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*Article presented by Serena Rix Tripathee, Country Director of Search for Common Ground Nepal, at the 3rd Symposium Forum Media and Development: Measuring Change in Media Development, held in Bonn in September 2007.*

## **MONITORING A MOVING TARGET: PEACE BUILDING SOAP OPERA IN NEPAL**

Serena Rix Tripathee

*“ We are all faced with a series of great opportunities,  
brilliantly disguised as impossible situations”  
Chuck Swindoll*

Those of us using the media for social transformation face multiple challenges, not only in finding the best ways to cause social change, but also to develop rigorous methods to measure the success of what we do. When a country is in conflict or a period of transition, obstacles multiply. How do we measure the changing environment and its impact, how do we ensure that what we are doing is relevant to the new context, and when we start to see results – how do we understand the alchemy between what we have done in our project, the contribution of other organizations working on similar goals, and the impact of the unpredictable external circumstances. Monitoring and evaluation has been largely donor-driven, and perhaps one of the greatest challenges is not only to understand and measure the results of what we do, but also to ensure that we interpret and learn from those results in a meaningful way.

Search For Common Ground (SFCG) is a conflict transformation organization, working in 17 countries around the world. The mission of SFCG is to transform the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches; towards cooperative solutions, and in 2007 we celebrated our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an organization working in peace building. SFCG is not a ‘media’ organization, however, we do work extensively *with* the media – both to produce content that serves as peace building tools, or to work with media practitioners on how they can play a role in peace building. At the beginning of 2006 we started up a program in Nepal – one of SFCG’s newest offices with a particular focus at that time on the role of youth in peace building.

The program we began had two core components. The first component was a radio soap opera, produced in partnership with local NGO Antenna Foundation Nepal. The drama, called ‘Naya Bato Naya Paila’ or ‘New Path New Footprints’ was to have all the wonderful dramatic ups and downs of life that a soap opera should have, but must also provide role models to youth on how they could play a role in peace building, in decision making in their communities, and to

foster intergenerational dialogue. The second component was community peace building work, working directly with rural youth leaders to understand conflict, and develop practical solutions that they could implement at the community level, to address the root causes of the conflict.

When we began, we dreamed of one day walking into a village and hearing people say ‘ I listen to the drama with my whole family’, ‘ We feel it is truly our story’, and of course the holy grail of behavior change communication – we dreamed of hearing listeners tell us of how they had been inspired by the drama to make changes in their lives.

After 18 months of broadcasting the soap, my colleagues and I were meeting with some young listeners in a hot tin schoolroom in the far west of Nepal. One of the boys was quiet for much of the discussion, but then suddenly he spoke up.

“I was in the Maoists. We were working for social change. Then in the cantonment I started listening to the drama, and I heard the story of the character Khadga, who left the Maoists and went back to his village, and worked for change through his youth group instead. I realized if Khadga could do it, I could. So I left. Now my identity has shifted from being Comrade Raju, to being Raju of Nepal Youth Club.”

