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United for peace

How non-violent conflict transformation promotes justice

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Dear readers,

Conflicts are part of our lives. Yet, sometimes they escalate to such an extent and are driven by injustice and discrimination that they pose existential threats to people. So, what is to be done? How can the rights of women, girls and minority groups be protected, and individuals who scarcely have the means to defend themselves against violence be empowered?

Young and adult peace multipliers active in Dinajpur and Naogaon, two districts in northwest Bangladesh, offer a starting point. They bring local conflicts, for example over land, and human rights violations to light, support the victims and crucially, work to prevent violence from happening in the first place. They represent a significant civil society peace initiative that comprises not just volunteers, but as well those affected, standing against injustice and discrimination. People in remote villages come to realise that social services are not just a charitable act by officials; they are a right. Women are empowering themselves. The youth are learning to take responsibility.

Their most vital tools are knowledge and dialogue. The peace multipliers inform people about their rights and they challenge social norms that enable discrimination. Thousands of boys and girls get involved at high schools in collaboration with the peace initiative. They perform plays,

engage in student forums and invite the entire locality to their school festivals. The peace multipliers liaise with public authorities, acting as a bridge between citizens and politics – and they kickstart a societal-wide process: fostering mutual trust, advocating for rights and promoting non-violence.

This publication is dedicated to this peace initiative and showcases some of its endeavours over the past two years and several of their active members. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the colleagues of our partner organisations DASCOH Foundation and Manab Kallyan Parishad. Their unwavering dedication and support to the peace initiative at local level is crucial to nurture it.

We are very grateful to Shamsul Haque Suza, Dr. Ashrafuzzaman Khan and Sven Wagner: their vivid photographs, insightful interviews and articles are the cornerstone of this publication. And we are also very grateful to the German Federal Foreign Office for supporting the peace initiative and this publication through the zivik funding programme of ifa (Institut fuer Auslandsbeziehungen).

We wish you an inspiring read.

AFSANA BINTE AMIN AND SHAHIDUL ISLAM
NETZ Partnership for Development and Justice



Rolling dice against prejudice

United, joyful and far from any form of violence – these are the focal points when the peace multipliers in Bangladesh get into action. They organise themselves into local groups, student forums and working groups at schools, in emerging theatre troupes as well as self-defence groups for girls – collectively forming a peace initiative that serves as an essential part of civil society’s human rights work in their country. While lawyers and activists primarily advance the legal processing of human rights violations with a rights-based approach, the peace initiative pursues another significant objective: the non-violent transformation of conflicts.

Here, at the high school in Khajur in northwestern Bangladesh, the initiative has organised a festival. Women, men and children from the surrounding area gather and overcome societal barriers, for example by playing “snakes and ladders” (pictured). This well-known board game is available here in a peace edition. Through rolling the dice and advancing spaces, the players learn valuable information about non-violent communication, anti-discrimination and equality. Days like these strengthen societal cohesion and break down prejudices. This is crucial for promoting non-violence and peace, so that new human rights violations do not arise in the first place.

The story of an orange

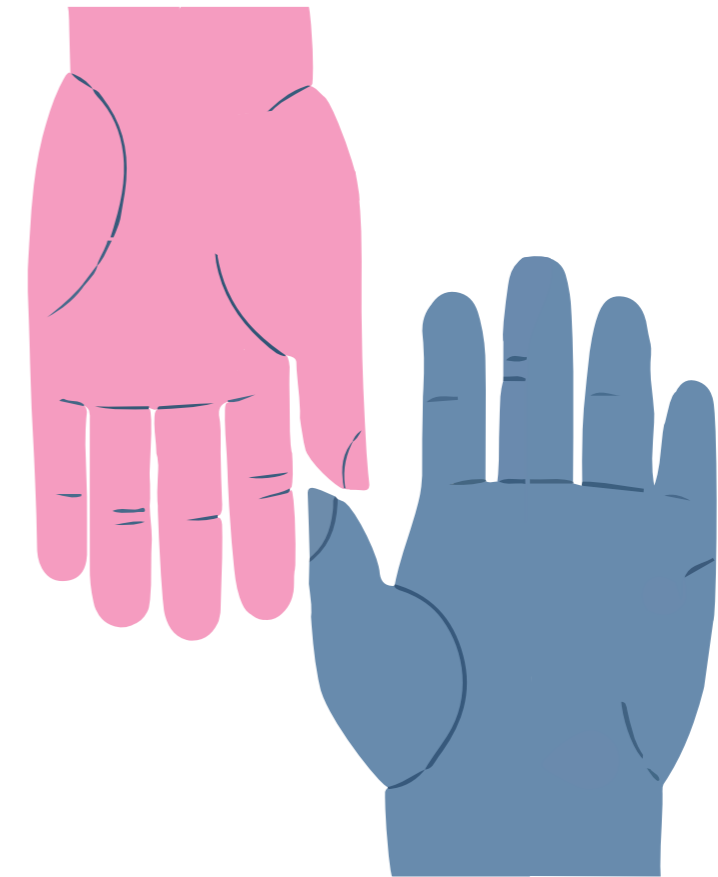
How does a conflict arise, what are its causes and how can it be non-violently transformed?
An example in three steps:



Concept and Illustration: Danielle Lima • Graphic: Pkksuperstar by Freepik

What are the peace multipliers in Bangladesh doing?

They seek ways to transform conflicts non-violently. Through their commitment, they question and alter the attitudes, behaviours, interests and relationships of the people involved in a conflict. One might also say: they remove the basis for violence. The cases can be quite varied, ranging from violence against women, neighbourhood disputes, land conflicts, to the discrimination of minority groups. The peace multipliers meet regularly in their groups to address conflicts. And they impart essential knowledge to the people in their surroundings, which they have previously acquired in training: a non-violent perspective on conflicts, non-violent communication, understanding and analysing problems. Many young people are also active: The initiative has established student forums, theatre groups and self-defence courses for girls at educational institutions.



Who are they actually?

The peace initiative involves individuals who are deeply rooted in local society. Among them are ordinary citizens, journalists, teachers, office workers, but also housewives and those affected by human rights violations: Indigenous people, religious minorities, individuals living in poverty, who, despite the daily struggle to meet their basic needs, make time because they see a way to finally address issues that have been simmering for years. The groups are composed equitably and have a fixed quota for members of minority groups. Everyone's commitment is purely voluntary. And there are rules: No party politics and no NGO employees, as the peace initiative is an independent movement. No microcredits, as the peace initiative is not a forum for self-interest. It is a civil society movement that enhances the connection between citizens and authorities and initiates a lasting process within society to promote peace and protect human rights.

Overcoming violence together

Land conflicts as a major challenge

By Sven Wagner

The struggle for resources, amidst climate change and rising profit interests, often preoccupies the peace initiative. This is because violence is present and sustained efforts are essential to foster peaceful solutions. And it works – even using notably creative methods.



One of the most significant areas of conflict, frequently heard about particularly in the northwest of Bangladesh, revolves around land use. Many people neither own their homes nor any agricultural land. A preliminary report on the Agriculture Census 2019 revealed that a quarter of households in rural areas do not own land – this equates to over 17 million people, a tenth of Bangladesh’s entire population. These individuals live on the fringes of villages, by riverbanks or along railway lines, tolerated rather than welcomed. Paradoxically, a majority of them work on the fields of affluent landowners, thereby contributing to the nation’s sustenance.

Land conflicts are not solely about housing but also access to resources either held publicly or used as communal assets over generations. Many are denied access to water in the form of ponds and streams, or to forests. Thus, land and resources are distributed profoundly unjustly: few people own a lot, many own little to nothing. Land, water and forest utilisation are crucial for the livelihood, sustenance and way of life in the world’s most densely populated country. Landownership means having a living space, the ability to cultivate rice and vegetables and keep livestock – agriculture remains vital for the non-urban areas of Bangladesh. Access to water signifies the ability to wash oneself and clothes, irrigate fields and water animals. Naturally, it also means having drinking water available. Space and resources are culturally essential, too; people require both for religious activities, festivals and services.

