sport events. Of course, in other settings there may be more group sessions to discuss, plan and follow up on the exact implementation of these activities; or to mediate conflicts in the group which might emerge later. In political dialogues with a high number of complex interlinked issues, you don't just brainstorm activities. Instead you conduct joint conflict analyses, using techniques like stakeholder mapping or systemic feedback-loop mapping, among others.<sup>5</sup> Depending on the dispute at hand, technical input by outside experts might also be needed to arrive at an agreement on joint activities. However, all these tools and techniques do not work very well unless the people involved are ready for a genuine dialogue. The *sha:re* approach attempts to foster this readiness through the trust-building process described above which includes the sharing of personal stories as an essential part.

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See <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/civilhandbook/Chapter8.pdf> or <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/Conflict-Analysis-Tools.pdf>.

## OUTLOOK

Whereas this project had a clear grassroots-approach, we have begun to apply elements of it in political dialogues as well. This is a context, however, where participants meet each other with a significantly different motivation. Here it is clearly not about exchanging personal stories, but about exploring possibilities for cooperation, enforcing or convincing others of political positions and to sound others out. Therefore our approach had to be modified significantly. In Nepal, for example, we worked with a group of parliamentarians and party officials whose parties were in a political crisis and officially not talking to each other. What we asked them was, »What kind of experiences brought you to hold your respective political opinion?« In this case as well, we worked with drawings and came to hear stories of mothers fighting against the suppression of women, a boy who had to watch the execution of a reported Maoist, one person who had been beaten up by his teacher for showing up in school with torn trousers, a woman who had to watch a landowner whipping one of his workers, etc. The participants came to see a lot of similarities in their stories. We do not expect this to have a long-lasting or visible effect on actual politics. After only a one-time intervention during a short workshop which wasn't followed up, such an effect would be close to a miracle. However we take it as a sign that it might be possible to go even further and deeper.

A report by Norbert Ropers<sup>6</sup> is also very interesting in this context. He has worked with local or insider mediators on the conflict over secession in southern Thailand. The mediators covered the full spectrum of the conflicting parties. One day he asked them to share their answers to the following question: »How do you continue doing your work despite the fact that it is so nerve-wrecking, tedious and maybe even in vain?« What followed was an exchange about their personal biographies and relations to the conflict, clearly generating trust-building momentum. We regard this as one more encouraging example that including a personal level in political dialogues is possible, needed and promising.

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Norbert Ropers worked for many years as the head of the Berghof Foundation, an internationally renowned institute for conflict transformation. Currently he works as the head of its Bangkok office.



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EPRIE 2014 working group at the European Academy Berlin

Photo: Yajima Tsukasa