

FIELD WORK REPORT

What are all these people doing in their offices all day? The challenges of writing-up stories from 'post-conflict' Kathmandu

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¹ After a critical learning experience at the Peace Studies Department at the University of Bradford, **Tobias Denskus** became a citizen of 'Aidland', working, living, listening to people and often shaking his head in disbelief at UNDP in Nepal, in a humanitarian NGO in Kabul, Afghanistan, and through research into German peacebuilding projects in Macedonia. He now has dual citizenship, as PhD candidate at Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (which sometimes appears to be 'Reflectionland') and in Aidland from time to time.

Abstract

For the international community the civil war in Nepal and the complexities of the war-to-peace 'transition' pose a real challenge that mirages about development, civil society and governance become exposed. Instead of engaging with the root causes of violence, inequality and (under)development, procedural and technical elements dominate post-war reconstruction. From the point of view of a researcher the challenge is writing-up the stories from field research inside the aid community so that they capture the multi-sited, multi-layered 'reality' of a transition and at the same time create a space for reflection on the broader implications of 'peacebuilding' seen through the lens of desk-based planning, ritualized workshop discussions and office-driven 'solutions' to the complexity of war-to-peace transitions. There still seems some way to go for peace research and all the people involved to become 'reflective practitioners' and engage with constructivist micro-stories to learn and question dominant models of post-war reconstruction.

Introduction

I felt encouraged to share my reflections on my ethnographic fieldwork in Kathmandu/Nepal during the immediate post *Jana Andolan-II* democracy movement from April 2006 onwards by Susanne Buckley-Zistel's interesting fieldwork report in the last issue of this journal². Research during (post-)conflict transitions confronts researchers with a lot of ethical challenges, but in my case the field of ethnographic engagement was not a conflict zone where the war between the Maoists and the Nepali army had happened, but the relatively peaceful 'Aidland' of Kathmandu³ where the peacebuilding and post-conflict 'industry' was quickly parachuting in after the war was declared 'over' and a peace agreement was put on track. In a way, the complex 'shadows of war', to use Carolyn Nordstrom's expression⁴, are extended into 'shadows of peace', or, more precisely, 'mirages of peace(building)'⁵ that the international community together with the Kathmandu-based political and intellectual elite is chasing these days.

For the international community the civil war in Nepal and the complexities of the war-to-peace 'transition' pose a real challenge that mirages about development, civil society and governance become exposed. Instead of engaging with the root causes of violence, inequality and (under)development, procedural and technical elements dominate post-war reconstruction, raising interesting questions about desk-based peacebuilding, ritualised workshop discussions and office-driven 'solutions' to the complexity of war-to-peace transitions.

² Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "Ethnographic research after violent conflicts: Personal reflections on dilemmas and challenges", *Journal of Peace, Conflict & Development*, 10 (2007).

³ Raymond Apthorpe and Rosalind Eyben coined the word 'Aidland' as multi-sited, multi-dimensional spaces of relationships that are linked to 'development' and its resources, people, organizations as well as the public and the private aspects of living, working and researching a powerful and pervasive phenomenon: 'Aidland [...] is the *trail* (to use a word that usefully is both verb and noun, and about both process and place) of where foreign aid comes from, where it goes, and what then. Stepping into Aidland is like stepping off one planet into another, a virtual another, not that this means that it is any the less real to those who work in or depend on or are affected by it in other ways' (Apthorpe, p.1, emphasis in original).

⁴ Carolyn Nordstrom, *Shadows of War: Violence, Power, and International Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

⁵ The Wikipedia definition for 'fata morgana' seems quite applicable for the changing 'temperatures' of a conflict and the ways that post-war 'reconstruction' often focuses on unobtainable 'best practice': 'A fata morgana is a mirage, an optical phenomenon which results from a *temperature inversion*. *Objects on the horizon*, such as islands, cliffs, ships or icebergs, *appear elongated and elevated*, like "fairy tale castles"' (my emphasis).

I conducted my doctoral field research in Germany and Nepal on peacebuilding policy processes, engaging with an emerging field of research and writing that I will summarise for the purpose of this practical note as 'aidnographies'⁶. Even if more insights into development processes and organisations emerge, very few stories are shared from inside ongoing peacebuilding processes, the international organisations and people that manage a peace process on a day-to-day basis – particularly when a conflict is declared 'over' and aid dynamics quickly start to shift..