As Bangladesh progresses economically and infrastructurally, and as its population grows, resources, especially available land, become scarcer. The effects of climate change exacerbate this: river erosion washes away riparian lands; cultivable areas occasionally become unusable due to droughts and floods. And where rural businesses, large landowners, middle-class families and average earners already “compete”

for resources, others fade into obscurity: landless families, those living in extreme poverty and indigenous communities (the government calls them “ethnic minorities”). These are the individuals with the least money, advocacy and influence in society.

In principle, there is a right to land. State-owned khash land should be allocated to those without. In practice, this is seldom realised. Khash land is contested, with politically and socially influential interest groups attempting to profit from it. The urgent needs of others are overlooked. Even in established settlements, disputes arise frequently, with violence often involved. The situation is multifaceted and intricate: conflicts can date back to when Bangladesh was part of the British Empire, and later Pakistan. It concerns missing documents that prove land ownership, as well as displacement during the fight for independence. Equally, it involves families who have used their land for generations and were eventually driven out by enforcers. And influential individuals who suddenly plant trees and erect fences, thus establishing de facto ownership.

Travelling through the region and listening to those affected paints a picture of a simmering struggle just beneath the surface. It’s a contest with wildly uneven stakes: on one side, affluent and influential individuals keen to turn a profit; on the other, assetless poor whose meagre livelihoods can disappear overnight. Fighting back can seem a daunting, if not impossible, task. And caught in the midst of it all is an administration eager to resolve disputes but often rendered powerless. Their knowledge of specific cases might be lacking or they are bogged down by internal frailties or other concerns.

A visit to Mohadevpur, located in Naogaon district in the northwest, paints a vivid scene. Over 85 percent of the population here earn their livelihood from farming. As is common

Villagers carry a mobility-impaired woman on a stretcher along a narrow path through the rice field. They demand better access to the main road; public authorities have yet to respond.

throughout Bangladesh, a majority are Muslim, yet there is a noticeable presence of indigenous communities and Hindus. Among them are Chetuna Rani and Sorup Mondal, both in their early 30s. Rani, a housewife with a daughter, and Mondal, an employee in local administration, have volunteered for a peace initiative aimed at non-violent conflict transformation since 2022. Their local group meets weekly. Both joined training to grasp new ideas and effective techniques to promote peace. “Yes, discrimination is real,” Rani and Mondal admit. “Conflicts arise, mainly over land.” They are currently addressing a case that illustrates the extensive issue of land conflicts.

The story goes as follows: An indigenous community had been living for generations on a hectare of land inherited from their ancestors, where they had homes and cultivated crops. Around five years ago, strangers appeared, claiming the land as their own and forcibly evicted the inhabitants. Lacking any formal documentation to assert their claim, the indigenous people were left with no choice but to leave. In 2020, a survey by the agricultural department unveiled that the land did indeed belong to the indigenous group, a pre-independence era deed having been unearthed. A local court ruled in their favour. However, when they attempted to return, the occupiers denied them access and filed a lawsuit in retaliation, alleging that their deed was counterfeit. The indigenous group retaliated with traditional weapons, bows and arrows, leading to a violent confrontation that left several injured.

This situation encapsulates the mission of the peace initiative. Beyond the question of guilt and legal clarification, both parties have become adversaries steeped in mutual distrust and resentment. While the court’s ruling did take a stand, it did nothing to change the tension. Both groups remain entrenched in their perspectives and interests. The pressing issue now is: How can this conflict be transformed without further escalation into violence?

That is where Rani and Mondal step in. Their first step is understanding exactly who is involved.

They gather information on the conflicting parties, seeking to understand their motives: What drove the occupiers to claim the land? What are their plans for it? Might someone have instigated them? As for the indigenous community: Why didn’t they have a land deed in the first place? What would reclaiming the land mean to them? And why did they resort to using weapons?

Next, the peace multipliers initiate communication with both conflicting parties. Their group organises meetings to understand each party’s perspective and needs, with the ultimate goal of bringing them to a common table. Here, they forge agreements palatable to both sides. The primary objectives are ending the violence and exploring how diverse needs might be harmoniously aligned. It is a process heavily reliant on dialogue. “Peace” and “harmony” are phrases frequently invoked by Rani and Mondal.

“It’s a draining conflict,” says Rani, who is still relatively early in the case. It was only a few months ago that someone introduced it to her group. “Both parties don’t trust each other and lack mutual respect.” This is no foundation for coexistence.

There are countless similar cases that peace multipliers from northwest Bangladesh recount. Instances that illustrate the need for an enduring approach. And that non-violence is not merely a casually used term but is crucial, even in the fight against poverty. But above all: there are cases that have been resolved, instilling hope – take Badalgachi, for example.

The local union parishad (council) chairperson there, Anowar Hossain (60), with a grey-white beard and a friendly face, welcomes visitors in his home and delves into a prolonged monologue:

“Recently, we faced another land conflict in our area. Nine indigenous families live in a settlement far from the main road. Their only connection to it was a narrow path, barely a foot wide. During the rainy season, it became impassable. Yet, children had to frequently traverse it on their way to school.



Photo: Sven Wagner

Sorup Mondal and Chetuna Rani.

The sick had to use this path to reach the hospital. It's been this way for years – but I simply wasn't aware. The community wanted to widen the path to accommodate at least a transport rickshaw. The owners of the adjacent land resisted for a long time, simply ignoring the requests. We finally sat down, had a dialogue, and made them realise the importance of the road to these families. For instance, what if a pregnant woman suddenly needs the hospital? Should the locals have to carry her on a beam with a makeshift sling, as was previously done? No. The path was eventually built, in good agreement with the landowners. Furthermore, through this initiative, we on the union council realised these families were entitled to benefits from the social safety net because of their poverty. They weren't recorded in any official list previously. So, we rectified that as well."

Another peace initiative group in Mathurapur, a few dozen kilometres away, convenes on a Saturday afternoon in a classroom of the local high school. The headteacher, Mamunur Rashid, is always happy to provide space for their meetings. The group has been poring over a hand-drawn map for the past half hour. It is also about land disputes; they jot down the names of the conflicting parties, their close contacts, and "influential people". Who is willing to speak to whom? Who refuses any contact? Who in the neighbourhood might possibly mediate? The aim is to find a way to initiate dialogue and bring the conflict, which affects many, into public discourse.

The group recently managed to resolve a major land dispute – albeit not in the manner anticipated. The school grounds, given its vast open space, are also used as a livestock market. Every Monday and Friday, hundreds gather to trade cattle, goats and sheep, as is customary in Bangladesh. By Tuesday morning, the school's forecourt was a mess: mounds of mud, dirt and rubbish were left behind. The students could not use the area where they would usually have their breaks, partake in

sports or play. What was more concerning was the tremendous hustle and bustle around the school on Mondays, with heightened traffic and parents fearing for their children's safety.

They deliberated for a longer time, the members of the peace initiative explain. It involved them, the school committee and the market board. The eventual solution: The market organisers committed to cleaning up after their events and restoring the site. The school, in turn, decided to move its Monday classes to Saturday. This way, students are off on the market day, alleviating parental concerns for their safety. An unconventional, creative approach. Yet it works, as it best considers the needs of both parties involved.

After a while, Sweetly Digha lifts her gaze from the map and commences speaking. The young woman in her early 20s delineates another conflict, akin to the one in Mohadevpur. Several indigenous families inhabit a piece of land, handed down through generations. The documents for this had been lodged with an influential landowning family since colonial times, given the absence of a state land authority then. In 2008, these landowners

“We don't want violence or lasting tensions in our village”

sold the land belonging to the indigenous people, with ownership documents allegedly being fabricated. Here too, the indigenous inhabitants were expelled, only to return and reclaim the land. However, the new “proprietors” summoned the police. “It oscillated back and forth,” says Digha, “for years, up until now.” The upshot: the conflicting parties remain at loggerheads, and the land has been fallow ever since. In reality, it belongs to the indigenous people. On paper, it is the property of the influential landowners, who are not easily swayed – primarily since few dare to pursue legal avenues.

“We don't want violence or lasting tensions in our village,” Digha emphasises. For violence and



Photo: Sven Wagner

Peace multipliers at a meeting in Mathurapur, Naogaon. They address a conflict using the actor mapping method, initially identifying the parties involved.

hatred strain the entire social fabric. She believes the indigenous people are in the right, as they have no livelihood without the land. However, the young woman knows that confrontation and blame will not resolve much. The local group of the peace initiative initially tries to understand the exact reason the landowners suddenly decided to sell the land after decades. The goal then becomes conveying the needs of the evicted to them and

appealing to their sense of duty. “The family is well-established and rooted in the region; they should have an interest in peace,” says the group’s chairperson, an indigenous man who introduced the case. “Their societal position carries a responsibility.” It is one of many arguments and a means to foster mutual understanding and agreement, hoping this conflict can soon be transformed peacefully.

