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The fragility of peacebuilding in Nepal

In some strange and paradoxical way the rapid 'success' of peacebuilding that the UN has been proclaiming in Kathmandu seems to be another blow to the Western model of peacebuilding: The transition from war to peace is proceeding quite smoothly and the political institutions in the capital city are undergoing significant transformation yet this transition has yet to make a difference in the lives of most citizens and for the overall 'development' of Nepal. In some ways, the current changes remind of the post-1990 situation where a newly democratized Nepal produced a 'good governance bubble' in Kathmandu, but was unable to address many problems and grievances that finally led to the violent conflict. Prescribing more of the 'status quo ante' medicine as many donors and international aid organizations continue to do is another sign of the lack of historical and institutional memory that development not only in Nepal suffers from. In other words, isn't the very success of the political transformation a sign that peacebuilding may create stability on the surface, but at the same time fail to achieve its ultimate goal even under favourable conditions: To contribute to long-term, sustainable development and broad 'poverty reduction' in the post-conflict environment?

Whether one takes the recent flooding, the high fuel prizes and related problems or the rise of harmful tourism in the Himalayan mountains it becomes obvious that Nepal is facing many challenges. As always, donors will provide warm blankets and words of commitment, but even during the heights of the violent conflict donors never left the country and Nepal has been provided with aid for well over five decades. Even if nearly 13,000 people were killed in the course of the ten years of violent conflict Nepal never descended into a humanitarian crisis or became a so called failed state. But the poverty that has been gripping Nepal for the last decades has been persistent and did not deteriorate significantly during the violent conflict. The conflict did not lead to mass human rights violations, starvation, large refugee camps, a conflict economy based on the plunder of natural resources, warlordism and the influx of small arms that can be observed in many conflicts elsewhere. It creates the illusion that 'conflict resolution' is easier and that technocratic solutions to the 'root causes' of the conflict are easily implemented. Hence, international jobs become very appealing for expatriate experts who have always had a special relationship with the scenic backwardness of one of the textbook cases for testing out the implementation of the latest development fashion. Especially in Kathmandu, there are numerous signs of how the peacebuilding industry has entered the scene: rising house prizes due to the influx of expatriate aid workers, more international flights that often carry a Nepali delegation to visit foreign parliaments and governments in donor countries,

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increased sales of cars that subsequently clog the congested streets even more, and an increase in registered NGOs.

It is quite remarkable how international and national elites have switched from 'war' to 'peace' and how all political players seem to agree that the only way forward is to cooperate with the international aid organizations. After clearing some technocratic and bureaucratic hurdles the country has reached a point where the international community can boast of the tangible improvements that their approach has generated. A few Maoists in demobilization camps, a few human rights trainings for the army and some gender empowerment workshops with female civil society 'leaders' later, the consultants, observers and experts can look forward to more aid money, extended contracts and glossy reports that tell 'success stories' and identify 'lessons learned' about the peace process. The ways the governing elite works in Kathmandu nowadays seem different, but many of the socio-economic institutions have shown some bureaucratic resilience when it comes to fundamental changes of attitudes and behaviours towards the governance and citizens of Nepal.

This short essay is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the international aid community in Kathmandu, many discussions with international and Nepali colleagues and being a remote observer of the peace process, reading newspapers, reports, emails and sometimes Facebook status messages. I argue that as long as 'we' peace researchers, advisors and peacebuilders do not include a personal dimension into peacebuilding and reflect on our attitudes, approaches, mindsets and ways of working with recipients of aid efforts the mistakes that have appeared in many peace missions around the world in the past twenty or so years are likely to be repeated.

Peacebuilding in Nepal has to acknowledge and deal with the following five challenges:

1. Peacebuilding is a 'successful' process that does not have 'real' implications for sustainable development and/or the majority of Nepali living outside Kathmandu and a few other urban centres.

