

LET'S BUILD PEACE, HERE AND NOW: KAMALA CHANDRAKIRANA AND GABI KENT

One way to help begin the process of bringing together former adversaries is storytelling – allowing or enabling both victims and perpetrators from conflicts to talk to each other about their own experiences. This is the third in a series of conversations hosted by the Foundations for Peace. In this episode two women who have helped to bring these stories forward and have them heard in the Balkans, in Indonesia and in Northern Ireland talk to each other and to their peers about the processes involved, the challenges those processes face and the value of stories in healing the wounds created by conflict.

The discussion is mediated by Barry Knight but first, Rasha Sansur of Dalia Association, Palestine briefly introduces the work of Foundations for Peace (FFP).

Rasha: As local activist funders, Foundations for Peace members play a vital role in delivering and sustaining peacebuilding because we work at the grassroots level and we have the element of trust. With these dialogues, we also seek to influence the global agenda. Instead of having a top-down approach of building and changing the development aid architecture in conflict-affected areas, we try to bring out the local stories, so today's session is really important. We're sharing our learning and we're showing that, while it is a difficult process, it is more sustainable.

Barry: As you say, Rasha, FFP is all about people on the frontlines of conflict, and often the peacebuilding world is driven by people who are remote from the frontlines, who allocate resources in ways that are not necessarily helpful. So these stories matter. The next 20 minutes will feature a conversation between Nana (Kamala Chandrakirana) and Gabi and then I'm going to bring everybody in to ask questions and give comments and at the end, we'll try and come up with ideas of where we go to next. This is especially relevant in the context of philanthropy where one of the most popular current campaigns is shifting the power, which Rasha has had much to do with. We really need to do things differently because the old ways have not worked. Nana, when was the first time you encountered storytelling?

Nana: First of all, I should say that everything I've done in the past 30 years has been framed by conflict, not just a single conflict but multiple conflicts in Indonesia. Those of you who know the history of Indonesia will know what I mean. But my first encounter with storytelling was in the early years of 2000, when I was one of the people building a national commission on violence against women, which came about from an incident of mass rape in 1998 and which was central to the end of a 32-year dictatorship in Indonesia, and started a whole new era of what we call *Reformasi* or reform. One day I got a call from somebody named Imam Aziz, who led a group of young Muslim social justice and democracy activists. He and his colleagues had traced back what happened in 1965/1966 in their own community, when there was an anti-communist pogrom involving mass killings – of up to half a million people, according to some estimates – and mass detentions without trial. During the whole subsequent period of dictatorship, the story of what happened in 1965 and

'66 was silenced. All the survivors were silenced and were excluded from public service. Imam told me that he and his comrades felt it was their responsibility to inquire into the role of their own elders in those incidents, as Muslim-based mass organisations were implicated. They felt a duty to seek out those who had been imprisoned to listen to their stories so that they could understand what happened in 1965/66 from the point of view of the victims. Then they conveyed these stories to their own elders, some of whom were also witnesses and maybe in some cases also involved directly.

The reason Imam came to me was that after about a year or so of doing this inquiry into the past, they had found that the women victims actually had quite different stories from the men. Imam's group, which was entirely comprised of men felt that these stories could not be told in a space created by men only but needed the involvement of women. So we started working with women's organizations to seek out the women who had been victimized. It wasn't just to hear their stories, but also to form the basis on which to build a strategy to demand accountability for past human rights violations. The telling of these stories and our process of documenting them was a healing process for them as well – both a healing from the terrible personal trauma, but also an opening for intergenerational dialogue about a past that had been hidden from public debate. This meant that it was also an act of challenging the dominant narrative. So that was the beginning of my journey in grasping the power of this very humble tool that is storytelling.

Gabi: That's an extraordinary story in itself. What I recognize very strongly in what you're saying is the power of stories and storytelling as a way to open up spaces and opportunities for conversations, and I have come to storytelling as a constructive tool for peacebuilding, too. My first encounter with stories in a conflict situation was when I was looking at a grassroots process in the Balkans called Recom [regional commission for the establishment of facts about war crimes and other serious human rights violations in the former-Yugoslavia] as part of my studies. The human rights activists on the ground I was talking to were holding a series of community conversations to find a way in which they could work together to create a movement for this fact-finding mission. Even though sharing stories wasn't the purpose of the exercise, when they did so during the process, it allowed them to talk to each other in a different way. Even though the room was full of people from all sides of the conflict, victims and perpetrators and people who were both, when they began to talk at the human level about their experience, it allowed people to move beyond their divisions. What it made me realise is that stories do something in these contested spaces.