Peace multipliers share their stories

Anjuman Ara Khatun (49) from Nijpara in Dinajpur

Union Council member

For many people in our community, the term non-violence evokes calmness and tranquillity. For me, it's more profound – it signifies a calling. I was very happy when I had the opportunity to join the peace initiative in Dinajpur. My involvement is transformative, reshaping my views on community level conflicts and domestic issues and it is very helpful for my work as an elected member of our union council.

Throughout Bangladesh, stories of land conflict and domestic violence are widespread. Often, conflicts and violence arise from deep-rooted issues that require more than just legal resolution. This is where our peace initiative, promoting non-violent action, steps in and fills an essential void. It doesn't merely aim to prevent or end conflicts; it seeks to change the very narrative around them.



To understand the gravity of such disputes, one need not look further than my own family. We, too, grappled with internal strife over land distribution, born from the fact that my father had two wives. The land he owned became a symbol of discord. Yet, my involvement with the peace initiative equipped me with the skills needed to play an active role in this regard, ensuring fairness and transparency in the distribution.

Furthermore, my role has extended beyond personal matters. Day in, day out, I mediate between families, striving to instil a sense of mutual respect even amidst heightened tensions. One such case that vividly comes to mind is of two families torn apart by a land conflict. Their aggressive stances seemed almost insurmountable, but together we found a path forward that respects the needs and interests of both families.

Our peace initiative, in collaboration with the chairperson of our union council, has worked as well diligently to address other issues like wrongful land grabbing from indigenous communities. The road is long, and not every case sees immediate resolution, but progress is tangible.

Critics might wonder: does the peace initiative have any weak points? From my vantage point, its strengths overwhelmingly outshine any perceived shortcomings. Its interventions have empowered victims of domestic violence, giving them a platform to voice their concerns. Moreover, the outreach of the peace initiative into local high schools, e.g. by establishing student forums, is visionary. It ensures that the next generation is well-equipped to handle conflicts, equipped with knowledge and courage.

In essence, our peace initiative doesn't just resolve conflicts – it seeks to rewrite the script of how we, as a society, approach them. And in that mission, it finds an unwavering ally in me.

Mahfuja Akter (27) from Mohadevpur in Naogaon

Policewoman

We women typically handle desk duties at the police station, dealing with all cases involving women—both victims and perpetrators. When individuals come to us to report an incident, we are the initial point of contact. Therefore, we meet those who have experienced violence and are seeking help.

My supervisor suggested that I participate in training by the peace initiative in our region. At first, I wasn't clear about what awaited me – peace is a broad term. Once there, the objectives became clear: I was to learn about conflict transformation and non-violent action and communication.

Our supervisor sent several officers to this training. He sees the initiative as a pioneering project from which we, as police, can learn. We deal with many problems daily, such as violence against children and women. The training taught us numerous practical applications. For instance, no matter how stressful a day, I now endeavour to always see things from the victims' perspective, interacting with them with empathy and respect. I act more considerately, offering more time and attention to individuals.

Arguably more significant than the acquired knowledge is the fact that we are in contact with the peace multipliers. This exchange is beneficial for both sides. We have exchanged phone numbers; I often receive calls from people seeking advice on new cases. Or they send us additional informational material on non-violence, which we can study. By far, the most significant issue in the region is domestic violence. Women experience horrific things. Occasionally, they come to the police station themselves, but mostly we receive emergency calls. Sometimes, these involve disputes between young couples, but often they relate to severe physical violence against wives, daughters or daughters-in-law. Psychological or economic forms of violence are seldom reported. I have been in service for eight years, and this summer, I encountered the most horrendous case so far: A woman was found dead, tied at the hands and feet, strangled. Upon arrival, we realised it was not a woman but a 13-year-old girl. Our investigations revealed that her mother had an



extramarital affair with a man. The girl had pleaded with her mother to end the relationship for the family's sake. When the lover found out, he simply killed the girl. She was in sixth grade.

Our supervisor consistently articulates that women are fundamentally discriminated against, perceived as subordinates. The fact that they often have less formal education and schooling than men contributes significantly to this, as does the reality that many girls are married as children. Poverty is a significant driving factor in all of this. Consequently, many are unaware of women's rights. Through groups like the peace initiative, people can learn what is right and what is not. They are motivated to enact change, and they gain a sense of value as someone attends to them. This benefits society as a whole. We, as the police, also profit – where there is less violence, there are fewer crimes for us to investigate.

Azadul Islam Azad (40) from Mohadevpur in Naogaon

Journalist



I am a journalist and quickly came to know when a peace initiative was established here in our area. The fact that it adheres to the principle of non-violence intrigued me immensely. In October 2022, I joined, and now, I am the chairperson of the group.

I write for the national dailies Daily Ittefaq and Jugantor, as well as for local newspapers in this region. I observe an increasing sense of unrest, instability and mistrust

in our society. I wish to contribute to diminishing this and also to take a stand against the various forms of violence that one can witness recurrently. Hence, my involvement.

In our group meetings, regional conflicts are discussed, which can be quite diverse. We have actively intervened in several specific cases. One was successfully resolved: A woman lost her husband and, as per legal stipulation, was to inherit the joint household. However, the in-laws wanted to prevent this and retain the property themselves. The woman would have been left destitute. Our group sat down with the family and discussed the matter. We peace multipliers clarified the legal situation and illustrated the devastating consequences their actions would have on the woman. The in-laws understood and agreed not to dispute her household inheritance. In the end, it was a consensual settlement.

I occasionally attend dialogue meetings with local authorities and visit schools when events are taking place. I recently visited Khajur High School and witnessed the sports festival, theatre performance and tree-planting event organised by our peace initiative. Many locals were present, gaining insight into the principles of non-violence.

I report on the cases I learn about in group meetings in the newspapers and their online editions. This commitment has not only left an impression on the readers but also on myself. Previously, I sometimes wrote reports about other people in a somewhat condescending manner. Now, I pay closer attention to such topics and write with increased empathy. I have witnessed many cases of violence and always thought: straight to the police and court. However, taking more time and having conversations with all sides can lead to a more nuanced understanding of a problem – and lead to more sustainable solutions. Especially on a local level: conflicts can be overcome through careful observation and prudent action, without immediately resorting to court. After all, it's not only costly – the mere threat of going to court can significantly intensify conflicts and fuel anger.

Mosaddek Al Jamil and Dipa Rani Mondal (both 14) from Khajur and Debipur in Naogaon

Students

We have participated in theatre performances since primary school, write our own plays and thoroughly enjoy acting. When we heard during a school assembly that a theatre group was being formed as part of a peace initiative, we were immediately on board. Learning is enjoyable, but extracurricular activities are equally vital for broadening one's horizons. Our plays address everyday conflicts in society here in the countryside – small and large problems that arise when people coexist. We pursue an innovative approach: at the end of a play, we aim to offer the audience a perspective, showing them how to confront such conflicts. Theatre should stimulate thought, not just entertain.

To develop plays, we observe our immediate surroundings. Take, for instance, the discrimination against older people. In many villages, it's noticeable that they are increasingly excluded from societal life, even though the family has always been central, and elders were highly revered. However, adult children often neglect their parents, alleging a lack of time, depriving seniors of their right to participation. They are left out of religious or familial festivals and gatherings. Yet especially the elderly need entertainment. Our play on this topic conveys a clear message: regardless of age, every individual is a family member deserving care. Not just physical, but also mental care is essential, against loneliness. When you were young, your parents naturally cared for you. Now you should do the same – it is your responsibility.

The first time we performed with the new theatre group, we were quite nervous. However, each performance and rehearsal bolster our confidence. This self-assurance extends into our everyday lives, aiding us personally: we are now much better at expressing our opinions and defending them. We have become more assertive and can articulate our desires and goals more effectively. The local and district administrations have invited us to perform at their events. We have already played at other festivals organised by the peace initiative. We are being noticed. And our parents are proud of us. Theatre also strengthens unity within the school: some children who previously showed little interest

are now participating and thoroughly enjoying it.