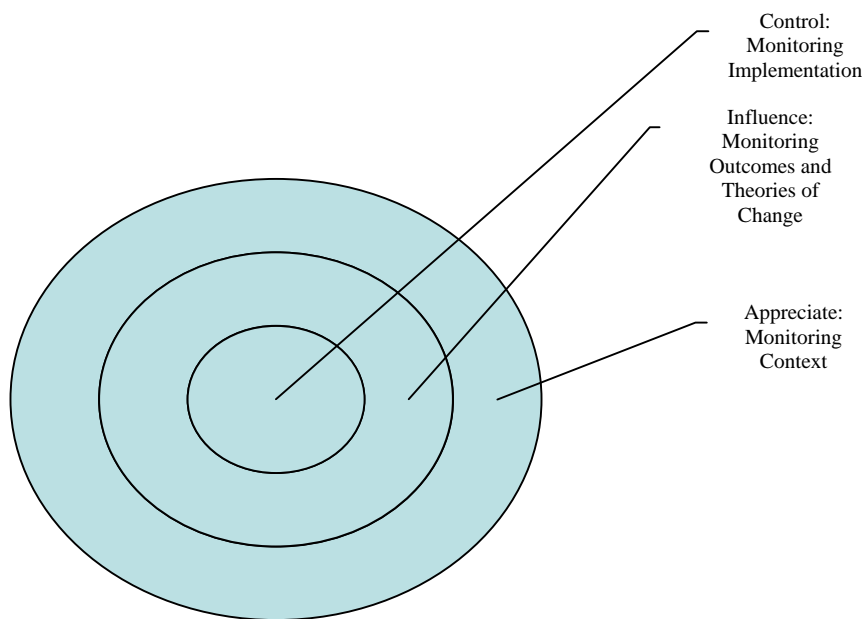
### **Measuring a moving target**

Raju is now cycling across Nepal in a peace rally with some of his fellow youth club members. And, whilst we love his story, and the others like it that we hear, how much can we actually claim credit for? The push from donors to be more accountable for results, to monitor not only output but also outcome and impact, is important. However, it can also tempt us at times to claim all the credit, without stopping to analyse the contextual changes that have also contributed to the ‘change’. Whilst Raju was listening to ‘New Path New Footprints’ from the Maoist Cantonment, Nepal was undergoing a transformation. A peace agreement between the Maoists and the Government was signed, the Maoists eventually entered Government (and then left, and then entered again), elections were scheduled (and postponed, and rescheduled, and postponed, and rescheduled), the UN set up a mission to monitor the peace agreement and arms, and much of the fear that had surrounded the Maoists during the conflict lifted. This also created an environment in which ‘Comrade Raju’ could make the choice to leave, a choice that, whilst it still may hold dangers for him, which I will come back to later, is not nearly as risky had he made it 12 months earlier.

I share this story, because it is a story of paradoxes. It is a reminder of the power of behaviour change communication (BCC), and the importance of stories. But it is also a reminder to be humble about claiming credit for ‘outcomes’ or ‘impact’, because in a changing environment, there are so many different factors working together to influence the result. As media practitioners, or people who work with the media, we must improve our abilities to demonstrate the power of our work – both qualitatively and quantitatively. But as we seek to tell the story of our work, we must also tell the parallel story of the context, and accept that whilst we aim to find ways to ‘prove’ our impact, we can in fact never truly do so, because so

much of what influences human behaviour is beyond our control. Social transformation is also something that can take generations. We need to develop systems that help us understand and monitor that which is influencing our work, but is beyond our control. We also need to be wary of trying to measure 'impact' in one or two years, for a project that is working on generational change.

Lewis (2001) simple diagram sheds light on the three dimensions that, ideally, we should be monitoring. This model's relevance to peace building work is further explored by Lederach, Neufeldt and Culbertson (2007) in "Reflective Peacebuilding: a Planning, Monitoring and Learning Toolkit." The central circle represents what we can control, our project implementation, for example the number of episodes of a soap opera, number of youth leaders participating in a workshop. At the next level, we have some influence, but so do many other organizations and stakeholders. Monitoring at this level requires us to look into what level of influence our project is having – are the listeners understanding the messages, what are they doing with those messages, what do the youth leaders do after they participate in our workshops? For the two inner circles, the monitoring system may focus on 'what result is our project causing?' The outer circle represents the broader context, be it the changing political, environmental or structural context. At this level, the question is reversed- it may be unrealistic (though desirable) to ask whether we are causing any result on the wider context, but we must ask what impact the changing context is having on our project.



*Three Dimensions of the Working Environment. Lewis (2001)*

### **Monitoring at the grass roots: Context, accountability and identity**

A recent survey of 50000 people by BBC World Trust found that 27% of respondents listened to 'New Path New Footprints'. The feedback we consistently get, now, is that rural youth *do* feel that it is their drama, that it contains stories of their lives. Recently a young woman from the West of Nepal said to me ' in my village, people of all ages listen to the soap. Grandmothers, youth, parents. We all stop and listen to it, we all hear ourselves in it.' This kind of feedback has been made possible through a network of youth 'community focal points', grass roots monitors who feed information to the writers on the three different dimensions in Lewis' diagram.

The soap is written in Kathmandu, far away from the setting of the drama, and indeed from the target listeners. It is about a village in the mid west of Nepal, and focuses on the youth in the village, the ups and downs of life, with the backdrop of the peace process and the changing scenario of the country. The young people come together through the youth club, which is a vehicle for them to create responses to the problems in their community – from the return of young soldiers, to land disputes, to manipulation by political parties, to migration and other issues.

