

1) What did you do? Who was involved?

In early 2006, Search for Common Ground Nepal launched a multi-pronged youth program aimed at *facilitating the participation of young people (aged 15 to 25)* in peacebuilding activities. Through a mixture of media and community peacebuilding, the project supported youth in the western, conflict-affected region of the country, to participate in the peace process.

SFCG worked with the Nepali media house, Antenna Foundation Nepal, to produce and broadcast a three-times weekly radio soap opera, *Naya Bato Naya Paila (New Path, New Footprints)*. The soap opera used an intended outcomes approach, creating behaviour changes in the targeted populations. The objectives were for:

- Youth to analyze the pressures on them caused by conflict;
- Youth to organize to address root causes of conflict;
- Youth to participate in community decision making processes; and
- Youth to conduct dispute resolution at community levels.

The soap opera told the story of a fictional village in the foothills of the Himalayas and its diverse groups of young people who were seeking to resist manipulation into violence and to do positive work in their own communities for peace.

The radio show was complemented by community-based work with young people most vulnerable to manipulation into violence. SFCG worked in rural, remote areas to engage youth groups and clubs (with members often in conflict with one another) into a leadership development program. Staff started by mapping the ways in which youth were organized and identifying how they were being involved in conflict. At that point, key young leaders – both young men and women - were selected and brought together from across political, caste, and ethnic lines into a dialogue and leadership process. Youth participated in a leadership workshop and then created cooperative actions for peacebuilding in their communities. Actions that resulted included a variety of activities, including street dramas and activities to facilitate the reintegration of former child soldiers.

The project is ongoing.

2) Why did you do it? How did you know there was a need?

SFCG implemented this project for a number of reasons. Youth in Nepal have been at the centre of the conflict. Many have been victimized, suffering direct violence, losing their educational and vocational opportunities, and being displaced. Many other youth – including children – were compelled to fight in the conflict as soldiers and young people within the transition continued to be manipulated into violence by political elites. Yet, throughout the country, youth were organizing to create opportunities to participate in the society and a vibrant youth movement had begun. SFCG conducted an initial assessment in mid 2005 and found that at the time, very few in the international community were providing

support to youth issues beyond traditional education. Therefore, youth were identified as a leverage point through which we could work.

In 2006, SFCG conducted a baseline study which confirmed some of the assumption on which the project was launched. Youth were organizing a great deal but were not sure how they could best contribute to peace building. They had few channels for participation in their communities and were unsure of how to best use their organizing power. And they were vulnerable to manipulation.

3) Did you face any challenges? How were they overcome?

The project faced a great deal of challenges in the implementation. The most significant was that the context was evolving very quickly with the country moving from civil war and a dictatorship to a ceasefire and transitional government to a comprehensive peace agreement. As a result, SFCG and its partners had to adapt an extremely flexible implementation process. While the activities largely remained the same, the content changed constantly. For the radio program, SFCG employed community focal points to monitor the responses of the target audience to the drama and to provide inputs on the dynamics on the ground. For example, an issue that emerged was conflict over land between displaced persons as they returned home and those who had stayed behind. The drama team quickly identified the issue as key and incorporated a storyline on how such conflicts could be addressed. As a result, the show reflected the realities in communities accurately, leading listeners to often comment in letters and to our staff that they couldn't believe how real the show felt.

The community-based work was easier to adapt. As the ceasefire took hold in mid-2006, staff were able to work in more remote areas that had been controlled by the Maoists, the rebel forces. The dialogue to cooperative action process that SFCG implemented took on more relevancy; the challenge was to effectively respond to the rapidly changing conflicts that were emerging in communities. For example, soon after the programs started, former soldiers began returning to their communities bringing up feelings of revenge and exclusion. SFCG programs responded by mobilizing youth clubs and groups to contribute to the long-term reintegration of former soldiers.

4) What was the impact? How do you know?

This project has had a positive impact on the way in which youth perceive themselves and their role in this historic and turbulent time in Nepal. Based on an independent evaluation conducted in early 2008, there have been some specific results:

- Youth are more likely to believe that they have a positive role to play in the society and that, if well organized, they could contribute to the peace process;

- The radio program is reported to have increased the confidence level of its young listeners, enabling them to analyze the pressures on them with regards to conflict and make positive decisions;
- There has been an increase reported in youth involvement in peacebuilding activities, bringing people together from across dividing lines. This has been seen particularly among those young people who participated in the community peacebuilding program who have organized activities aimed at bridging gaps among different caste, political, and ethnic groups;
- Some adults have come to see young people as potential partners in peacebuilding rather than threats to security. This has the potential to create channels of participation in community decision making for young people. This is known based on accounts of adults who have begun attending youth-led activities; and
- Many youth – especially those involved in the community work – reported getting involved in dispute resolution in their own communities

5) What lessons did you learn? What, if anything, would you do differently?

Overall, the project gave rise to some fundamental lessons learned that have been incorporated into our ongoing programs. Some of these include:

- The link between radio programming and community work is vital to creating results with target groups. This means that those in communities need to understand the radio show and its intentions, using it as a tool to mobilize opportunities for people to engage in peacebuilding;
- It is helpful to involve broadcasting partners (local FM stations) in collecting feedback on the radio soap opera. They have a stake in how the population perceives the show and can provide honest insights into the responses from the listeners;
- In peacebuilding programming with youth, it is vital to work with existing, self-initiated youth led organizations. However, it is equally vital to engage with respected adult community members and help them build mentorship relationships with youth leaders.

While the project has been largely successful, there are a few things that SFCG would do differently. The main one would be to work with youth in urban areas in addition to those in rural areas. While those in remote places are clearly the most vulnerable, youth in urban areas also have a significant impact on how conflicts unfold. As a result of this, SFCG has expanded its youth program to include young people from a range of backgrounds.