Working professionally in theatre in the future is our dream. Whether it will come true, we cannot say. Our teachers do devote much time to this endeavour. However, there are still quite a few societal reservations against such an artistic and casual way of life in our community.

Nevertheless, we wish to continue growing with our school theatre and portraying our topics, conflict transformation approaches being a very important one. Why? No matter the conflicts, the community always immediately seeks solutions. In doing so, something essential is overlooked: conflicts often involve emotions. Both parties first need a good rapport before any settlement can be considered. If you have a conflict with someone, you should at least be able to approach one another and converse.



Md. Julfikar Hosen (55) **from Bochaganj in Dinajpur**

Sub-District (Upazila) Council Chairperson

The peace initiative caught my attention soon after it started. I appreciate it very much, as it puts focus on building harmony and solidarity in society. Its importance is ever more prominent in our villages, where underlying sentiments sometimes translate into jealousy and major disputes. To improve the situation, we need to spotlight areas where such sentiments breed violence and discord. By introducing positive examples, we can offer a non-violent alternative.

Another important element of the peace initiative is its focus on the younger generation, to aware them early on about alternative ways to deal with violence and conflict. Thus, they'll be better equipped to navigate their futures and to become social change makers.

Drawing from my experiences, reasons for land-related conflicts are manifold. These conflicts spring from multiple parties laying claim to the same land, leading to issues around sales, purchases and inheritances. In many cases I got to know, members of indigenous communities are involved and victims of such conflicts,

often because they are lacking proper deeds. And there have been instances where Bengali individuals have duped indigenous people during these transactions. You might wonder, how can such transactions happen under the radar? The sad truth is the prevalence of corruption. A stark reality in Bangladesh, corruption sees even honest individuals being forced to pay bribes for their rightful claims.

When it comes to resolving such conflicts, for example between Bengalis and members of indigenous communities over a contested piece of land, I firmly believe in the power of negotiation and open dialogue. While some conflicts have escalated to forced land grabbing and violence, I'm convinced that fostering mutual understanding will lead us to sustainable resolutions.

While societal change might appear like a mammoth task, it's the incremental changes that matter. Society won't change overnight, but the peace initiative and continuous community dialogue can initiate a ripple effect. Changing one individual's perspective can lead to a broader transformation, and together, we can sculpt a society where mutual respect and understanding triumph over jealousy and violence.



Mosammat Ummay Kulsum (46) from Dargapara in Naogaon

Teacher

Conflict transformation fundamentally relates to all aspects of our lives. That's why I eagerly participate in the peace initiative. I had engaged with it before, and now I have been able to learn even more.

Transformation signifies change. Life is continually changing, and we, as humans, should strive to shape this change positively. We should transform ourselves and thereby society. This includes dealing with conflicts, which are inevitable – whether within the family, at school or in social coexistence.

The work of the initiative is commendable. Here in our school, the focus is on children—the young generation that will one day shape the destiny of the region. And since conflicts are part of our lives, it is vital that, from childhood, one learns how to deal with them. Through the approach of conflict transformation, the students are equipped with the tools for this.

I've witnessed firsthand in my neighbourhood how conflicts can escalate. Months ago, a very young Muslim woman and a Hindu man married secretly and they shifted to a nearby city. The girl's parents, strictly against the relationship, located the couple and filed a complaint. The man is now in prison, and the woman initially was placed in a reformatory for adolescents. It was there that her pregnancy came to light. Subsequently, her own family took her back, but the tension is immense.

No one knows the way forward. The parents feel ashamed. Through the marriage, their daughter has become a Hindu woman, something they strictly reject. It's an extremely stressful situation for all involved – and, of course, for the unborn child.

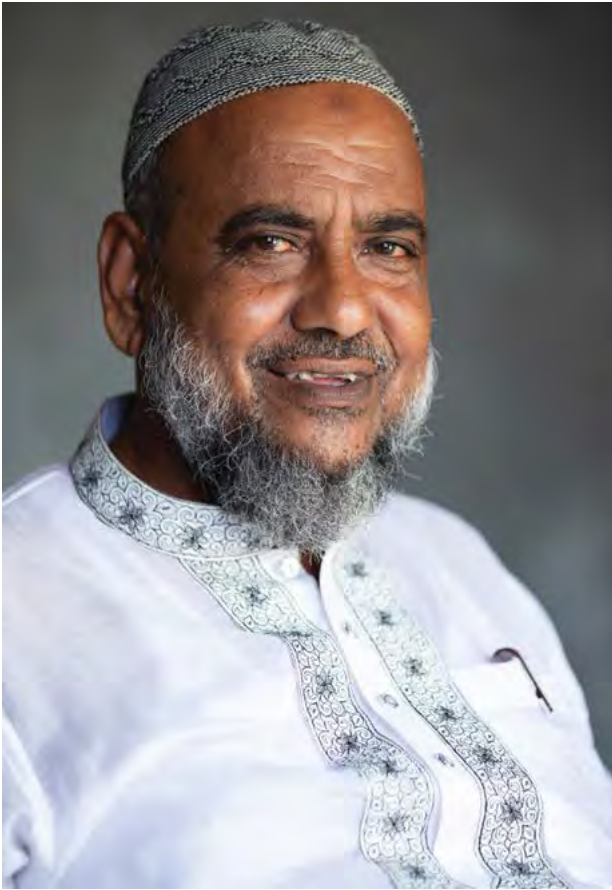
In the peace initiative's training, we've learned a lot about discrimination and ways to overcome it. We've made a commitment: We aim to work together for a just society, as best as we can. This is crucial, as everyone can – whether consciously or unconsciously – perpetuate discrimination. I, as a teacher, hold a responsible position; I am accountable for children from grades



six to ten. It starts with the smallest things: Indigenous children often sit at the back in class and miss out – also because others won't let them sit at the front and don't want to sit beside them. I then say: Everyone gets a turn at the front, please take turns.

Mutual exclusion is not a conscious decision. It's handed down because the elders learned it that way and pass it on. Sometimes, students come to our home during an event. I then offer them biscuits and tea. However, some students from Hindu families say: I shouldn't accept anything from Muslim families – that's what my grandmother has always said.

We can overcome this mindset by doing things together, enjoying the camaraderie and repeatedly addressing discrimination: Within the framework of the peace initiative, we have organised debating rounds, essay competitions, poetry readings and much more, through which we confront these issues. Students encourage each other, new friendships form and the connection between teachers and children also improves, as we participate in sports festivals and games. Thus, we spend more time together, strengthening our unity.



Anwar Hossain (60) from Chakrail in Naogaon

Union Council Chairperson

I was invited to the inaugural meeting of the peace initiative in our area. The group's aspirations were clarified there: to fortify societal togetherness, identify conflicts and transform them non-violently. I thought: Yes, this is meaningful. Consequently, I have attended subsequent dialogue meetings. At these, peace multipliers meet with local authorities, for example religious leaders, teachers and officials like me from the union council. It is a forum where we discuss various issues, successes and the general development of the region.

The approach of non-violence is pivotal because it is universal. I endeavour to propagate this, even in the village arbitration courts, the so-called shalish, which I often attend. Here, too, it's about conflicts, and a transformative approach can assist. Land disputes are a significant issue here, often escalating into violence and physical confrontations. However, it can

also be trivial: one person's cow grazing on another's pasture. This causes disputes that need resolving. Where does one begin? The initiative has introduced us to specific methods, one of which is mapping: we document who is directly involved in the conflict, which individuals and groups are indirectly involved and who is close to the disputing parties. This way, we can conduct discussions and address the conflicting parties. Achieving mediation through trust is already a substantial accomplishment.

People are often self-centred, focused on their advantage. For example, when possession has to be divided among several heirs, each person gets less. However, by excluding, say, the youngest, one gets more. Regrettably, this mindset is deeply ingrained. Additionally, power dynamics in our society are unequal. Those with power receive more resources, more recognition and more strength before the law. Corruption and nepotism are not far off.