The 5 writers, who work for our partner organization, Antenna Foundation Nepal, are all under 25 years old, from various parts of the country, and were selected through an open competition. The situation in Nepal has been changing so rapidly that we needed to find a way to ensure they could keep their fingers on the pulse in terms of how the changing country was affecting the lives of youth in the villages. Twenty young community focal points were hired, 2 in each of our 10 working districts. Their ages range from 16 to 27, some of them work part time in between studies, some of them full time. They are in 4 teams – story gathering, listener feedback, outcome monitoring, and Youth Facilitators.

The audience feedback team survey diverse groups to find their responses to particular characters, storylines, technical aspects such as sound effects, and language. They reported for instance, that young people gathered around the radio with their whole families, but since one of the characters sometimes used swear words, they found it embarrassing. Since one of our intended outcomes of the drama is to foster intergenerational dialogue, using language that makes young people embarrassed to listen with their parents is obviously counter productive. The Maoists are also important listeners. A field discussion with local Young Communist League members found that they felt that the Maoist character in the drama used language that was too 'high brow', it was not the village-accessible language that the local Maoist leaders used.

The story gathering team goes from village to village, and gathers stories that they think will be relevant to the soap opera. They also let the writers know about changes happening at the local level. For instance, after the peace agreement was signed, the story gathering team started to report two new trends. One was about public drunkenness – the Maoists had formerly banned drinking in public, and one of the side effects of the ceasefire was that people started to drink in public again, and domestic violence and other drink related issues increased. Another trend

that the field staff in different districts reported was that after the ceasefire, young people started going to the district headquarters to finish their schooling and to take their school leaving certificate exams, as security had increased. The unforeseen consequence of this was a rise in unplanned teenage pregnancies, particularly with girls doing their exams in district headquarters and getting involved with police / army who were stationed there, and had little to occupy their time with since the ceasefire. If we had simply conducted irregular field visits and asked listeners what was happening in their villages, these issues, had they been voiced, would have sounded to us more like health issues, which is not the topic of the drama. Having staff rooted in the community helped us to understand that these were in fact conflict issues, consequences of the peace process and the shifting context. Issues such as public drunkenness and unintended pregnancy, and other things the field monitors have reported were woven into the script of the radio soap. The result of this feedback loop is that when the writers get a chance to travel into the field, they are often asked ‘How come you always know what is going on in our lives?’

Having a web of young grass roots monitors has been complex and difficult to manage. As they are not technical researchers, sometimes their feedback has not been useful. It’s hard to monitor the monitors when they are spread out over the country. There have been challenges to ensure that information is properly shared with both SFCCG and our partner Antenna Foundation Nepal. Despite the difficulties, it has also had profound benefits beyond the functions of monitoring. It causes us as drama creators to be more accountable to the community. If there was anything in the drama that upset local Maoists or other groups, the safety of our field staff could be in jeopardy. They are known as ‘NBNP sister/ brother’ in their communities, and they hold us accountable for delivering a product that people want to listen to and relate to, but also something that is inclusive and does not sideline or marginalize any group.

One of the challenges in conflict transformation is to work at the level of identity. Just as the former Maoist combatant Raju is in a process of shifting his identity from comrade to peace activist, the radio drama and parallel community peace building work aims to support people to create an identity of being a peace builder. The opportunity to contribute stories and feedback directly into the drama has given those listeners a deeper sense of ownership of the show, and an experience that it is a two-way communication dialogue. The field staff become not just monitors, but the agents of change, and the show becomes more than a radio drama, it becomes a way of being that listener’s identity themselves with.

Quantum physics tells us that simply the act of observing has an impact on that which we are observing. The discovery that energy could behave as a wave and a particle at the same time, and that it is in the moment of observing it that it becomes one or the other, holds important lessons for peace builders and communicators. Simply the act of asking questions of our audiences, contributes to causing change. We will never be able to really document all the things that cause change in an individual, a community, or a country. But we must always continue to ask the questions.

## **Cohort study**

Gathering ongoing audience feedback, monitoring and stories helps guide and shape the soap opera. What is missing from this approach is a tool that would enable us to directly observe the outcome of listening to specific episodes of the soap on a sample audience. In an ideal world with unlimited time and money, every episode would be audience tested before going to air. However aside from money, the cost of this would be a longer turnaround time between script and broadcast, thus making it harder for the soap to be so current.