My particular challenge is writing-up the stories from this field research so that they capture the multi-sited, multi-layered 'reality' of a transition and at the same time create a space for reflection on the broader implications of 'peacebuilding'. Michael Pugh's recent critical analysis of post-war economies is a good reminder that "peace operations can be considered an integral part of the world ordering project that has accompanied projects for stabilising capitalism"⁷. Foucault's 'power/knowledge' complex then meets storytelling. But Buckley-Zistel's field note is an important reminder that openly engaging with such challenges is a first step to more adequately taking on the 'data' from an ethnographic, critical development project. Barak Kalir sums this up nicely at the end of her reflections of working very closely with migrants in Israel: "Nevertheless, instead of maintaining a professional silence about our actual methodology in the field, and emphasising our overriding and idiosyncratic agency, we can seek a more enhanced and transparent understanding of anthropological positioning experiences"⁸.

'...and throw away the rest!'

⁶ Paul Stubbs argues that 'In recent years, ethnographic studies of aid and development have become increasingly important. These studies focus on 'how' development works [...] and seek to situate aid and development "projects" and "programmes" in the context of social, political and economic relations and power imbalances between "donors", "implementing agencies", "recipients" and all manner of intermediary actors and agencies' (Stubbs, p.1).

⁷ Michael Pugh, "Post-war economies and the New York dissensus", *Conflict, Security & Development*, 6 (2006), p.271

⁸ Barak Kalir, "The field of work and the work of the field: Conceptualising an anthropological research engagement", *Social Anthropology*, 14 (2006), p. 245.

“My suggestion for you is that you keep these two slides and throw the rest away”, the deputy head of a European aid organisation commented immediately after the end of my 25-minute presentation that I gave to a small group of interested academic colleagues and staff of international donor organisations and NGOs at the end of my field research in Kathmandu. She referred to two quotes that I had used at the beginning:

‘Everything becomes stories and it is not important when or where something happened, how it happened or whether it happened at all. Stories are told and that makes something happen. The stories never stop, they never come to rest for they are told again and again and differently. It is no longer important what you see while you walk, it is no longer important that you are walking while you are seeing something; names are no longer important, nor are people or a person’s age, the shape of a mouth, the condition of a body. Everything can be influenced in the telling and so nothing is how it is, nothing stays how it was once the telling begins and everything can be told and you tell yourself as a story with every word, with every lie.’⁹

And

“Bringing our everyday stories into question is an adventure. No one adventures securely in their backyard. Professionals need to face the uncertainty of not knowing what’s round the corner, where they’re going, how they’ll travel, when they’ll meet dragons or angels, and who the comrades are. They even have to trust why they’re going. A student commented: ‘What a relief it is to know that this uncertainty is essential; knowing that makes me feel less uncertain of being uncertain. Now uncertainty is my mantra’.”¹⁰

She continued to explain what she meant and why she took advantage of my invitation for critical comments: “If you want to look at conflict and peace in Nepal and the role of the international community you should not write a dissertation like all the other researchers have before with all the aggregated “data” and general recommendations. There are also a lot of consultancy reports that work like this and that I find most of the time useless in terms of feeling encouraged to think critically of my role and that of [my organization]. If your

⁹ Nina Jäkle, “Type case 5”, *Mercedes Benz Texttracks Volume 1 (2006)*, Available online at <http://www.mercedes-benz.com/texttracks>.

¹⁰ Gillie Bolton, “Narrative writing: Reflective enquiry into professional practice”, *Educational Action Research*, 14 (2006), pp. 203-218.

dissertation can live up to these two quotes you can really contribute to a better understanding of conflict and peace dynamics. Dare to tell stories. Tell our stories!”

This short story on reflective engagement with aid practitioners shows the great potential of thinking/writing/talking out of the ‘policy’ box, but immediately raises questions about maintaining academic coherence and standards – issues that colleagues in Germany were particular concerned about during my research. Peace research, still very much influenced by political science, comparative research and approval or falsification of hypotheses, still has to come to terms with qualitative research alternatives.