Although the overall need in the area has reduced, still about a third of families cannot afford three full meals a day; previously, it was significantly more. However, today's challenges are different: Low earners like rickshaw drivers can now send their children to school but barely afford educational materials. This is the new dynamic of poverty. Peace in the village communities is also challenged by sexual harassment of young girls and divorce cases. In one instance, a young couple engaged in a relationship and married without the families' consent. When the boy's parents discovered this, they simply turned the girl away. They determined her fate without ensuring her security. Thus, family feuds originate. Moreover, approximately four to five times a month, adolescents in our region are married below the legal age limit. Fortunately, this number is decreasing, as the government has tackled the issue and the peace multipliers are very committed.

These individuals are residents, citizens of this country, aiming to do good in their region. Naturally, there are also governmental programmes, rules and measures in place – law and order, essentially. Being a responsible politician, I am well aware of this. But beyond this, the initiative engages in relationship building. It fosters mutual respect, understanding and harmony within society.

Badal Kislú (36) from Bhognagar in Dinajpur

Construction worker

I belong to the indigenous community of the Santals. For us, land holds more than just economic value; it's a symbol of heritage, identity and livelihood. My family, alongside 35 others, has been living on these lands for generations. But recent years have been tumultuous, marked by a land conflict that has challenged not only our rights but also our resilience and community spirit.

A prominent local business figure is at the heart of this dispute. In 2007, with the power of forged deeds, he staked a claim to our ancestral lands. His approach was direct and intimidating. Arriving with claims of ownership, he demanded we abandon our homes. While his wealth and political affiliation cast a shadow of fear, we remained unyielding.

Being a construction worker, my life is a daily hustle and financial constraints an integral part of it. However, the need to protect our community's land ignited a passion for activism. Challenges from the local businessmen emerged in various forms, including threats, bribery

attempts and even physical confrontations. But we stood firm. We pointed him towards the courts, urging him to let the legal system decide. Yet, his focus was on swift land acquisition, offering us money to vacate. While money is undoubtedly tempting for daily wage earners like us, the land's value transcends currency. It's about identity, tradition and a sense of belonging.

Community leaders, including religious leaders, have been supporting us to influence the local businessmen. And the local peace initiative provided us valuable guidance, especially concerning local administrative dealings and land rights.

This ongoing struggle is just one facet of my daily life, intertwined with the challenges of work and family. Yet, it's a powerful reminder of the importance of community, heritage and the lengths to which we go to protect our legacy. It's a story not just of land, but of resilience, unity and hope.



Faruk Ahmed (50) from Badalgachi in Naogaon

Head of the Department for Women's Affairs at sub-district level



Non-violence holds immense significance, and I value it as a principle. Conflict transformation, however, was a new concept for me. I learned about it during the training sessions of the peace initiative and in joint dialogue rounds and have since tried to apply it in everyday life.

In Bangladesh, there are social services by the state, explicitly for women too: widow's pension, maternity benefits and other services. Women who apply for these services at the local government do not always receive their money. In such instances, they approach us, the higher authority, seeking support. The failure to justly distribute benefits to those entitled is a structural issue. Our agency attempts to investigate such cases, but it isn't always possible when funds are distributed based on local interests. This represents just one of many challenges I observe in my daily work, with domestic violence against women and child marriages ranking at the top. We encounter cases every month.

This, in turn, is primarily due to discriminatory societal norms. Dowry persists, forcing families to contribute considerable amounts – either in money or valuables – to marry off their daughters. In essence, they offer a contribution for the other family to accept and take care of the young woman. However, the receiving family is not always genuinely in need. It even becomes a

matter of prestige: if my acquaintance received a substantial dowry, I should demand as much.

It's complex. When a girl is married off, parents often cite safety. Under the protection of a husband, she would be safe from assaults. Parents marry off their daughters very young, believing it's the best path. The extreme forms this can take became apparent to me a few years ago: we learned that a girl was about to be married off. She was only eight – a primary school child. I, along with police officers and the union council chairperson, rushed to the village. The girl was there, dressed in a bridal gown. Her future husband arrived with his family in a wedding car – everything was prepared. We intervened and halted the proceedings.

The scene was deeply unsettling. The girl's family had to sign a commitment not to marry her off before the legally stipulated age of 18. It transpired that the family was utterly unaware of the injustice being inflicted upon their daughter. The father was impoverished, ignorant of both the legal age and the psychological and physical repercussions of marrying off an eight-year-old. The groom was underage too, but he had a job as a labourer in a garment factory in Dhaka. The girl's family thought she would never face hardship again.

The efforts of the peace multipliers are beneficial, especially the dialogue meetings and the approach of conflict transformation. On one occasion, the initiative organised a meeting with a man imprisoned for a violent crime. Through conversation, we learned more about the motives behind his act. This was followed by a dialogue with the victim's family, enabling the pacification of the conflict environment, even if it wasn't legally resolved.

This approach is vital for society. While enforcing existing laws is essential, there needs to be a way to understand the issues and the human dimension behind them, especially in cases of domestic violence. We need both: protection and precaution. The peace initiative exemplifies this. Our agency does not learn of all cases; much remains undisclosed.

Bobita Roy (23) from Bhognagar in Dinjapur

Student

I am very much supporting the goals of the peace initiative: transforming conflicts without violence, addressing family and societal issues peacefully and helping our community understand their rights – especially in regard to land-related conflicts.

Conflicts between wives and mothers-in-law are more common in our village than outsiders might believe. They often spar over seemingly minor issues like child-rearing, livestock or household chores. Before I joined the peace initiative, I found myself biased, usually siding with one party over another. But I have understood an essential lesson – understanding the full context is very important. I learned to communicate with both parties and make conclusions only after grasping the underlying issues. Thanks to this newly acquired patience and understanding, our home is now free of needless quarrels and conflicts.

So, why is this initiative vital for society? Violence, in my eyes, is akin to a contagion. It spreads, fostering disputes that sometimes escalate to severe consequences, even murder. Therefore, our initiative aims to promote non-violent approaches to deal with conflicts.

I owe much of my involvement to my father-in-law. A teacher by profession, he saw potential in me and believed I could genuinely make a difference. My husband, too, is very supportive. Their faith in me isn't just because they see it as an opportunity for societal change. They believe that if I can assist and support even a handful in our community, that in itself is a considerable achievement.

In future, the members of our local group will try to meet more often. This could deepen the reach and effect of our tasks. Our goal is always to solve issues at our level. For major problems, particularly those related to land, usually all members of our group come together. And if needed, we can always reach out to the chairperson and members of the local union council for support.

After all, it's about making a change, one step at a time. And every step we jointly take with the peace initiative gets us closer to a more peaceful and harmonious society.



Pradip Pahan (32) from Rosolpur in Naogaon

Agricultural worker



My family and I are Adivasis, belonging to an indigenous community. Our ancestors once came here from India and I was born here. We have long been citizens of Bangladesh, possessing identity cards. However, many people still do not accept us. Even though we possess the same rights as they do – such as access to education and healthcare – these are not conceded to us. Our settlement was originally established by cutting down trees in the forest and constructing small houses. The government has yet to acknowledge this.

I work as a day labourer in the fields and sometimes in a brick factory. When we go to a public hospital, people treat us differently. We are often not offered a bed and have to stay in the hallway. The staff do not listen properly when we present our complaints. People can tell by looking at us that we are indigenous.

Our language is gradually disappearing. We seldom have the opportunity to use it in public. When Adivasis

converse in their own language, some villagers give us nasty looks, as if to say: “You are in Bangladesh, speak Bengali!”. My mother tongue is Nagri. No Nagri is taught in school because the teaching staff are not familiar with it.

We have our own festival traditions and enjoy playing music. This doesn't sit well with some Muslim-Bengali families. Sometimes neighbours are annoyed because of this. But since 2022, I have been part of the peace initiative and have made Muslim friends. We now discuss such matters: They explained to me that it is important to maintain silence during their prayer times. And we are more mindful of this during our celebrations. It is a matter of respect – not rivalry. We had little contact with Muslims before.

Through the peace initiative, we have learned a lot from each other. It provides us with a joint platform. There, I feel strong – it's collective strength. And this can help: We have many problems in our neighbourhood. Above all, we lack land of our own; domestic violence also exists. Some indigenous men drink alcohol because they are poor and frustrated. But they only increase their frustration by doing so – and all too often turn violent against their wives. I never knew how to deal with this. Through our peace work, I have learned to involve other people to address and change these issues.

