

The Tree of Life growing in Nepal

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I have been working for a psychosocial service NGO based in Kathmandu, Nepal that works on several projects around this culturally rich and resilient country, battered by a 10 year conflict, natural disasters, and poverty. These include supporting the reintegration of ex-militia children into their communities, emergency psychosocial support of flood victims, work with refugees expelled from Bhutan, and supporting the National Human Rights Commission and other organisations.



As a 'technical advisor', my hope was to introduce narrative practices that encourage collaborative ways of working with individuals and communities. The 'tree' provided a good entry point and has now put down roots in just about all our project sites! My colleagues have been attracted to its simplicity and universality, and the logic of helping people find a platform of safety and strength before facilitating exploration of problems.

Personally, I've used the activity with a number of professional teams and found it adaptable to all sorts of contexts. When an INGO team requested a 'stress management' workshop, I overcame my initial concerns that it would be seen as 'childish'. The team's response was 'thank goodness it's not another power point presentation ...'. Sharing trees between individuals worked to bring people together whose perceived differences were a major cause of conflict and stress. Realising that many problems and challenges of the work (the storms) were shared by many in the team was a surprise to them, and allowed for a collective sharing and discussion of current and new ways of coping with the challenges of cross-cultural development work.

Since this experience, I've also used the 'tree' with human rights defender teams around the country as a 'needs assessment tool'. Senior lawyers, expecting serious talk and form-filling, have found themselves sharing stories of their childhoods, sharing hopes and dreams, and singing songs to their colleagues with much mirth. This as a prelude to detailing the serious challenges to human rights work – death threats, facing angry mobs, dealing with a frustratingly sluggish bureaucracy and legal system, the physical and psychosocial effects of these challenges, and ways of helping each other respond. Revisiting these teams months later, many people said the activity had had a significant positive effect on their lives and work.

In the remainder of this document, I've adapted a report that shows how the Tree of Life was used to provide a 'psychosocial needs assessment' in a home for children orphaned or affected by the recent conflict. I hope it might provide some interesting insights into the lives of children in Nepal, as well as illustrating the effectiveness of the activity.

Objectives of the program

We wanted to interact with the children in a way that helped them to feel more confident and better able to deal with their situation, including problems in their lives. We wanted to hear from the children about problems and difficulties they face, but also about their strengths and skills, and hopes for the future. We did not want to highlight individual children with problems in a way that could make them feel uncomfortable or ashamed.

Methodology

We spent four days at the children's home. The first day we used a group activity, the 'Tree of Life' with 15 of the younger children; on the second day, we conducted the same activity with the other 15 older children. On the third day, we conducted some group activities and then met with some of the children individually and some in small groups. These were children who the counsellors or staff felt may have had particular problems or children who requested to meet with the counsellors themselves. Ten children had individual sessions.

On the fourth day, an interaction was held with members of the children's home staff and also local schoolteachers and members of the home's management committee. Individual meetings were also held with staff members and the international volunteer.

The Tree of Life activity

In this activity, children drew a picture of a tree and then wrote about different aspects of their life that relate to different parts of the tree. For example, the roots of the tree represent people and things that have made important contributions to the child's life: important people like family members and teachers, the place where they have come from, music and books etc; the trunk represents skills and abilities that the child has; the branches represent hopes and dreams of the future. After completing their trees, small groups of children described their drawings to each other and many sang their favourite songs.

The idea of this activity is to help children remember the strengths and resources that they have and also to think about their hopes and dreams for the future. We wanted to talk about the problems in their lives, but only as one part of their lives, not the totality or major part.

Although many of the children had lost parents and had difficult lives – some had been negatively affected by actions of the



Maoists, and some by the army – all of them have significant relationships that are supportive to them including brothers and sisters and other family members, teachers, etc. The staff of the children's home were mentioned as part of the 'roots' of almost all the children. All of the children also have skills such as singing and dancing, giving speeches (we experienced all of these things from the children), drawing and painting, being able to use a computer to type letters, mathematics and English skills, playing football and volleyball, care for younger children, etc.



Perhaps because they have received help themselves and appreciate what it has done for their lives; in the future, many of the children want to help others – as nurses, doctors, teachers, or social workers. Some also want to be pilots, dancers, and artists.

