

# THE POWER OF A POSITIVE LENS IN PEACE BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT

Malcolm J. Odell, Jr. with Bernard J. Mohr

## ABSTRACT

*Drawing on recent, successful experience in Nepal, this paper traces the use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in designing roles, structures, and processes to support the engagement of private-sector businesses and non-profit civic organizations in a peace-building response to the collapse of governance and the Maoist insurgency. Specific case illustrations are offered including: the design of grassroots peace building and development organizations; the need for continual redesign; the power of populist design; the positive design lens for micro-business and post-conflict development in Africa; and the positive design lens in global business. The paper concludes by asking what might be learned from this experience that might bring new hope to Africa, the Middle East, and other troubled corners of the globe. Some of the most important lessons identified include: (1) focusing information-gathering and decision-making conversations on the positive, on the successful, and on what works in resolving conflicts and promoting collaborative understanding, (2) designing conversations which identify windows of opportunity to build success on success, (3) creating dialogical structures which illuminate positive deviation and highlight exceptional experiences that have contributed to building trust, enhancing communications, resolving conflicts, and bridging cultures and viewpoints,*

---

**Designing Information and Organizations with a Positive Lens**

**Advances in Appreciative Inquiry, Volume 2, 307–327**

© 2008 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

ISSN: 1475-9152/doi:10.1016/S1475-9152(07)00215-3

*and (4) streamlining social design processes such as AI, so that people at all levels can embrace them quickly, easily, and enthusiastically to bring about rapid and positive change.*

## **PROLOGUE: A WINTER WALK ON WOODSOM FARM**

The sun rose on one of those glorious mid-winter mornings in New England – mild wind gently blowing, crisp air, January thaw. I had been struggling for some time to grapple with the ideas coming out of the conference Bernard Mohr and I had joined back in November 2005 where we'd promised to bring our Appreciative Inquiry experience to bear on the issues surrounding Designing Information and Organizations with a Positive Lens. Architects, industrial designers, management specialists, information systems analysts, academics, and organizational development professionals had gathered from around the world in Frank Gehry's swooping and diving architectural creation, Weathershead's Peter B. Lewis building, what students at Case Western call "The Roof." The event had left some of us puzzled and restless – unsure of where the most constructive links could be made among the worlds of positive organizational development, design and information systems, and my own work in support of the peace process in Nepal.

Then, in the beauty of the rolling meadows, the honking of the geese, and the rustling of the wind in the forest, I saw some light. All great art, music, architecture and systems design are ultimately looking for the same thing: Finding the beautiful, the wondrous, the inspiring, and successful, imagining more and even better, and creating a way to make it happen. That's what I've been doing in Sierra Leone and Nepal. It's what Bernard Mohr has been doing with organizations like Hi Lo Food stores in Trinidad, with Newark Beth Israel Medical Center in New Jersey and with British Petroleum in the UK. It's what Frank Gehry was doing with the Peter B. Lewis building, what Frank Barrett was doing on his jazz keyboard, and what David Cooperrider has been doing with Nutritional Foods in Brazil, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and Roadway Express in the US, and the United Nations.

Christopher Alexander, the controversial architectural genius, called this the search for QWAN: "Quality without a name" – that indefinable quality that embodies beauty and functionality in a way that touches the spirit (Christopher, 1979).<sup>1</sup>

Here's our attempt to weave together the strands from the conference, our walks on the beaches and farms of New England, and the task of peace building and development in the Himalayan nation of Nepal. There, in a land marked by extreme poverty and a decade of violent Maoist rebellion, the power of a positive lens is helping people to design new processes of social interaction – processes that will contribute to ending conflict and building partnerships for a positive future, providing new hope for those embroiled in violence and strife around the globe.

## **DESIGNING FOR PEACE, DEVELOPMENT, AND BUSINESS IN NEPAL**

A particularly important task for designing information and organizations with a positive lens is to explore the potential role of the private sector – businesses and non-profit civic organizations – in the peace-building process, particularly in the developing world. As a case in point: What role could civic society, business, and the tourism industry play in helping bring resolution to an ongoing political crisis, such as the collapse of governance and the Maoist insurgency in the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal? What social structures or forms of idea-sharing could most productively harness the positive power of youth as another source for stimulating positive change, recognizing that if we cannot harness that positive power, it turns into anger and frustration that fuels negative forces such as those that became apparent in Maoist cadres across Nepal? Could lessons learned from Nepal, where Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has now become relatively widely known and practiced in a variety of development programs, bring new hope to Africa and the Middle East where the worlds of business and civil society could work together to design information and organizational systems with a positive lens for peace building and development?