My first direct experience was working in Northern Ireland with CFNI (Community Foundation for Northern Ireland) as a digital storyteller with a communities in action programme, where people were researching the impacts of austerity on their communities, which were also living with the legacy of conflict. We got into more of the *how* do you tell stories *with* people because, which is very different from where I began which was telling stories as a filmmaker *about* people. I was now trying to find ways in which we could work together to use stories in an empowering way and we ended up with a collective storytelling method, which allowed people to talk about topics, like poverty, which people often found quite shameful and then we used those stories as tools to lobby politicians and decision-

makers. So in both cases, it's about how activists can use stories as tools, and how we as storytellers can facilitate that.

And a third part of my work is with oral histories and archives, in particular an Open University in Ireland archive called *Time to Think* which is about the educational journeys of former combatants in Northern Ireland. These are not stories about direct experiences of conflict, they are about educational journeys of change in which I can see hopeful moments, that I think can serve a purpose in very difficult times when we're looking for examples of different ways of doing things.

Nana: I just want to add that while storytelling can be a powerful way to build peace and justice, it can also be a means to destroy it. It's not in and of itself a tool of peace. That's why it's so powerful, and that's why it's an important tool in social transformation – it can push to opposite directions!

In 1965/66 in Indonesia, for example, storytelling was a means of perpetuating the process of 'othering' directed at a whole social-political community, the PKI – and these initials were made into a scary demon - the *Partai Komunis Indonesia*. The PKI had a women's wing called Gerwani. When the killings and the imprisonment without trial were happening, women were also targeted, particularly those affiliated with Gerwani. In the official narrative of what happened in 1965/66, which the state developed so that its repression could appear justified, the women of Gerwani were depicted as highly sexualised beings. They were not only betrayers of the nation, they were prostitutes. There's a monument set up by the Indonesian military to commemorate what happened in 1965 which includes a relief that shows these women with big breasts with very sexualized positions and revealing clothes. This version of the story continued to be told for 30 years and formed the opinions of people at the time and of the next generation. We had to deal with that perception when we were trying to tell the victim's version of what happened.

Gabi: When you were gathering stories from women as part of this project, did the fact that you were an activist change the kinds of stories that were told?

Nana: The work was part of a national commission on violence against women, so it had an official mandate. This commission involved people from different political backgrounds as it was meant to be a meeting ground, a new platform for women's rights. I was not doing the interviews myself. I was creating a safe space and also a sense of shared purpose because some of the women were saying 'Why should I tell this story?' They knew the dominant narrative was opposed to theirs, and the stigma was so deep that it was quite possible that, even if they did tell the story, people would not believe them. Our answer was that, firstly, we want to know the truth, and secondly, we believe that this is part of our responsibility as a nation. As activists and individuals in this commission, we wanted to be enablers in this process.

Gabi: Something that's struck me very much in my work with communities in Northern Ireland is that everyone had a common experience of poverty in the aftermath of the conflict there, and they were tired of people coming in and telling stories about how awful life was, or the trauma or of this and that and the other. There has to be a purpose. So we called the

method project ‘purposeful storytelling’ and we had an objective to get hidden stories, in this case not directly about conflict, but stories that people weren’t talking about in their own communities, because they’re shameful, and from that, allowing people to talk across **political** communities and find ways of working together on a common issue. So there has to be a purpose behind storytelling for them to actually have an effect.

Nana: I really get your point about that. We don’t know where it will lead us: searching for stories and getting people to tell them. I was talking about the mass rapes earlier that led to the establishment of the commission. Ten years later after the incident, many of the victims still said ‘No, we do not want to speak’. When the rapes happened, the response was immediate denial, not just by government officials but also by people in the street. In the 10 years that followed, we had not made any progress legally in terms of accountability for past human rights violations. Given the refusal of the victims to speak, we ended up writing a report about silence: the persistence of silence because of the structural and cultural impediments that remain in place.

Barry: I just want to bring others into the conversation, Galina, from Serbia, you’re first.

Galina: I’m from Reconstruction Women’s Fund which is both a feminist and a peacebuilding fund. What I’ve been noticing is that we are not yet at a level where we develop the other side, the audience, because the audience comes with their own stories, which are often opposed to our narratives, and sometimes instead of connecting to the storytelling, we end up with even deeper antagonisms. How can we get better at developing the audience, and tell the story and be heard by the other side. We’re now going through such a process so I would really appreciate an answer.

Barry: I think that’s a question others are probably facing because the stories we tend to tell around conflict transformation and social justice, are actually the polar opposite of those of the people that we need to influence. I’d like to come back to you in a minute Nana and Gabi and ask you to think about that. Anybody else like to add a question or a comment at this stage?