After 8 months of broadcast, we conducted a ‘cohort study’ - an intensive ‘listening’ week, where one group listened to the soap and had discussions, and another group did neither. The purpose was to trial the cohort methodology, with a view to using it longitudinally in the future, tracking the same group over time. The methodology is useful in gaining audience feedback and responses, however it was limited in being able to draw conclusions of the actual knowledge, attitude or behaviour changes, since firstly, these take time, and secondly, the changes that did occur could have been a result of the discussions that were taking place as much as they could have been due to the soap. Once again, wave particle theory intervenes. Sesame Workshop (who produce Sesame Street) have used this methodology extensively, and it is a methodology that needs more work and experimentation to enable it to be a helpful tool for entertainment education programs that work on soft skills and shifting long term behaviours.

### **The non-magic bullet**

Communication theorists mid way through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century proposed that one way communication, such as radio or TV programs, could carry messages like a torpedo carries gun powder, which were dispatched through the airwaves to their intended audience. The resulting explosion would be a pre-planned change in knowledge, attitude and behaviour in the listener. This ‘magic bullet theory’ though convenient, does not hold in reality. Human behaviour is complex, and understanding how people move from a shift in attitude to a shift in practice is not a well-understood science. If it was, HIV would no longer be transmitted, teenagers in the West wouldn’t smoke, speed or have unplanned pregnancy, 30,000 kids wouldn’t be dying annually of preventable diseases in Nepal, and obesity and high cholesterol would be a thing of the past.

Truly effective behaviour change communication needs to be participatory, multi directional, and part of an integrated approach that stretches beyond media products. It is surprising, then, that there is a pressure to evaluate media-based projects as though the magic bullet theory still held strong. The push from donors to be more accountable for results is an important one. However, it is crucial that there be space to acknowledge that there are many influences on behaviour change. Why are we trying to measure the impact of a soap opera, talk show, or information campaign, when we know that the communication product does not and should not stand-alone? For a health communication campaign to be successful, it should be supplemented with face-to-face health advice, access to medicine, advocacy and sometimes policy changes. Whilst we know for instance that our radio soap opera has caused shifts in behaviour in some listeners, we also know that the impact of the changing context in the country cannot be underestimated, and we also see that the effects of the program are greater in areas where there is also a community peace building component.

Raju, the former Maoist combatant, made the decision to return to his village after listening to 'Naya Bato Naya Paila'. At the same time, our field staff were working with youth leaders and youth clubs in the community Raju came from, on how they could play a role in supporting the reintegration of former combatants. When Raju returned to his community, the youth group was ready, the environment receptive, and he was able to make the transition relatively smoothly. Raju himself attributed his decision to 'reintegrate' to the radio soap opera. This makes a lovely story for conferences, reports and donors, but the truth is that the soap opera was one piece of a puzzle that included massive contextual changes, as well as work in the community that had low visibility but a high impact on the communities receptivity.

### **Allowing for contradiction: Guns and Marigolds**

After the focus group discussion of listeners in the village school room was finished, our local Youth Facilitator, who knew Raju, told us there was more to his story, and called him over to talk to us. He told us shyly that he had been chosen by the youth group to welcome us at the airport the previous day with garlands of marigolds. He said that as he had waited for us, the regional Maoist commander had arrived with his guards to board the incoming flight. One of the Maoist bodyguards recognized Raju from the cantonment, and, when he needed to take a quick toilet break, handed Raju his AK 47. At that moment, the SFCG team emerged from the plane, and Raju hid in the shadows, holding flower garlands in one hand, and gun in the other.

This final piece of Raju's story poignantly illustrated to us the challenges of reintegration and shifting identities and contexts. Peace building is a field of contradiction. The same person can be both a combatant and a peace builder. Conflict is rarely black and white. In our logframes and monitoring systems, we need to build in space to let there be paradoxes, and reflect and learn from them. Having a web of people who are from our target group, who live in the communities that we intend to impact, helps to draw out the real stories of people's lives, and to ensure that the work we do is not a one way communication product, but is a multi directional dialogue. As media practitioners, as peace builders, as agents of social change, we are privileged to work with people to facilitate their own transformation. Learning how to monitor and measure that transformation is a great opportunity, brilliantly disguised as an impossible challenge.

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