Nepal is a small and ruggedly mountainous country approximately 500 miles long and 100 miles wide, sandwiched between the plains of India and the Tibetan Plateau, home of several of the highest mountains in the world and home to about 23 million people. Per capita incomes are among the lowest in the world, averaging less than \$200 per year, with large numbers of people living on considerably less than the frequently quoted \$1 per day for poor nations. Women face particular difficulties and many families have been bonded laborers for generations. The caste system still dominates the social order and those of low caste are both poor and exploited. Large numbers of young girls are trafficked to the brothels of India every year, where too many of them either die or return to their home villages as outcasts bearing HIV/AIDS.

There is much to despair in that beleaguered mountain nation. The press over the past several years has reported the ongoing conflict in Nepal, fomented by an underground Maoist movement that has emerged from Nepal's patterns of inequity and poverty and has pledged to topple the ruling class and to bring a better life to the proletariat. Beyond poverty and inequity, there is a severe lack of basic infrastructure, rampant corruption, rotating political parties, failed elections, and a royal take-over following just a few years after a widely publicized royal massacre. Citing the failure of

the political party system and the ongoing Maoist crisis, the king took the reins of power, promising but not delivering on continually postponed elections.

Yet there is much promise in Nepal as well. Its remarkable people shoulder their burdens with extraordinary equanimity, its mountain people are among the world's most respected mountaineers and guides, and the legendary Gurkha soldiers are known around the world for their loyalty, honor, and incredible toughness in battle. The British and Indian armies, as well as UN peacekeeping operations in dozens of nations, have depended on the Gurkhas for their toughest assignments. The country also boasts world-recognized community forestry, eco-tourism, and conservation and development initiatives that are gradually reforesting the Himalayas, protecting ecosystems and wildlife, and significantly enhancing the incomes of local people. Public health efforts, harnessing thousands of rural women volunteers, are eradicating major diseases. A remarkable women's empowerment program has transformed the lives of 125,000 women and their families, building on an earlier national literacy program that reached 500,000 women. Despite the ongoing guerrilla warfare across the country, most of these programs have survived and continued to make progress.

## **STRUCTURES FOR WOMEN ENDING POVERTY**

By way of example, this latter program, Pact's WORTH<sup>1</sup> initiative – linking literacy, banking, and business – not only helped extremely poor rural women to increase their incomes dramatically, but also has received six international awards for excellence. It has survived the Maoist rebellion and, with no external support, continues on its own. This year, 5 years after external assistance ended, an evaluation has begun to measure how many of the village banks created by local women have carried on in spite of overwhelming obstacles; the levels of women's savings; numbers of loans being circulated and incomes generated from their small businesses. The question is not "if" but "how" the program demonstrates a remarkable new phenomenon: "women ending poverty."

A key element in the WORTH program – as in several successful Habitat for Humanity, UNICEF, Plan International, and Mountain Institute programs in Nepal – has been the application of AI. By 2002 a dozen or more professional facilitators had been well trained in AI by Ravi Pradhan, and they had used it as an organization development approach with numerous national organizations. Another dozen or two had similarly been

trained in a short, action-oriented adaptation, Appreciative Planning and Action (APA) that I developed with Nepali colleagues while working with a large conservation and development project among villagers in the foothills of Mount Everest (Odell, 1998, 1999).

The APA process embodies a streamlined version of AI and involves the asking of seven basic questions, posed to any group facing what traditionally have been seen as problems. Apparently intransigent obstructions or barriers to progress are approached by seeking the “positive deviation” – exceptions to negative patterns from which we might learn (Pascale & Sternin, 2005). To create the APA approach, we simplified the basic “4Ds” of classical AI and, at the same time, supplemented them with three additional steps leading to concrete action, celebration, and reflection. The APA process, which requires no more than two or three hours, asks stakeholders to address these questions swiftly and collectively, dwelling on each for as little as a few minutes:

1. *Discovery*: When are things operating at their best? When have we felt particularly successful, empowered, and proud of ourselves?
2. *Dream*: What does “even better” look like? What is our positive vision for the future, for our children or grandchildren, based on our successes?
3. *Design*: What would be a good strategy or approach for moving toward achieving our dreams?
4. *Delivery*: What are our short-term action plans and personal commitments for starting to implement our Design?
5. *Do It Now!*: What can we do right now, here where we are, to get started? What is one small part of our action plan we can do right away?
6. *Dance and Drum*: Who has a drum, who wants to dance? Let’s celebrate our achievements!
7. *Dialogue and Discussion*: What have we just done together? What did we find most interesting, enjoyable, and useful? How could we do this “even better” next time?