Dirgha: I’m Dirgha from ActionAid Myanmar. We know from practice that storytelling programmes have proven an effective tool for healing, reconciliation and demanding accountability in post-conflict situations, but how in an active conflict zone, like Myanmar, can storytelling be effective when the authority is very powerful and also purposely perpetuating the cycle of violence? There is great risk involved in implementing such programmes because they can be seen as dissent. What are your experiences of ensuring the level of community participation in storytelling when there are bigger risks they need to worry about?

Barry: That’s a really important point. Only yesterday I was on a call where activists from various parts of the world were talking about the fear of reprisals for what they wanted to do. I’m going to take another question or comment from Araddhya, also from ActionAid, I believe.

Araddhya: Yes. We have done storytelling, and it has been successful in some cases, but in many cases it can also feel extractive. How do we strike a balance? How do we contextualise storytelling as part of a larger journey so that it's not extractive but genuinely an effort towards peacebuilding?

Barry: I'm going to turn to you first, Gabi. Would you like to respond to any or all of those three points?

Gabi: To the first question, how when you've got different voices do you include those that want to shut conversations down or have a different perspective? I think there's no easy way of bringing in difficult and different points of view, except to create respectful places for conversation. People call it agonism - you may not agree on your different experiences or perspectives but you can listen to each other respectfully, and that allows people to hear and hopefully understand a bit more about where the other is coming from. I don't know what you felt about the Recom process in Serbia, Galina, which is the one I was talking about earlier, but that was a 6-year process of communal deliberation and while the original planned outcome of establishing a fact-finding mission may never be achieved, the process led to the opening up of conversations between people who may never have been able to talk, never mind work together on a common purpose. And I think that is an example of a way in which you can hold multiple stories and experiences in one place. It's how you frame it - and it's a slow, slow process.

The question about risk is very difficult in conflict and storytellers or people working with stories in active conflicts have a huge responsibility. I'd be asking about the risks those telling their stories feel they're under and looking for ways to tell them differently. You can tell them anonymously, for example. In Northern Ireland, we did collective stories because that didn't isolate an individual and make them the target of stigma, shame or backlash in their communities. We had a community conversation, and out of that we wove a narrative that represented the core of people's stories within that community. We told stories through photographs, and got somebody else to voice that story, so that there was no direct link to the individuals involved. At the end of that process, people actually decided that they wanted to be named and they wanted to own their community stories because it was more powerful for them, but they weren't prepared to do that at the beginning. So I think you have to work very carefully particularly in active conflicts. But there's no rule to storytelling, and I think our job is to think about how to do it in a way that protects people as much as possible.

Barry: Before going back to Nana, Sean, do you want to add to this discussion or do you want to speak to something else?

Sean: I want to talk about one particular programme called Unheard Voices, which was a woman's project in Derry which brought together women who were victims of violence or perpetrators of violence, who were in state forces and in non-state armed groups, who had some connection to the conflict. They took them through a process in which they got to talk to each other, and that was a very long process of building trust etc and there's a booklet which features some of the stories of people who were part of that process. Not everybody's story made it to the book, and the group had to realise that that didn't mean that one story was more important than another, it was just, there were particular reasons why some were

included and some weren't. Because those stories were being told in the public space, there are legal requirements to ensure that the information is correct, so the process of telling stories within a group that's closed is different from that for telling stories that become public.

Actually the book is now part of Yale University's curriculum on Northern Ireland, it's been so powerful in terms of being a useful tool for reaching people and the people who told the stories are now talking on Zoom links to students in America, so they've now taken on a new role in terms of post-conflict peacebuilding. So there are different processes for different forms of story but the main thing is that the people who are telling their story are always supported.

And another thing that needs to be borne in mind - even though people may experience the same thing, they may have very different views of what actually happened.

Barry: We put our preconceptions into data all the time and we tend to make any new information fit with those preconceptions, which is really important. 'Who's story is this and what's its legitimacy?' is a really key question.

Rasha: From my experience of living in Palestine, it's true, it's very difficult to build the audience. Palestinian voices are not prioritised in mainstream media, so when social media came, it provided an alternative platform. I know social media can be a double-edged sword but it has been used very smartly these past few months, especially during the last attack on Gaza in May, where they were trying to expel Palestinians from their homes. Like the Black Lives Matter movement, it sparked global interest and this sense of storytelling and solidarity in storytelling created a move beyond the gatekeepers who control the mainstream media, and the voices have started to be heard. That is when the audience started getting built and listened to.