Nepal – A discourse on ‘root causes’ and the mirage of building peace

“Civil war which erupted in Nepal in the mid 1990s had its seeds sown five decades ago when the country embarked on an import substitution (IS) strategy. While the IS policy accelerated growth (brought about by urban-based non-agricultural activities), it failed to benefit 86 per cent of the population living in rural areas. The bias inherited in the IS policy favoured urban-based activities and attracted resources away from rural areas, leading to a fall in agricultural productivity. As agricultural productivity fell, exports declined. This, together with the lack of alternative employment opportunities, significantly increased unemployment, poverty and rural–urban inequality. By the early 1990s, poverty and inequality increased, governance deteriorated and political instability increased, which forced disadvantaged youth particularly from rural and remote areas to join radical left wing forces (Maoists) to fight against the political system and economic policy”¹¹.

Kishor Sharma’s conflict analysis in a nutshell is only one example of the many documents that basically share the same analysis about the root causes of the conflict (most aid organisations would probably emphasise the role of import substitution less). We *know* by now why the violent conflict erupted. But neither has the international community adapted their programmes to these root causes nor does the ‘peacebuilding project’ which is being unleashed right now take them into consideration. Alongside the Kathmandu-based elites there is a propagation of ‘back to normality’ – to a ‘normality’ that never existed, but at least existed without visible violent representatives like the Maoists. Martha Caddell and Helen

¹¹ Kishor Sharma, “*Development policy, inequity and civil war in Nepal*” p. 553

Yanacopulos' article on denial and acknowledgement processes in situations of violent conflict in Uganda and Nepal states that "the process of acknowledging conflict within the international donor community has been hampered by the prevalence of "Shangri-la-it-is". The "poor but happy" vision of Nepal, which has saturated popular and, largely, development imaginations has acted as barrier to the recognition of the socio-political schisms and conflict in the country"¹². An important factor which contributed to the denial was the fact that 'Aidland' was living in a *'bubble of innocence'* as one donor representative described his life in the Kathmandu Valley during the conflict to me. Violence never affected the Valley, the security of the inhabitants of 'Aidland' and their families. He described one of the everyday impacts of the conflict: "When there was no fresh food available in the shops because of a bandh [general strike and road blockages enforced by the Maoists], the worst thing for us was to buy the more expensive canned vegetables in one of the supermarkets". This helped to form a deep dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' – 'order', 'normality' and 'chaos': Those in the bubble could not visit 'them' in the field for most of the time because of security regulations and when people reported to 'us' they brought examples with them of how the Maoist insurgency had 'disrupted' a project, how they were trying to stop the advancement of 'development'. Re-establishing 'order' after the establishment of the Seven Party Alliance and the beginning of peace talks was (and still is) a very important task for 'Aidland' to reclaim 'their' modern project of developing the 'margins' and reconfirming the central role of 'the state' that they cooperated with and lived with in Kathmandu.

It was always interesting to see which (and whose) stories and anecdotes count in the post-war process, i.e. that examples or 'case studies' from, say, nation-building in East Timor or reconciliation in South Africa were more readily available and shared than stories from poor farmers in the remote villages of Western Nepal.

In a cynical way, the international community could not have met 'better' opponents than the Maoists, because they helped to dichotomise the 'solutions' for a future Nepal, as Pugh has observed in Balkan countries and elsewhere: "There seems to be nothing contemplated between a command economy and 'the free market'. The discourse set up binary confrontation between one solution and another, discounting nuances, modifications and the

¹² Martha Caddell and Helen Yanacopulos, *"Knowing but not knowing"*, p.569

potential for creativity and innovation in economic policy”¹³. And from the economic imperative quickly follow related assumptions, or more precisely ‘non-assumptions’ about land reform, civil society, political decision-making procedures, governance arrangements, participation, gender and masculinity that make the ‘Maoist insurgency’ look like a temporary ‘error’ that can now be rectified. This unfolding project denies the ‘order’ and ‘governance’ that the Maoists themselves have established at the ‘margins’ of state presence and activities and reduces the complexities of any sustained period of violent conflict. Last but not least, the unwillingness to engage with larger parts of the realities outside the Aidland bubble deprives the international community of some important learning opportunities about the dynamics at the ‘front lines’ of war and conflict.

A few days before I finished my research in Kathmandu the feedback from the colleague mentioned at the beginning made a huge impression on me, because she clearly emphasised that the form as well as the content should at least try to build a unity that conveys my message and shares my stories. Her feedback is also encouraging regarding the office of the aid organisation in Kathmandu and its senior staff and their willingness to engage in self-reflection and reflective work.