APA’s seven steps are built on what we call the “Makalu Model” since it was developed with villagers around Mt. Makalu, in the eastern shadows of Everest:

#### *One Goal*

- Seeking the root causes of success.

*Two Laws*

- What you seek is what you find.
- Where you think you're going is where you end up.

*Three Principles*

- If you look for problems, you find – and create – more problems.
- If you look for success, you find – and create – more successes.
- If you believe in your dreams, you create miracles.

If these seven steps, two laws and three principles appear to complicate AI's elegant and highly successful organization development process, let it be understood that they merely enhance the AI process in a way that more easily and rapidly gains the enthusiastic participation of those involved. At the very core both AI and APA are built around just three simple questions that take little time and can be applied to virtually any endeavor:

- What's working? What's the best?
- What does 'even better' look like?
- How do we get there?

Through the efforts of a growing cadre of trained AI and APA practitioners, this "positive design lens" approach had been introduced to over 240 local grass-roots organizations, 6,000 economic groups, and WORTH's 125,000 women. An ongoing WORTH monitoring and evaluation system revealed early in the program that in only 18 months 60,000 women had started or expanded small businesses, earning some \$4 million. What was remarkable about this achievement was that it came about before WORTH's materials and training programs for micro-enterprise had been introduced. The women themselves, with no external guidance or support, had created these new businesses. They had drawn on their own knowledge, encouraged by their training in APA, and shared their own success stories to help each other learn from their achievements, rather than from outside training or materials. The WORTH APA methods had provided the positive design lens that enabled thousands of the world's poorest women to innovate, create, and generate value – cash value – within an environment marked by scarcity, complexity, oppression, and meager economic, material, or knowledge resources. APA empowered them to become successful social entrepreneurs.

## **DESIGNING GRASSROOTS PEACE BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS**

The lessons of these and similar experiences among other organizations and practitioners across Nepal that were experimenting with the application of AI principles and methods encouraged a growing number of organization and social development professionals to consider applying both AI and APA to the task of peace building in the context of the ongoing national crisis.

During 2002, after about 7 years of experience with applying AI and APA to social and organizational development, a group of these practitioners joined together to examine the potential for applying AI principles to the task of national peace building in Nepal. A Maoist rebellion and the collapse of national governance was followed by dismissal of the Parliament when the king assumed total control of the country later in the year. Together these practitioners, now highly trained and skilled in the use of AI and APA methods in their work in both national and grass roots programs, designed, created, and registered a new organization, Imagine Nepal, chartered with the goal of applying AI principles to the combined task of national peace building and development. Modeled on Imagine programs begun in Chicago by Bliss Browne<sup>2</sup> and now found in dozens of cities and countries around the world, Imagine Nepal took special inspiration from Imagine Nagaland. This UNICEF initiative had been undertaken to help bring resolution to an ongoing civil rebellion that had plagued the Nagaland territory of India in the eastern Himalayas.<sup>3</sup> A video about this initiative, which debuted at the international AI conference in Baltimore in 2001, circulated among AI and APA practitioners during the following year (Delahaye, 2002). This led to a joint resolution to bring a similar process to Nepal's ongoing Maoist conflict and general deterioration of social and economic development as government control and both government and non-government development programs in rural areas collapsed.

The Imagine Nepal group then set to work between 2002 and 2005 to develop a national network of AI practitioners, provide basic training to new members and bring them together for annual meetings to review plans and progress toward generating a positive dialogue around the future of Nepal. Using AI and the streamlined APA process, Imagine Nepal focused dialogue, discussion, and training around core peace-building questions, asking people across Nepal to share stories of their positive experiences around conflict resolution. Some examples:

- Share a story of a time when you were part of a successful activity that resolved a conflict – any time in your life, work, family, or community.

- Tell us about your most positive experience in bringing about harmony and cooperation to resolve a difficult situation.
- Describe a time when you witnessed or were part of a process that brought adversaries together to resolve a dispute successfully.

From this foundation of “Discovery” – what we consider to be the “Super-D” of the AI process – participants then went on to create a positive vision of a peaceful and prosperous Nepal for their children and grandchildren, to develop a strategy for moving toward that vision, to create action plans for bringing their strategy into reality, and to take the first steps to begin that process immediately.

Then, in September 2004, at the Miami international AI conference, members of the group prevailed upon David Cooperrider and others among us in the AI world to join them for a proposed Nepal national AI Summit for Peace Building and Development to be held in Kathmandu in September 2005.