Nana: Galina, I totally get what you were saying about opposition to sharing our stories and facing a counter-narrative. That's exactly what happened in our experience. At that time, when the stories started to come out and people were listening, opposition and resistance to the movement and actual attacks began. These attacks challenged not just the stories but the legitimacy of the spaces we created and the credibility of the people who were telling the stories. The people who were speaking out were threatened physically and I think our friends from ActionAid Myanmar were also talking how risk has a physical dimension to it.

In a very oppressive situation like that we could not continue to tell these kinds of stories. But what was interesting was that other kinds of spaces were created, and they were more cultural than political in nature. In our case, stories were communicated in the form of song. For example, a young Indonesian rock star, based in Bali had set up a band called Superman Is Dead when our political reform period began. He was referring to the comic character, Superman, but also to our former dictator! Because many of the arrests and killings of 1965 happened in Bali, he wanted to get to know the ex-political prisoners, and to find out whether they sang songs in prison and what songs they were. When he then recorded them on an album called *Prison Songs* in the rock idiom. So, in essence, he was re-introducing to the public, and particularly to the young public, this silenced voice. Another thing was a

group of women who were either the wives or children of the victims of the 1965 pogrom who started a choir as a way of self-healing. They sang the songs that had been sung in prison. This attracted the interest of a young woman jazz singer who was so affected by these songs that she started singing them as well. And she and other musicians then produced an album with this choir called *Greetings of Hope* which reached a much wider audience than the stories would have, particularly among the younger generation. It raised a question in the young generation's minds about what happened in the 1960s and started to look for information themselves. So, despite the opposition, a new space of dialogue and engagement was created. The form in which storytelling happens necessarily evolves, because there is always a reaction and we're always adapting to that and finding different ways to tell our stories.

On the issues raised by our friends from ActionAid Myanmar, we recognize that the country is in the middle of war. Stories need to be told in safe spaces. If there's no safe space, then storytelling is not the tool to do our work. There has to be a sense of shared need, a collective sense that it's time to tell the story. How we know whether it's the time is a process of discussion and dialogue. This is essential even before we get to the storytelling phase. I want to mention the role of movements - social movements - here. We could not have done all the work we did in bringing out silenced stories and encouraging storytelling without being part of a bigger social movement. When we are trying to support each other in whatever the circumstances are, whether it's conflict or post-conflict, we ask each other: 'What's needed at this point in time?' We decided together whether the need is to hear the stories that have been silenced, or simply to document and archive them which also important, especially when people are getting old and their stories risk being lost forever. Documenting and archiving, even if you don't make them public at the time, is still an important task. But what's critical is the underlying foundation for that process of storytelling, which is this network, this ecosystem of trust, that social movements create and nurture. If there are consequences in terms of violence or threat of violence against a storyteller, we the movement will come in and do what we can to protect them. I think, Rasha, your example of how the Palestine voices that had not been prioritised before but then gained from the movements of Black Lives Matter is an example of that. It was the role of social movements, this ecosystem of trust, that created the confidence and the safe space. It also broadened the constituencies of people who feel that their interests are at stake as well.

Barry: One of the things that I've learned from this call is that context is everything, and as Arradhya said it's that stories need to be put in the wider context of the other initiatives you're taking. And it's not just written stories that matter, there are other devices. I remember from reading Vaclav Havel's autobiography, leading up to the Velvet Revolutions of 1989 the role the theatre played in enabling safe spaces to emerge among people who weren't seen as a political threat, and yet were doing political work through another medium. If you think about pre-revolutionary France, and the work of Beaumarchais, and the Marriage of Figaro and the Barber of Seville, those stories were both deliberately set in Spain but were actually about the situation in France. These tools and techniques that we have are really worth developing, because the stories of building peace on the frontline are much more vivid than the dry and log-frame-driven discourse of the development industry that wants to see inputs and outputs, rather than transformation of people's lives through direct experience.

One of the things that Foundations for Peace is learning and pioneering, is that peace is actually a problematic term. When you think about Black Lives Matter and the conflict transformation that's needed there, and in places like Palestine 'peace' is a loaded word. We need to think about this in a much more nuanced fashion. The studies that we've done often imply that peacebuilding is something that happens 'over there', but we should all be involved in these kinds of processes every day, and I think coming out of the pandemic, we are seeing the importance of our relationships and *how* we do things, as much as what we achieve. Development that measures itself by the number of bed-nets produced, or the number of dams built is not a good method. Enabling people to live flourishing lives in really dangerous circumstances, is a really critical piece.