Moreover, I've come to realise my own humanity. It might seem peculiar, but I've grasped that I am no less than anyone else. Contrary to this, we've been indoctrinated for far too long with the belief that we, as indigenous people, are inferior.

Nadira Akter (14) from Dhakra in Naogaon

Student

Representatives from the peace initiative visited our school, discussing their work with the headmaster and my teacher. They introduced the idea of self-defence courses, addressing the frequent harassment of girls and their usual inability to fight back. My friends and I are all too familiar with this. Upon asking who wanted to participate, I was immediately interested but sought my parents' permission first. They were curious about what I would be doing. I explained that it was an opportunity to learn to stand up for myself, which they approved of.

Why did I want to do this? Boys often tease or severely bully us, usually making inappropriate remarks, even in public. They shout vulgarities and are spitting on the path in front of us. Not all boys are bad, but some behave very nasty. Often, it's older boys and young men from different areas. Having attended a tutoring course in another village, requiring a four-kilometre walk daily, I regularly encountered such insults – words I don't wish to repeat.

Such experiences are intimidating. Alone, I never dared to talk back. Being with friends and telling the boys to stop only egged them on. Yet, it's natural to want to defend oneself against ill-treatment, making the self-defence training highly appropriate.

In Bangladesh, gender matters. Boys enjoy freedom, whereas being a rural girl, I wasn't even allowed to fetch medicine for my sick mother. Parents claim it's fear for our safety, citing our defencelessness. But that's not entirely true. Whether in family, school or any decision-making situation, our voices go unheard. It's frustrating and impacts our future lives: men, possessing more strength and power, always prevail. Although women nowadays make household decisions, their influence hardly extends beyond.

Before the self-defence course, I had never undergone such physical training. But it felt good; I immediately felt empowered. However, it's not just about strength. Before training, we first understood its purpose: not to attack or harm, but to react. It's about being able to defend ourselves, crucially boosting our self-esteem.

I share the knowledge I acquire. I have trained a substantial number of girls at my school and some children in my neighbourhood. People now recognise what I am doing when I wear my white tracksuit and step outside. There is a sense of pride in the community, mirrored by my parents, that someone from our area is undertaking something so exceptional. Additionally, my seven-year-old sister learns from me. While our exercises are often playful, she already grasps the importance of asserting oneself in life, especially as a girl.



Protocols: Afsana Binte Amin, Nurun Naher Shoma, Dr. Ashrafuzzaman Khan and Sven Wagner
Photos: Sven Wagner and Shamsul Haque Suza



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United to promote non-violence

Bringing people together: The peace initiative regularly organises sports, school and community festivals, to which all people of the region are invited. The events convey an essential message: They demonstrate the value and importance of peace and respectful societal interaction, and the joy that can emanate from it. Various religious groups, citizens and representatives of public authorities come together for games and fun (1). Young people participate in sports and drawing competitions (2, 3) as well as poetry recitals. And they are especially in focus: Theatre groups (4) have been formed in high schools as part of the peace initiative and self-defence courses for girls (5) are offered. In student forums (6), boys and girls now have a platform to talk about violence in their surroundings and ways to overcome it. Peace libraries at high schools (7), established by the initiative and stocked with youth-appropriate literature on peace and non-violence, are helpful in this regard.



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Actively engaging for peace: Peace multipliers meet weekly in groups to address conflicts (8). They discuss the motives and needs of the conflicting parties to find entry points to transform conflicts non-violently. To this end, they employ for example the method of actor mapping (9) to identify connections between the circles of the conflicting parties – which helps to foster dialogue between both parties. Democratic dialogue (10) is also very important. The peace multipliers regularly meet with representatives from public authorities, union councils or police to highlight issues and propose actions.

Photos: Sven Wagner and Shamsul Haque Suza

“Yes, you can make a difference!”

On the vital role of civil society

Akramul Haque (58) is the Chief Executive Officer of the non-governmental organisation DASCOH Foundation that supports tens of thousands of people through its work. In this interview, he talks about the achievements and challenges of the peace initiative and stresses the importance of mutual understanding.

Bangladesh is progressing, with the construction of highways, power plants and sprawling housing estates in cities. Is there still a need for NGOs to be involved?

Significant developments, particularly in infrastructure and supply, are taking place. When we think of development, we typically envision something progressive. But there are also negative developments. And how should these be addressed? There needs to be someone who identifies issues and brings them to the attention of policymakers. Take the rise of fundamentalism as an example. Some activists are shaping society with a very conservative, regressive understanding of faith, instigating conflicts and even animosity among religions. Economic development is one thing, but development also includes social values that need to be strengthened.

Is this where NGOs step in?

In schools where our peace initiative is active, students from all societal groups sit together, addressing how a fair coexistence can be achieved. Among them are many children from indigenous communities, living mostly below the poverty line and socially excluded: their families own no land, have comparatively few sources of income, limited educational opportunities and above all, no advocates within society.

How can this situation be changed?

We try to support people specifically, strengthen their self-confidence and say: Yes, you can make a difference! These people are citizens of this country; they have rights. Supporting them is fundamentally a matter of human rights and justice. And accordingly, questions arise like why a woman earns only 300 Taka for the same work in a rice field, while a man earns 500. Why does this



Photo: Sven Wagner

Akramul Haque

disparity exist? Some say, that's just the system, it's always been like that. We say: No, it's an injustice that must be overcome. And when people achieve this by standing together, asserting their rights and being recognised by society, it always inspires others.

Human rights are often labelled as a constructed, Western idea.

A local politician constantly told me how everyone in his region was treated equally and that there was no discrimination. Later, he proudly reported that he had launched a project to supply indigenous communities with drinking water. I asked him:

Why is that? If wells are only now being built for these people, it means they have not previously had access to their right to water, unlike other residents. Although the right to water is enshrined in our laws. And: Is this a Western idea then? Talking about human rights also involves water, food, education. People living in poverty lack these. They cannot claim their right to them. What's constructed about that?

Human rights work fosters cohesion. How important is this, and what role does civil society play?

Every society has certain formal and informal structures by which it operates. A government can establish rules and enact laws, but it can't necessarily automatically change ingrained societal patterns. Only society itself can do this; positive change must come from within. Many prevailing structures are problematic: Day labourers have internalised their social status to such an extent that they deem it impossible to ever live under better circumstances. Meanwhile, local politics sometimes sees itself as a benefactor, granting favours to poor people. Perceiving the provision of social services as a favour is very problematic. Many are not even aware that these services are a right. This mindset needs to change, and a broader societal discussion is necessary – and for that, we need civil society. It provides crucial impulses; it can include all societal groups – so that no one is left behind.

An important component of the peace initiative is democratic dialogue. Why?

There is frequent talk about the so-called good governance that is demanded by politics. Essentially, it is about the exchange between public authorities and citizens – and that is exactly what democratic dialogue enables within a structured framework. Representatives from public authorities, police and various religious groups are invited to these meetings. There, they encounter members of the peace initiative, representatives of indigenous groups and people living in poverty. Everyone is brought to the table to resolve issues. Citizens address pressing matters and challenges: the multitude of child

marriages, cases of domestic violence, land and resource conflicts. Gradually, many more topics emerge. Someone once remarked during a meeting after lengthy discussion: we are getting lost in details. But that's precisely the point: exchanging views on everything that affects people. For instance, the issue of pension payments through the social security net was raised, resolving previously unmet entitlements for several widows in the region.

Are there also obstacles?

Sometimes politicians appear very committed because they are primarily interested in garnering many votes in the next elections. Apart from that, we can't solve all problems through dialogue: If a union council chairperson is responsible to 50,000 people but the government provides funds for significantly fewer people, then that's a problem. One cannot blame office holders in this case for not considering everyone. Their resources are simply limited. However, democratic dialogue can foster mutual understanding in such cases – by informing those affected why they might not have received services.

Could you give an example?

There are specific guidelines regarding social security benefits that must be understood. For instance, support for pregnant women is only allocated from the age of 20, to deter marriage before the legal age. A 17-year-old girl, unaware of these stipulations, approached us, frustrated at not receiving benefits. Similarly, a 70-year-old woman complained to the union council chairperson for not receiving a widow allowance. Upon investigation, her identity card inaccurately listed her as 50, rendering her officially ineligible. This discrepancy originated from officials estimating her age inaccurately when the card was issued, as she could not read it. Such misunderstandings necessitate clarification; through dialogue, such issues are resolved, preventing conflicts from arising.