Plans proceeded and, in spite of rising street protests, turbulence, and ongoing conflicts between Maoists and the Royal Nepal Army, the September 2005 Summit was scheduled. When we reached Kathmandu, we were welcomed to not one, but two well-attended meetings of members from the Imagine Nepal network. The main event was held at the largest hotel in Kathmandu where, to our surprise, we found over 200 participants ready for an extremely professionally arranged 3-day Summit entirely organized and paid for by members of the Nepal AI network, with no external donor assistance. Since 2001 the Imagine Nepal group had clearly been very busy recruiting and training new members from a remarkably wide range of local organizations, development groups, government agencies, and political parties. Together this group worked through the full 4Ds of the classic AI process, building on David Cooperrider’s experiences in applying AI to conflict situations around the world, and coming up with its own action plans for bringing about peace, prosperity, and positive development for the new Nepal.

Two reports sent from that Summit noted the remarkable progress being made. Some excerpts:

Greetings from Nepal!

... This is an extraordinary event and could provide a breakthrough in moving the peace process forward, especially since the Maoists have just declared a 3-month cease-fire. An important opening.

We're now entering Day 2 of the Summit, **Appreciative Inquiry for Peace and Development: An Initiative for Societal Transformation** .... Actually what's remarkable about what's going on here is that we're in the second of TWO "summits" held here around AI – One grassroots [event] held in Bhaktapur, about half an hour from Kathmandu, and this national event hosted here in the capital city.... Tuesday – Thursday, the grassroots "Imagine Nepal" network held a Summit and training for about 50 young field practitioners from every corner of the country, from which emerged the "Bhaktapur Declaration" on peace and development, urging all parties to take advantage of the recent Maoist Cease Fire and move peace talks forward.

What's even more remarkable is that those attending these two events represent hundreds of others trained in Appreciative Inquiry here in Nepal, plus the 240 grassroots NGOs, 6,000 economic groups, and 125,000 women from the WORTH initiative spread across 21 Terai districts <[www.worthwomen.org](http://www.worthwomen.org)>. We believe that this represents the largest AI movement anywhere in the world – exceeding anything we know about in N. America or Europe. The goal of the **Imagine Nepal** movement is to have 1,000 trained facilitators working with 100,000 people across the country in the next few years <[www.imaginenepal.org](http://www.imaginenepal.org)>.

The closing session of the Bhaktapur Summit included ... a remarkable speech by one of the fathers of tourism in Nepal, Karna Shakya, who has just published his biography, *Soch*, (Perceptions). This has become a surprise best seller here by a man who embodies everything Appreciative Inquiry stands for – a man who lives his life turning problems into opportunities, the most extraordinary being the creation of Nepal's first national cancer hospital following the death of both his wife and daughter from that disease in the same year. A forester by trade who has long been a leader in the conservation movement here, Karna turned his Kathmandu Guest House success (... Richard Gere's favorite hang out) into a string of excellent environmentally friendly hotels and resorts across Nepal which carry on in spite of the Maoist rebellion while the tourism industry as a whole is in tatters. <[www.ktmgh.com](http://www.ktmgh.com)>.

What impressed me most about the opening session of the national Summit were the 200 faces in the crowd – the overwhelming majority of whom I did not know at all. This means that in the 3 years since I left Nepal the network of folks Ravi Pradhan and I trained over the past 10 years, supplemented by those who learned about AI elsewhere, has now grown exponentially, embracing an extraordinary range of NGOs, international organizations, and grass-roots groups that reaches into every corner of Nepali society. AI is clearly imbedded in the overall development process in Nepal to a degree I find quite amazing.

Whatever happens in the peace process as Nepal struggles to pull itself out of the present morass, there's one incredible movement spreading here that is going to make a real difference.

MacOdel, Kathmandu, 10 September 2005

More greetings from Nepal ... where a marvelous Summit on Peace & Development wound up Sunday night with an extraordinary array of action plans from about 17 working groups to move the peace and development process forward through a wide

array of exciting initiatives ... not the least of which is the announcement that Imagine Nepal would like to host the next International Appreciative Inquiry Global Conference here in a peaceful Kathmandu ... Maybe we can learn something here, beyond the spectacular ways in which these folks are mounting a social movement across Nepal based on AI. Two hundred Nepalis paid about \$100 each to be part of this event, in a country where per capita national income hovers around \$200 per year. That represents interest and commitment!

