

Meaningful Dialogue

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The leaders of political parties and social organizations of Panchthar district participated in an exercise of stacking 12 nails on top of one nail stuck in a small wooden slate without any external support. The task looked almost impossible to 18 people divided into three groups. Later when the facilitator indicated the groups to use local experience and technology, one of the groups was able to complete the task that involved rigorous efforts. Six members in the group shouted with joy. The success was later achieved by both the second and third groups, and all the group members were shouting in excitement.

Although the reaction of the participants looked normal at a first glance, there was one thing special in the success and scream—the leaders who were less active in the group work were relatively more excited and screaming out loud than the rest. The chairperson of Nepali Congress, Narendra, and the leader of CPN-Maoist, Bikash, were in two different groups. Some of the emotions that were observed as a result of this exercise and shouting were interrelated and were very important. First, it was relatively easier to achieve success while working in groups. Second, proper utilization of local experience and technology is important. Third, ownership of the success achieved by one's own effort was easier to accept and could also be a matter of unlimited happiness. Fourth, it was possible to achieve any daunting task perceived as impossible through mutual coordination and cooperation. Fifth, the need-based external assistance could play an important role. Sixth, leadership should have the capacity to incorporate, coordinate, and motivate all throughout the process. And seventh, things should be analyzed from different perspectives when solution to a problem could not be achieved from one thought process. The leaders of Panchthar had developed these understandings from this "Nail Exercise." Giving continuity to the tradition of dialogues is the only alternative to minimize mutual discontents and to concentrate on local development.

The above context was that of a three-day workshop organized by UNDP's Conflict Prevention Program targeting political and social leaders of Panchthar district. The workshop was held in Birtamod, Jhapa, from August 14th through 16th. While the district-level political leaders were initiating dialogues to solve the Nail Exercise, the political parties and the government in Kathmandu were busy in bilateral, tripartite and multilateral discussions. During the same time, while some political parties were trying to create enabling environment for the upcoming election at the districts, the CPN-Maoist, its aligned groups and their fraternal wings were distributing pamphlets with a message to boycott the election. Although these reactions towards election are extremely different, they are interrelated. All these reactions could be brought together for a dialogue.

Dialogue is a dynamic process. A one-time dialogue does not necessarily address and solve all the problems. Recognition of a problem is an important aspect, and the process of dialogue is important to do so. Bringing concerned stakeholders together to listen to each other is an important aspect of dialogue. For this to happen a favorable environment needs to be created—preparatory work needs to be done. Although dialogue may not always be a solution, but there is

no other alternative either. Dialogue, however, can provide appropriate groundwork towards solving any problem if handled appropriately by facilitators based on the needs. Trust is an important condition for a dialogue. Dialogue is not possible when there is lack of trust. At least the participants in Birtamod have now understood the importance, rationale, process, and conditions for dialogue. The participants, who even hesitated to shake their hands in the past, were seen trusting their own lives in the hands of others. This was an important aspect of the workshop as there is now a situation where they can trust each other. On the basis of what was observed in Birtamod, it is now expected that the political parties in Panchthar will initiate the culture of dialogue as a continuous process.

Acceptance of others' existence is an important aspect in the process of dialogue. The leaders of Panchthar have clearly understood this reality. Imposing one's unilateral opinion or attempting to build consensus within traditionally held opinions only could not be dialogue—in fact, it is conflict. Using this analytical lens, the rationale of so-called dialogues between the government and four major political parties in the past is questionable. One of the reasons of these dialogues for not being meaningful might be due to the groups coming to a dialogue with prejudiced mindsets. In a meaningful dialogue, it is expected to express one's opinion, listen to other's view openly, accept differences in opinions, and seek mutually-agreeable solutions to move forward.

The leaders of Panchthar have realized the above facts and also sensed the need of joint-leadership based on dialogue and collaboration. They have also cherished their common dream of developing their district within the next 10 years. Once together in Birtamod, they were thinking of Panchthar's overall future development. Standing together at present, they reflected their past, and developed the framework for future. Their visions on development are creative and constructive. Most importantly, the dream that they cherished together is not impossible. If they retain their trust, like the way they practiced in Birtamod, and if they continue fixing the "nails" through dialogues, they can achieve much more than what they expected over the next 10 years.

Most of the participants of the workshop have accepted that local human resource, technology, resources, and ideology are required for local development. They have also developed the understanding that local policy and leadership are decisive for this to happen. It is even inspiring that they realize the fact that the understanding of people involved in National politics in Kathmandu is different than local. This, however, is only possible when they start dialogue in real sense.

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