Eddy: I can really appreciate that the process requires such a delicate balance and thoughtfulness to get people to move from a place of healing to a place of solidarity, or at least a better understanding between groups. And I thought Sean's comment about the need to draw out the complexity of this process is really interesting. It sounds to me that it requires a real recognition of assets, things that exist in the locality, but might not even be realised. I think Nana's reference to singers is one example of such an asset. I have lots of questions, but it sounds to me that storytelling requires a real local process.

Barry: It's good that you've got questions Eddy, because we never intended the session to be the definitive account of storytelling, but I think if we've opened this up this would be a really serious achievement. Your points about infrastructure and assets are really well made, and go with what Nana talked about, particularly about fitting in with the ecosystem, because without an underlying social movement we're nowhere in facing down authorities that are very unsympathetic to the kind of peacebuilding that many activists are seeking.

Sean: In Croatia, there's a death camp from the Second World War called Jasenovac. School children in the former Yugoslavia used to be taken there to hear the story of the victims. After the war in the 90s, Croatia broke away, it's become more right-wing, and what it now does is it tells the stories of the survivors, not the victims, which aren't as bad, right? Now, the camp is divided in two by a border, a river, and so half of the camp is in Bosnia, half in Croatia and if you go to the Croatian part you'll hear figures and facts, and if you go to the Bosnian you hear a very different story, and yet it's the same camp. So one of the things we do when we bring people over to the Balkans is take them to see how one place can have so many different stories told in so many different ways, and how people use those variants to weaponize storytelling so that they can use to suit their own purposes. Those are also things we need to be aware of.

Barry: That is really important. Stories are not objective, they come from our consciousness, and we need to harness their power. I'm going to give you a minute each Gabi and then Nana for your final thoughts.

Gabi: Thinking about what Sean was saying, the work that I'm doing on The Open University 'Time to Think' project which I mentioned earlier and which is oral stories of former combatants who studied during their time in prison, what strikes me from those interviews is that sometimes connections have been made between people around ideas, around shared

experiences, for example the books that people read and the hopes that they have for forming a different kind of society. There's a role in illuminating those moments of hope and possibility and human connections that exist, sometimes in very disparate stories. And perhaps that's another more constructive role of storytelling, that when you have many different perspectives, there can be points of connection that you can see when you look at them as a whole. I'm thinking also of a project I'm doing in Belfast at the moment working with Loyalist ex-prisoners and young people in loyalist communities. It's important for young people to see that in past conflict people have created ways to work together differently, and been able to talk to each other in respectful ways, and find ways of forging and building peace. We forget those stories when we're in difficult times but I think it's a really important role of stories to offer a counter to hopelessness and it gives young people the possibility of seeing that there's a different way of thinking and of doing things. So stories can play a hopeful role for building peace as well.

Barry: Nana, a final word from you.

Nana: I just want respond to some of the comments from Eddy, about the long journey and the issue of scale. Conflicts don't just end. Maybe there's an episode of peacemaking, but I truly believe that it's peace that's episodic, not conflict. Conflicts evolve and they evolve through a fabric of stories, both those that support peace and justice and those that destroy it. These stories are passed down from one generation to another. This is why something that happened more than 50 years ago in Indonesia is still felt as a threatening issue even now. So given the fact that conflicts evolve through a very long period of time, the process of peacebuilding necessarily becomes long-term. We don't have a particular point where we say 'Oh we've succeeded, now we can go back and do something else!' It also challenges us to think what we mean by 'peace' and peacebuilding, because what we're doing in terms of peacebuilding through storytelling is really to make the victims, survivors and the average citizen all become part of the peacebuilding process. It's not about the powers of two conflicting entities sitting at the table and shaking hands on an agreement that is based on whatever compromises these elites make. Peace requires the average citizen, it requires victims and survivors, to make it work. On the issue of scale, we in Indonesia for Humanity are an activist fund that gives small grants. We believe small is beautiful and that peacebuilding through small acts of storytelling – this humble tool – is really significant in the process of building genuinely transformative peace. For me, the Shift the Power movement means really shifting our focus from big players and negotiation tables to the community and believing in the power of the small and humble.

Barry: Thank you, that's a great way to end. Stories give us the opportunity to reframe, that's the thing that I'm really taking away here. And thank you for reminding us that we need to shift power from the centre to the edges of our society. There is no justification for having huge numbers of bureaucratic staff sitting in an office in London or Washington, when the margins of our society are starved of resources. We need to get people like you into the driving seat in these kinds of situations, because you are with the people in a way that many of the so-called peacebuilding institutions that are actually over the people, and that's a critical relationship that we need to correct.

To become part of the FFP learning community or to find out more about its work, please contact Chandrika Sahai at chandrika@global-dialogue.org or Rasha Sansur at infoffpn@gmail.com