I am not arguing that 'development' will not take place in areas outside of Kathmandu. For more than fifty years international actors have been involved in such efforts and it is likely to be like this for some time to come. But what the post-conflict engagement has shown already is that the international peacebuilding discourse is likely to foster a bubble in Kathmandu, an 'Aidland' where international and national elites live separated lives from

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the rest of the country. Even in the midst of the violent conflict Kathmandu did not suffer any attacks or a direct, visible impact of 'the conflict in the remote areas' as it was often labelled. This geographical divide has had a powerful impact on the way the international community perceives the conflict and, interestingly enough, this is not addressed at all in the ways these international actors and local elites engage with the post-conflict situation. The risk is that Kathmandu becomes a post-conflict 'non-place' of international short-term advisors, technical experts (on 'transitional justice', 'constitution writing', DDR/DRR etc) and regular aid organization staff who spend a lot of time in meetings, traffic jams, workshops, meetings and behind their desks to write monthly reports for the headquarters. Even if the tendency can be observed in many capitals of developing countries, a post-conflict environment is even more vulnerable to these impacts as a 'peace dividend' that may only pour in slowly (e.g. in the area of tourism) is replaced by a 'peacebuilding dividend', e.g. a political economy of visiting foreign delegations, workshops in five-star hotels and information sharing and coordination meetings that may lead to more policy papers and livelihoods for junior aid bureaucrats, but hardly to a sustainable vision for Nepal and Nepali citizens. Even after almost two decades of post-Cold War peacebuilding very little research has been done on the shifting geographies of international capital-based peace interventions and the international community is very reluctant to reflect on their roles in environments where lots of dollars have to be spent within a relatively short time. Personal attitudes, relationships and mindsets are not part of the agenda of peacebuilding and may ultimately lead to even bigger isolation of the domestic and international Kathmandu circles from 'the rest' of the country and population.

2. Peacebuilding is a reduction of political conflicts to technical processes in line with international discourses. However, it neither addresses local 'root causes' of the conflict or pervasive, long-term questions about development, nor does it take hybrid, non-standard forms of governance into consideration.

This argument is clearly linked to the previous point, but highlights that 'learning difficulties' of the international community are not just limited to the personal level and/or individual behaviour 'on the ground' (in this case Kathmandu). After a broad variety of peacebuilding missions in the last twenty years, it has emerged (and not just recently, but literally during/after every international mission) that the peacebuilding discourse may have contributed to the emergence of a shell of liberal peace and governance, but has not achieved social change or broken up the power relationships that had led to the outbreak of war in the first place.

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One of the reasons why the UN and other international actors have started to label Nepal a success story is that it has been successful on the surface. Photos of the stereotypical old woman casting a ballot in a remote area as a 'proof' of democratic progress, the King becoming an ordinary citizen or the Maoist Prime Minister Prachanda meeting world leaders in the US contribute to a picture of democratic normality that the elites are keen to maintain. At the same time, there are signs that the political culture has indeed begun to change and that new forms of accountability and civil society involvement are emerging, However, those involved often do not want to get involved with the 'development elite'; it remains to be seen whether and how the international community will be able to accommodate such 'hybrid' forms of governance that may present unique, local interpretations of the liberal peacebuilding model that the aid community tries to introduce. But experiences from other post-conflict societies cast doubt that the 'development machine' will be able to accommodate some of the 'unruly' new actors and forums that are currently emerging.

3. Peacebuilding is a slow, governance-oriented process that gets 'overtaken' by new conflicts, e.g. related to climate change and environmental degradation, population growth and overly optimistic assumptions about the 'peace dividend'.

As I already noted in the introduction, peacebuilding in Nepal does not take place in a vacuum, but in the reality of one of the poorest countries in South Asia. As aid money becomes available as a reward for the Nepali elites to play by the Western democratic rules, the pressing questions for the future go beyond governance arrangements. Even without its recent conflict Nepal would be in a very difficult situation. Population growth, environmental degradation (often linked to tourism – a sector that is often regarded as the panacea for 'development' even though its economic benefits are ambiguous) and the impact of climate change have begun to affect some of the poorest parts of the population. On the one hand it is difficult to lay out a vision for Nepal in the current environment of immediate post-conflict change and high hopes, but on the other hand the capacities that are currently built up in the governance and social development sector are not matched by technical capacities in more traditional development sectors, e.g. infrastructure or agriculture. Tourism, hydro-power and adaptation to climate change remain buzzwords that do not get the attention that other areas enjoy. Furthermore, the mostly overused description of Nepal as a 'land-locked and mountainous country located between China and India' should be kept in mind in order to appreciate the impact of rising oil and food prices as well as the role of labor migration to India and the Gulf states. The enthusiasm about the democratic and prosperous future of Nepal – partly similar to the mood in the early 1990s

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when the Panchayat system came to an end and Western-style democracy entered the political discourse – should not obstruct the view on some of the fundamental challenges that have kept Nepal 'poor' for more than fifty years and the development industry in business!