The peace initiative reaches out to the younger generation with forums in schools and self-defence classes for girls.

Why is this group in focus? Because we aim to achieve long-term positive changes in society. And young people are tomorrow's change-makers. If we succeed in nurturing a responsible generation with a better understanding of social issues, change is possible. Education is key: The fight against poverty has improved the living conditions of many people whose children now attend school – unlike the parent generation. They acquire knowledge there and pass it on to their parents, grandparents and the community. The effect is significant, even if it takes time. Social change doesn't happen overnight. There were also concerns: We initially offered the self-defence classes at four schools and didn't know how they would be received. Would parents or religious leaders in the neighbourhood complain if girls, usually having a very passive and subordinate role in the family, were suddenly doing exercises outside in karate uniforms? However, it turned out that people in the community, other teachers and parents very much welcomed the idea.

Theatre groups are also being formed in schools. What is the reason behind this?

Just sitting in class and learning can be monotonous. Through this form of cultural work, children can express themselves and have much more fun in the school environment. They also internalise the ideas of the peace initiative, pass it on to classmates and the community – for example, by performing publicly at community events or school festivals. This has another effect: This form of theatre was once known throughout the country. Young people would meet in their free time and perform. Today, this so-called jatra theatre, where amateur actors go around the villages, only occurs very rarely and during certain festivals. So, with the theatre groups, we are also reviving this culture.

You mention major changes that take time. But projects have time and financial limits.

We try to pass on the ideas to as many people as possible. Often, headmasters of other schools ask if they can also participate in the project. Then I say: Take the initiative yourself, discuss it in class. Unfortunately, we have only limited budgets to

work with. But the idea behind it – promoting peace, conflict transformation, non-violence – extend far beyond our immediate reach.

What is your wish for the future?

The Barind Tract region, where we live, should be more recognised. When it comes to indigenous people, everyone first thinks of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the southeast of the country. There, about a million people from indigenous groups live. In our area, it's two million people. And their rights and needs are hardly talked about. In Bangladesh, there is a census every ten years that collects population data: information on gender ratios, religious affiliations or forms of living. It happens that, for example, people from the indigenous Santal community are classified as Christians. This significantly reduces their official number. In a village, it might then be only 120 instead of 2000 people. Consequently, they are increasingly overlooked – so how can they assert their rights?

Does climate change also play a role?

Conflicts are increasing due to climate change, as there is less and less fertile land and drinking water. The Barind Tract is a drought region. For many small farming families, rice was the most important good for a long time. It brings work in the fields; it is eaten daily. Now, climate change is altering cultivation patterns; large landowning families are increasingly using land for mango plantations. But there, harvesting is only once a year. Fewer workers are needed; people are losing their jobs. And: We always talk about the empowerment and self-determination of women. But the current situation forces them to stay at home again. They are becoming economically dependent on their husbands again. What will that look like in ten years? Climate change is a significant risk and already has such effects. If this continues, the Barind tract region could be hit much harder than the already very vulnerable coastal region in the south of Bangladesh.



From the heart of society

Peace work as a shared journey

By Sven Wagner (Text and Photos)

In northwest Bangladesh, thousands are engaged in a peace initiative, aiming to tackle the roots of conflict and to help individuals like Lokkhi find a renewed perspective on life – a life that narrowly escaped a violent end.

The foil is lightweight, the size of a sheet of writing paper, yet Lokkhi Naranya (name altered) can only hold it briefly before her strength fades. The black and white document reveals an X-ray of her hands and explains why: it is evident her joints are malformed, a consequence of numerous bone fractures due to recurrent blows, especially on the “last night”. The blows were so frequent and severe that healing became impossible.

The perpetrator was no stranger. He was the man Lokkhi had woken up next to almost every day for two decades. Her husband.

Lokkhi (38) sits in a turquoise plastic chair in the backyard of a modest settlement in the village of Fazilpur. The sun is gradually setting; mosquitoes swarm around her legs, and nearby women are preparing rice on small clay stoves. Others have gathered to listen. Lokkhi, composed, willingly shares her story about “that last night” and all that preceded. She speaks of a deprived childhood, poverty and her father’s early death; of labouring in the fields from a tender age and a forced marriage at 13. A year later, Lokkhi became a mother. “Suddenly, I was a wife and a mother, though I scarcely knew what those roles entailed,” she shares. “But I tried to fulfil them as best I could.”

The fact that she is speaking now, and that she is being listened to, is not a matter of course. Several times she had already left the house of the

family-in-law where she lived or was thrown out by her violent husband. She came here, where her younger sister Sonali Murmu and her mother live in very modest circumstances. And she kept going back to her husband – with tender hope that things would get better. Without daring to speak further about the situation.

Sonali is the reason why this story does not remain concealed like purportedly many others. For over a year, the 32-year-old has participated in a peace initiative – a widespread network aiming to counteract societal violence. Sonali and her district group have supported Lokkhi in coming forward, allowing this grave injustice to be addressed. For Sonali, it is also personal: “Lokkhi is my older sister. She’s resilient, has always worked hard and reciprocated – so that one day, I might have a better life and complete my education.”

Hearing what her sister endured is particularly distressing for Sonali. What might sound like a scene from a brutal movie was Lokkhi’s reality. On “that last night”, she faced not only beatings but also feared for her life, as her husband bound her to the marital bed and continued his assault. Her cries eventually alerted her father-in-law, who intervened and set her free, allowing her to escape.

Lokkhi’s experience is a particularly harrowing example of a widespread issue in Bangladesh: gender-based violence, especially within families. Women, often considered inferior and

Lokkhi Naranya, having endured severe violence from her husband, seeks justice and peace and is supported by her sister and the peace initiative.

economically dependent, are relegated to the lower echelons of the social and familial hierarchy.

A 2015 survey commissioned by the Bangladeshi government revealed that over 72 percent of married women had experienced marital violence (compared to 35 percent in Germany at the time). Physical and sexual abuse were most prevalent, followed by controlling behaviours like being confined to the house. NGOs have warned that such violence escalated from 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey highlighted Rajshahi, where Lokkhi resides, as a region with particularly high violence rates.

Visiting Rajshahi reveals a multifaceted picture of the causes and consequences of these grave human rights violations. Victims recount not only spousal violence but also abuse by in-laws. Local politicians consistently list domestic violence, along with land conflicts and discrimination against indigenous communities, as pressing issues. NGO representatives report on their fight against it and describe the often unstable family dynamics fuelled by poverty, a lack of education and social exclusion. And teachers elucidate how child marriages especially exacerbate violence. It becomes clear that violence against women and girls is massive and has structural causes.

When Sonali Murmu listens to her sister Lokkhi and reflects upon her suffering, the anger is palpable on her face. One might assume she would want revenge on her brother-in-law for his actions towards his wife. However, the peace initiative is not about retribution, but about healing. Formed by 22 local and regional groups since mid-2022, consisting of women, men and young adults, the aim of the initiative is to heal wounds and seek justice without resorting to further violence.

The focal point of their work is not merely the legal rectification of injustice; that's a matter for the judiciary and public authorities. Instead, it is about raising societal awareness on the roots of violence and discrimination to instigate structural change. Many cases arise because societal systems allow them to, whether through

patriarchal norms, ambiguous legal settings, corruption or the influence of affluent groups. The peace initiative offers victims support and a voice, facilitating dialogues between those entangled in disputes.

The issues the peace initiative deals with vary widely: child marriages, alcohol-induced violence, forced evictions, long-standing demands for infrastructural improvements like roads and the unjust denial of social services, to name a few. Diverse as these issues are, they share a common thread: the victims often belong to Bangladesh's most vulnerable groups, including women, the landless, indigenous communities and extreme families. Their rights are frequently undermined, leading to social unrest, violence and enduring societal conflicts.

Numerous reports on Bangladesh's human rights situation have been produced by NGOs and international bodies like the UN. They paint a broad picture of what's happening in the villages. According to Transparency International, in 2022, over 70 percent of households bribed officials for basic services, with passport offices, law enforcement agencies and transport authorities being the prime culprits. Human rights organisations working on women's rights regularly highlight shocking numbers of women subjected to rape and those murdered over dowry disputes on the basis of media reports, with the true figures suspected to be even graver. The Ministry of Women and Childrens Affairs reveals that hundreds of girls daily report sexual harassment.