These are some of my immediate reflections and vignettes from field research. Observations on the workshop and conference culture also provide important insights into the close network of Nepali and expatriate people who meet and talk regularly without ever engaging in critical discussions. The influx of specialised international NGOs who are mapping out the post-conflict terrain in Kathmandu to see where funding will become available. I remember one particular meeting where someone from an international transitional justice NGO introduced possible ways of engaging with ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’. He offered interesting examples from around the world and all one Nepali participant (a professor and former member of the Human Rights Commission) said after his remarks were: “Thank you for your presentation. I think we need all this here in Nepal”. The pervasive logic of dependency and belief in expatriate ‘expertise’ has created a culture where even educated people want the ‘everything’ option rather than engage in discussions about the sort of institutions that would be needed and what local traditions (if at all) exist for ‘reconciliation’ and how such highly

¹³ Michael Pugh, “*Post-war economies and the New York consensus*”, p.282

political ideas can be implemented in the current situation. But the Nepali audience quickly gained a sense that the (Western) idea of 'transitional justice' comprises funds, new institutions and organisations, training opportunities and travel abroad.

'I knew more about what the Japanese and Americans were doing than about our projects in the field' (European conflict advisor)

But there is one point that I have to stress after my initial thoughts on the power and relationships of the peacebuilding discourse: The everyday 'aidnographic' reality of Kathmandu makes generalised claims about the intentions of the donor community and their intentions for peacebuilding almost impossible. There is no malign, strategic plan of aid organisations and there are no secret meetings where people agree to a master plan of reconstructing order and 'peace' in Nepal. This would suggest that a 'development machine' exists and one of the major points of my aidnographic field research is to refute such assumptions. 'Discourse coalitions' inside the donor community exist. Buzzwords like 'fragile state' or 'social inclusion' link Nepal to international discourses, but virtually every donor representative I spoke to stressed the discretionary powers of the head of agency and was sceptical about a pervasive organisational culture linking headquarters, country offices and the virtual sphere of high-level meetings.

The story from a former Conflict Advisor of a European donor is a good example to capture the disjuncture, complexities and issues of coordination that have occupied the international community during the conflict:

"When I first attended the meetings of the conflict advisors group I was surprised to find them talking over simple and conservative conflict analyses and I immediately started to wonder whether these guys [they were all men at that time] should know these things by now and before coming to Kathmandu. But some of the analytical capacities of the embassies [he named two European embassies] are just appalling. [...] And then there is over-coordination on the side

of the donors. We had 400 meetings after the February 1 move of the King in 2005 [where he effectively took over absolute power]– excluding meetings of the BOGs [Basic Operating Guidelines] group that at a certain point were scheduled on a daily basis. I knew more about what the Japanese and Americans were doing than about our projects in the field. And I was always surprised how quickly a consensus over most of the development was reached. There weren't really any big discussions. [...] All my successor has been doing since the April movement is organizing meetings for delegations from headquarters. Three delegations in two months really means that all she does is organizing meetings and is too busy to do any of those things that you would expect from the organizations' 'conflict expert'".

By-way of a conclusion

This note itself resembles some of the challenges of writing-up ethnographic research; it is not completely coherent and it misses a 'solution' and 'conclusion' at the end.

However, engaging with the micro level of peacebuilding, sharing stories from a multi-layered and powerful field of actors is necessary to approach learning processes in peace research. Rhodes reminds us that "a constructivist approach claims that practitioners learn by telling, listening to and comparing stories"¹⁴ and that this is important to bear in mind when researching with people in 'live' policy networks: "The social science model of networks treats them as given facts – as if they are cars and the researcher is the car mechanic, finding the right tool to effect repairs"¹⁵. It still seems to be some way to go for peace research and all the people involved to become 'reflective practitioners' (or reflective researcher and writers for that matter):

"Reflective practitioners recognize responsibility for their own life stories, the structures around them and their actions within those structures. They can then create strategies for responsibly taking charge of as many areas of experience as possible"¹⁶.

¹⁴ R.A.W. Rhodes, "Putting People Back into Networks", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 37 (2002), p.401.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Gillie Bolton, "Narrative writing: Reflective enquiry into professional practice", *Educational Action Research*, 14 (2006), p.208.

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