4. Peacebuilding is just another set of practices that simply gets absorbed into the Nepali discourse of (non-)development.

During a recent discussion with a Nepali colleague about the current state of affairs I was surprised of how often he mentioned the word 'commission': A commission of Indian and Nepali politicians was to review trade agreements, a commission was about to be set up to deal with minority issues in the process of writing the constitution, and yet another commission was developing different scenarios around the idea of 'federalism' for the country. This can be seen as an appropriate way of constructively engaging with potential conflicts, but this relatively sophisticated way of managing the policy process is also a reminder of the powerful bureaucratic elite that has been governing the country for a long time. And it is very important to keep in mind that, in contrast to other post-conflict cases, this bureaucratic system did not break down or had to be fundamentally changed. To put it bluntly: The governing elite has seen many ambassadors, heads of agencies, development fashions, consultants and researchers come and go over the years and has developed ways of working with the discourses that are essential of today's development management no matter what organization or donor one has to entertain. A smooth and proactive embrace of post-conflict governance, new institutions, commissions and administrative arrangements should not simply be seen as a smart way of engaging with social change and conflict transformation. It is also a survival strategy of the political elite and is much rather a part of the problem than the solution. Even if a few young and uncorrupted politicians were successful in the recent elections, it is too early to say how much elite structures are really open for the change that a young, underemployed and restless generation of ambitious citizens demands.

5. Peacebuilding is a process that conforms to global aid discourses, but does not foster critical, reflective research or the establishment of local intellectual agendas to challenge the Western liberal peace model.

One of the issues that has been emerged in recent evaluations on development aid in so-called fragile states is the successful delivery of services in the education sector. It goes

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beyond the scope of this essay to fully engage with the problem of education in Nepal. I just want to stress that a focus on primary education or literacy rates that the MDGs bring with them is clearly not enough. It could even be argued that the focus of the MDGs is part of a broader scheme to install a regime of 'governmentality', a term that Foucault introduced to describe the forms of structure and order that make people governable. Counting little boys and girls in blue school uniforms or organizing trips for senior UN officials to visit schools an hour's drive outside the Kathmandu Valley helps to maintain a certain vision of 'development' that has been promoted in Nepal since its opening the 'modern' world in the early 1950s. The dire state of the tertiary education sector, exemplified by newspaper advertisements of Uzbek universities and questionable colleges around London leads to a continuous brain drain and frustration among those who have studied in Kathmandu. This situation does not provide for a critical intellectual engagement with the development and peacebuilding project. Critical ethnographic studies on development ('aidnographies') or a strong academic voice that challenges the international post-conflict discourses on social inclusion, reintegration, justice or federalism are rare. Local researchers all too often end up as 'assistants' to foreign 'experts', as interpreters and door openers and find it difficult to develop their own critical stories and 'voice'. Practical considerations (future employment in the development industry) win over the necessity to use academic insights and research to engage with the elites, inform civil society and participate in a discussion about the future of the country. Field research in 'poor villages' or on challenging topics, e.g. the role of the 'development caste', could help to inform policy-making. This is an incremental, long-haul process, but the current situation would offer an excellent opportunity to debate the role of academic research and personnel for the future of Nepal.

As brief as my outline of the five challenges to sustainable peacebuilding in Nepal are, they are an indication of the challenges for the country itself but also highlight some of the broader problems that international peacebuilding engagement in general is facing these days. As long as the 'personal' dimension of such an engagement is not addressed – through qualitative, action-oriented research, reflective practice and approaches of development personnel to include their own attitudes, behaviour and lifestyles, but also by questioning assumptions, e.g. on the nature of 'civil society' and 'participation' – peacebuilding will be reduced to a traditional development and governance 'exercise' with many of the systemic and fundamental problems that have been emerging over the past years and decades. At the moment, Nepal seems to be on the road towards becoming a 'success story' – a success story that only tells the convenient side of the story and that finds its way into EU reports, fragile states publications and reports of Brussels-based NGOs (see picture).

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Recommended readings

Chambers, R. 2006: *Poverty Unperceived. Traps, Biases and Agenda*. IDS Working Paper 270. Brighton: IDS.

Denskus, T. 2007: Peacebuilding does not build peace. *Development in Practice*, 17 (4&5), 656-662.

Eyben, R. 2006: *Relationships for Aid*. London: Earthscan.

Mosse, D. & Lewis, D. 2005: *The Aid Effect. Giving and Governing in International Development*. London: Pluto Press.

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