Indigenous communities bear a disproportionate brunt of these challenges, particularly regarding land rights, resources and cultural autonomy. They are marginalised by both state and society. Recent reports suggest that influential factions occupy 1.3 million hectares of state land intended for the landless, nearly a tenth of Bangladesh's landmass. While official figures from the 2022 census put the indigenous population at 1.65 million, indigenous representatives estimate over five million people, from 54 communities speaking at least 35 languages. Here, the



Peace multiplier Sonali Murmu, Lokkhi's sister, with her mother in their settlement's backyard.



Neglected shrine in Fazilpur, which is home to many Hindus and indigenous families. Their economic, social and cultural rights are often challenged.

peace initiative plays a pivotal role, equipping families with knowledge of their rights and aiding in their enforcement.

Lokkhi, who, due to severe abuse, may never physically work again, belongs to one such community, facing discrimination on multiple fronts. How, then, can the peace initiative's approach of non-violence support her?

Following her husband's latest act of violence, he was arrested but has since been released on bail. While he may face conviction soon, this will not automatically resolve Lokkhi's problems. Currently living with her sister, she's estranged from her former life. Following her husband's arrest, his family ostracised her, even separating Lokkhi from her son.

The local peace initiative is intervening, liaising with the in-laws to mediate and highlight Lokkhi's plight. They also engage other influential individuals within the community. Their message is threefold: 1) Violence was done to Lokkhi over many years and this should be acknowledged. 2) Hold her husband accountable for his deeds. 3) Yet, he and his family should not only be branded as perpetrators; looking at their rights and perspectives is equally important to find a feasible resolution.

Digging deeper, it is revealed that Lokkhi's husband was coerced into the marriage by his parents, a fact he often reiterated to her. He felt trapped in a dead-end job as an agricultural day labourer. None of this excuses his actions. But it at least gives an idea what is behind his increased alcohol consumption and the escalating violence.

There has been an initial mediation attempt between the families, facilitated by the peace initiative and in the presence of administrative officials, with the proposal of a separation of the couple and maintenance payment for Lokkhi and their son. While initial figures were rebuffed by the in-laws, further discussions are scheduled. And the peace initiative will be there again.

Meanwhile, the peace initiative offers Lokkhi tangible assistance, aiding her disability recognition application, which grants a small monthly pension. Additionally, they achieved to place her in two other government support programmes that will provide her with a small house and a cow for sustenance.

And beyond this, the peace initiative has spotlighted Lokkhi's story, challenging societal perceptions that often fault women in cases of domestic violence, instead of unearthing the true narrative.

Strengthening the network

A national platform for conflict transformation

By Rabiul Azam

The peace initiative resonates beyond the region: it bolsters a national platform for conflict transformation as a centre in Bangladesh for the application and promotion of non-violent approaches. It connects civil society actors from villages through district towns to the capital Dhaka.

Conflicts are part of human existence. We encounter them daily: as individuals, within families or amongst friends, at work and in society. If we find a non-violent way of dealing with conflicts that considers the needs and interests of all involved, these can be a vital and potent source for positive change and development – on an individual level as well as for society. However, when violence emerges in various forms as part of a conflict, it can entrench or deepen discrimination and injustice, causing injuries and immense suffering. Every corner of Bangladesh offers examples of non-violent actions and movements. Communities had to develop approaches to address and modify conflicts, preventing potential future violence. They have adapted these methods over time to their local context and changing environment.

The repertoire of local communities, although rich and diverse, faces challenges in various ways. Current social, political and economic dynamics, as well as the effects of climate change such as severe cyclones, massive floods and prolonged droughts, contribute. In this context, conflicts over natural resources like land and water are particularly on the rise. And unfortunately, the use of violence related to these conflicts is also increasing. New and emerging challenges necessitate context-specific adaptations of existing non-violent approaches.

In Bangladesh, an increasing number of practitioners are striving to guide this adaptation process by providing local communities with input and support. Against this backdrop, we – a group of civil society organisations, human rights defen-



Photo: Shamsul Haque Suza

Members of the national platform for conflict transformation at a school festival organised by the peace initiative in Dinajpur; author Rabiul Azam (2nd from right) is also pictured.

ders and academics – established our platform for conflict transformation in 2017. The primary aim is to promote the application of conflict-sensitive approaches among civil and governmental actors. As an integral part of this endeavour, we seek to support the targeted development of capacities through training, seminars and networking for and by various actors in Bangladesh.

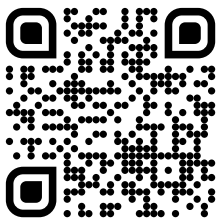
Simultaneously, our platform provides a safe space for collective reflection and cooperation, essential for further empowering civil society's scope of action. Thus, our members plan and carry out joint actions in their respective domains or sectors, ensuring the protection of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, especially for women, girls and vulnerable groups such as religious minorities and indigenous communities.

Our activities include training for civil society actors and authorities from local to national levels, as well as long-term training for staff of civil society organisations with national and international trainers. We also engage in advocacy work with political actors, exploratory missions to support activists at the local level facing severe human rights violations and offer continuous consultation and support to victims of violent conflicts. Additionally, we have initiated and supported the development of a comprehensive manual in Bengali and English to empower trainers introducing others to the realm of non-violent conflict transformation.

We are committed to continuing our efforts, learning more, reflecting upon ourselves, our organisations and our work, and gradually making our initiatives more visible. We eagerly anticipate further discussions on topics such as: What are our contributions to non-violence in Bangladesh and how can we enhance them? What can international movements and networks learn from us and vice versa? How might a more effective combination of rights-based approaches and conflict transformation concepts look? How can we expand our network and involve various individuals and groups from our society more intensively?

Currently, the platform has more than 25 members, including representatives from civil society organisations, human rights defenders, academics and journalists. Regular meetings are held including representatives of the peace initiative at grassroots level; new members are always welcome. Member organisations include, but are not limited to, the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum, Research Initiatives Bangladesh, Pollisree and SHAREE. DASCOR and MKP are founding members of the platform, with its secretariat located in the NETZ office in Dhaka. Over half of the members have participated in training sessions on conflict transformation approaches with trainers from Nepal, India, Germany and Bangladesh. And all members have contributed to the development of the peace initiative in Bangladesh and ensured that the commitment has already achieved significant successes.

The author is the Director of the Bangladeshi NGO Manab Kallyan Parishad (MKP).



We cordially invite you to explore the comprehensive manual that the national platform has initiated to support trainers eager to introduce others to the field of non-violent conflict transformation.

Main working areas of the peace initiative



Who we are and what we do

The peace multipliers and their initiatives depicted in this publication are supported by DASCOH Foundation (DASCOH), Manab Kallyan Parishad (MKP) and NETZ Partnership for Development and Justice (NETZ).

DASCOH

Established in 1994, DASCOH aspires to forge and uphold an enabling environment to ensure equitable access to both state and non-state resources, alleviating the plight of people living in poverty. By harnessing local knowledge and resources, the organisation endeavours to foster an alternative, participatory development process. DASCOH has extensive experience to promote networking between local communities, civil society and public authorities.

MKP

Founded in 1984, MKP is collaborating with marginalised groups in development projects, specifically concentrating on women's rights, child rights, agriculture, environment and alternative legal practices. MKP is dedicated to institutionalising gender-sensitive concepts and good governance in collaboration with local development partners, like-minded organisations and public authorities through advocacy, campaigning and networking.

NETZ

Since its inception in 1989, NETZ, in cooperation with its local partners, has been advocating for the self-determination of the people of Bangladesh in areas such as climate-resilient livelihoods, inclusive quality education and equal human rights. The organisation places a specific emphasis on promoting and protecting the rights of marginalised groups while addressing the structural causes of poverty and injustice.

Partnership Development Justice

NETZ বাংলাদেশ



United for peace

Together with NETZ, individuals in Bangladesh are committed to achieving greater justice for women, girls and marginalised groups in society. They stand against violence, discuss rights issues from the villages to the national level and strengthen the non-violent transformation of conflicts through their peace initiative. You are cordially invited to join.



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