

BUILDING PEACE THROUGH EMPOWERING WOMEN

Nepal, Skidmore College, Meghan Morris and Peter Brock (USA).

SECTION I:

The goal of our project was to bolster the prospects for continued peace in Nepal by empowering low-caste women. Specifically, our project was designed to strengthen local women's groups by providing a meeting house as well as funding for a head start program.

Our project was intended to address the marginalization of low-caste women, one of the root causes of Nepal's decade long civil war. Towards this end, we partnered with a locally run organization called ADWAN. Making use of ADWAN's intimate knowledge and experience in Nepal's women's empowerment movement, we identified the construction of a meeting house as a key contribution to this process. In addition, we chose a location for the project that would allow several groups to make use of the facility. Although the construction of the meeting house was delayed by the monsoon season, we purchased the land and some of the raw materials ahead of time in an effort to expedite the construction process. Perhaps the most touching moments of our experience were the long conversations with Nani Maya, a low-caste woman whose life had been completely transformed by her participation in the first of ADWAN's groups. In one conversation, Nani told us that her biggest hope is that her daughter will not have to face the same life of hard manual labor for petty subsistence wages. This simple expression of hope revealed so much about the true nature of poverty, and by contrast the pursuit of prosperity.

SECTION II:

As with most developing countries, the simplest logistical tasks are inevitably complicated by the lack of infrastructure. During the implementation of our project we encountered a variety of the barriers to prosperity that plague the country. First and foremost, the incredibly mountainous geography of Nepal is factor in almost every aspect of life. Transporting materials become more expensive because of the time and distance they must travel on mountainous roads. Secondly, the monsoon season puts a damper on most activities and especially those that depend upon roads. Rough dirt roads rapidly turn to mudslides and even roaring streams during the monsoon. As a result of the rains, the construction of the meeting house will not be completed until the first week of October. We did, however, purchase the land and secure most of the building materials during our three-week visit in June.

Once completed, the meeting house will host the monthly microfinance meetings of four local women's groups, a head start program and other educational activities. In order to sustain the operation of the meetinghouse, we have allocated funds for teachers and supplies to be spent over the next three years. It our hope that after three years, the meeting house programs will be sustained by the income generating activities of the women's group themselves.

We experienced the reality of the monsoon first hand in our walk from Mankamna temple to the village of Taklung (the project site). The three-hour journey was especially arduous on account of the constant downpour that soaked our clothes and rendered the path quite slippery. Kamal, our guide and an ADWAN staff member, put our discomfort in sharp perspective when he told us that he walked the entire path to and from school every day as a child.

Another difficulty we faced was the omnipresent language barrier. While a few phrases of Nepali produced smiles in almost any crowd, it was difficult to engage in any substantive conversation. We did, however, have numerous conversations and even interviews through our friend and interpreter, Kamal. The issue of communication as well as that of local-credibility was one of the main reasons we allowed ADWAN's staff to take control of most logistics.

As firm believers in the value of local knowledge and experience, we delegated the majority of the project coordination to the competent and dedicated ADWAN staff. Well intentioned as we were, we are foreigners with little concept of life in Nepal. Rather than to act upon our desire to help the organization we so much admired, we opted for a supervisory role in the most limited sense of the term. We did, however, take a great interest in learning about the functioning of the all-female executive board of ADWAN. These women were inspiring in their humble commitment to the future of their country. Even though a greater grasp of the Nepali language would have increased our ability to participate in the

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project management, the cultural knowledge and local respect of our Nepali collaborators was invaluable and utterly unattainable for us as outsiders.

Navigating the cultural differences between the United States and a somewhat conservative Hindu-dominated culture like Nepal can be tricky, especially so in the context of extreme poverty. This, again, was a capacity in which our ADWAN collaborators played a vital role. The ADWAN staff members and their family helped us act in a culturally appropriate manner as well as to understand the behaviors of our hosts. In one particularly useful instance, Kamal instructed us ahead of time that we were expected to make a small donation (less than fifty cents US) to the leader of a women's group after she placed a garland of flowers around our neck. Apparently a previous visitor had been unaware of this aspect of the tradition and had unintentionally offended the leader of the women's group. While we are not against foreign development assistance universally, this experience reinforced our conviction that such intervention is potentially disastrous without strong collaboration with local agents. Our commitment to delegating all responsibilities better executed by Nepalese to ADWAN's staff is a result of this conviction and it strengthens our confidence in our project's long term impact.

At the same time that collaboration with the ADWAN staff members was wonderful and productive, this relationship had its own peculiarities. All of ADWAN's staff come from poor low-caste families who's limited means are no barrier to their profound hospitality and generosity. Although we cherished our time spent in Taklung village, the exceedingly large plates of food served to us contrasted sharply with the prevalence of malnutrition in the village. As we learned more and more about the struggles of daily life in the village, we became more keenly aware of the burden we placed on our hosts. One particular girl we met was thirteen years old and about as tall as a five year old should be and had the tell-tale blotchy skin of prolonged malnutrition. Because this sense of hospitality is thoroughly engrained in Nepali culture, we had no choice but to accept it and be grateful. Being aware of the burden we inevitably placed on our hosts, however, we consciously tried to limit the amount of time spent in the village. While this decision curtailed somewhat our ability to influence the daily progress of the meeting house, we feel that it was thoroughly justified.

It is difficult to assess in a tangible fashion what the overall impact of our project will be in terms of securing a peaceful future in Nepal. However, in our short visit we heard powerful testimony as to the transformative power of ADWAN's women's groups. We heard numerous personal accounts of how ADWAN's women's groups had enacted profound social change in a few short years. As a contribution to this well documented model of social change, our project will surely be a valuable contribution. Perhaps the most encouraging testimony we heard was that of the young girls who had grown up watching their mothers transform the social order of their entire village through their solidarity and income generating activities. Seen from the perspective of a new generation of Nepali women, the prospects for peace must look considerably more favorable than it did for their mothers. While we lack any hard data on the impact of our project at this point, there is no shortage of evidence that it will bring an immeasurable amount of hope and opportunity the people of the Taklung area and beyond. In the future, we would very much like to help document statistically the impact of the ADWAN women's groups. This hard data would allow for greater access to funding as well as project evaluations.

In addition to the benefits that the meeting house will have in Nepal itself, we are confident that we can use our experiences to generate more interest in Nepal and women's issues in general. We are planning to present a lecture and slideshow on our project to the entire Skidmore community in the hopes of inspiring other students to take up the cause and make their own contributions to the creation of a sustainable and just peace in Nepal. In this hope, however, we are not so naive as to think that interested students should follow exactly in our footsteps. We plan on encouraging students to engage with these issues of women's rights, marginalization and economic empowerment at the various levels that they exist. We hope to inspire students to work for gender equality in the United States as well as abroad. Although our particular experience was overseas, we firmly believe that the lessons we learned and the inspiration that drove us have universal aspects at their core. It is in this continual and multi-dimensional quest for justice and equity that we hope our project will make its mark as a project for peace.

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