Structure of the activity

(many games were also played)

1. Making our 'Trees of Life'
2. 'Forest of Life': together, as a group we are stronger than each individual
3. 'Storms' of life: problems and difficulties that affect children in the home and in their communities
4. The effects of these 'storms' on our hearts and minds
5. What can children do about the problems and their effects?
6. When 'storms' are not around: happy times, living in the home, and visiting our communities

'Storms': Problems and difficulties in the children's lives

Although each child is strong, supported by others and also supports others, just like trees in a forest, children can be affected by many problems. Some of the problems that have affected the children at the home or affected their families and communities include (these things were shared by the children):

- ◆ Have lost their father or mother
- ◆ Are deprived of family members
- ◆ Are deprived of love (of father/mother)

- ◆ Are deprived to stay with mother/father
- ◆ Cannot stay at home
- ◆ Cannot spend enough time at home as nobody from home comes on time to pick up
- ◆ Frequent memory of home so cannot study
- ◆ We get punished at school when we cannot do our homework because of load shedding
- ◆ Children do not get a chance to study because of the condition of the family
- ◆ Are trafficked/can be kidnapped
- ◆ Substance abuse (cigarettes, alcohol)
- ◆ Are deprived of our needs and rights (need of study, need of playing games, need of food to eat, need of entertainment)
- ◆ No medical treatment on time
- ◆ Discrimination (between male and female)
- ◆ Can have accidents
- ◆ Not enough time to play
- ◆ Nobody looks after the conflict affected children.
- ◆ Cannot watch television
- ◆ Poverty
- ◆ Become Khate [plastic pickers] because of no love from mother and father

The effect of these problems and difficulties on children's hearts and minds

- ◆ Feel hurt [remembering our Mother/Father at home]
- ◆ Get worried [thinking about our homes]
- ◆ Want to leave this world
- ◆ Anxiety [thinking that some enemies have come and done something bad to our homes]
- ◆ Thoughts come, like "Why am I alive?"
- ◆ Tears come
- ◆ Want to pour out our pain (with somebody)
- ◆ Fear feeling [when guardians do not come to take us on time, have feeling of fear as if something has happened]
- ◆ Feel like we want to go immediately because somebody might be sick in our home
- ◆ Feel sad when friends dominate us
- ◆ Do not want to study after fighting with friends.

What we can do to deal with these problems and their effects

(Children are not powerless to deal with the problems – individually and as a group they can do many things. We hoped that by encouraging children to talk about their own

responses to problems, they would learn ideas from each other and also feel more confident in their own abilities to deal with their difficulties.)

- ◆ Sharing problems with a friend and making her/his man [heart-mind] lighter
- ◆ Convincing/giving advice to him/her
- ◆ Giving him/her company
- ◆ Try to forget the problem
- ◆ Dealing with sadness in many different ways
- ◆ Playing nice games (volleyball, table tennis, cycling, football, cricket, running, etc)
- ◆ Making self busy in something
- ◆ Writing and putting the problems in the suggestion box [there is a suggestion/complaints box in Shreejana Children's Home]
- ◆ Worshipping God
- ◆ Roaming around
- ◆ Entertainment with friends (song, dance, etc)
- ◆ Trying to understand our and our friends' feelings
- ◆ Not saying anything that hurts him/her
- ◆ Sharing (with friends, our carers in the children's home, teachers, child club)
- ◆ Crying
- ◆ Staying in quite place/placing our friend in a quite environment
- ◆ If something [bad] happens in home, don't talk about it on the phone
- ◆ Giving our friend a book to read (interesting/entertaining)
- ◆ Understanding her/his worry and problems
- ◆ Don't give too much work
- ◆ Making him/her laugh by saying jokes
- ◆ Not scolding; loving our friend
- ◆ Giving/providing the affordable/available things
- ◆ Not discriminating
- ◆ Painting/writing stories or poetry
- ◆ Going for morning walk/dancing

Other issues that were talked about in individual sessions and with carers and teachers

Some children have strong memories and strong feelings about things that have happened to them and continue to affect them. Some children's parents were killed during the conflict time by either Maoists or the army. They feel grief and sadness and also anger and feelings of revenge to those who caused harm to them and their families. Despite this, all the children have hopes and dreams for the future, and they recognise that through their good fortune, they have the opportunity to fulfil their hopes. They know that is better for them to



concentrate on their studies and playing with their friends.

Some children, especially younger ones, have nightmares and some wet their beds at night. This is very common problem around the world especially for children have experienced difficult situations. In most cases, it will settle itself. The most important thing is that children are not made to feel ashamed as this will make the problem worse.

Clearly, the children's home is very well run and the children receive a high standard of care and safety, with opportunities for education and social pursuits. The children praised the managers and carers and we had the opportunity to see them interacting with each other in a happy and harmonious way. International volunteers staying at the home provide individual attention and creative ideas to stimulate the children.



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