More specifically, among the many positive and hopeful outcomes, were dreams for the year 2020 and specific action plans for the coming months. This included a team working with political parties on drafting the preamble for a new constitution, and peace initiatives within working plans for making Nepal the #1 tourism destination in the world, health and education programs, and [a] potential new phase for the AI/APA-based WEP/WORTH program to reach deep into the hills with literacy, economic empowerment and peace building. And a very active group, including several staff from Capital College, is actively planning for the development of the world's first AI University! No lack of energy and vision here!

[Meanwhile] the daily papers are reporting ongoing protests, riots, and confrontations between the authorities and those pressing for the return to democracy ... So things are still very dicey here ...

MacOdeLL, Kathmandu, 15 September 2005

Our group left Nepal greatly encouraged. We knew full well that there were many forces at work in Nepal, both feeding the conflict and working hard to bring it to an end. The 200 participants at the AI Summit were only a fraction of the total number at work seeking solutions in various sectors of society, including government, business, foreign donors, and non-government organizations at national and grassroots levels. Karna Shakya had become one of the most popular speakers in the country, appearing on numerous TV and radio talk shows and panels.

One incident gave us special encouragement: Before we left we received an invitation from a senior police official to make a presentation to new police cadets. Although time constraints made that impossible, we referred him to the leaders of the Summit, all highly trained in AI to international standards. They, in turn, committed themselves to help him and others among the Summit participants with continuing training and support to accomplish the objectives of the 17 working groups. We took special interest in the police official's working group, the group drafting the preamble for a new constitution, for two reasons. First, they had all agreed to work toward bringing all political parties and stakeholders together to begin the process of creating an elected Constituent Assembly to carry forward the drafting of a new constitution, the need for which had been widely accepted across the

country. Second, this group included not only the police officer, but also members of the Maoist, Congress, Communist, and Royalist parties, as well as a member of the king's cabinet in charge of women's affairs – an extraordinary cross-section of almost all key stakeholders in this divided, conflict-ridden nation. Indeed, it appeared that we had made substantial progress for a 3-day Summit, but a monumental task still faced those we left behind.

### **“THINGS FALL APART”: THE NEED FOR CONTINUAL REDESIGN**

Following our departure from Nepal in September, things seemed to be going downhill. The king retained total power, and popular demands to restore Parliament and hold elections were ignored. The Maoist insurgency and retaliation by police and army units had left many dead. Local government all but ceased functioning. Protests began to increase in numbers and intensity. Violent confrontations grew between protesters and police and a number of civilians were killed. Calls from both sides for international assistance were largely ignored. Conflicts in Africa and natural disasters such as the Asian tsunami and hurricanes in America attracted far more news coverage.<sup>4</sup>

Then in the early spring of 2006 the street protests grew dramatically as thousands and thousands of people from all walks of life poured into the streets – young and old, rich and poor, men and women from every social class, ethnic group, and caste. About the same time that the estimated number of people marching around the capital's ring road reached half a million, there came a report that President Jimmy Carter might be coming to Nepal. This news encouraged those inside and outside Nepal because it was felt that President Carter might be the one person who could get the ear of the king and help him understand that the longer he resisted the will of the people, the more fragile the future of the monarchy would become.<sup>5</sup>

Just as hopes were being raised, the American Embassy, alarmed by the mounting protests and associated violence, closed its consular section, asked non-essential American personnel to leave the country, cancelled an upcoming Congressional delegation, and strongly discouraged President Carter's planned visit.<sup>6</sup> Those among us who knew Nepal well, and were in touch with colleagues there on a daily basis via email, understood that while the tempo of protest was rising, the demands for peace were also growing. We also noted that the Maoists, recognizing that the people were rising up

against the ongoing violence of the insurrection, had continued to honor their commitment to the cease-fire. Overall, we did not see evidence of escalating violence that should deter President Carter's visit. To the contrary, the timing for such an intervention by a respected world leader seemed completely appropriate, perhaps crucial, if the deadlock was to be broken.

### **THE PEOPLE SPEAK: THE POWER OF POPULIST DESIGN**

On April 21st, we received word of an enormous, yet apparently peaceful, protest march by several hundred thousand people around the entire perimeter of the city. What few conflicts there were appeared limited to the front lines between extremists among the protesters and retaliating security forces, but they did not seem to be dangerous to the general public or beyond the capacity of security forces to protect a visiting dignitary. We were not on the scene, however, and our colleagues in Kathmandu could not give us a full picture of the security issues at stake.

It was then that I remembered our friend in the police department. Surely he would be in a professional position to judge the potential danger to a visitor such as President Carter. I wrote him an email of inquiry, wondering if I would even get a response. To my surprise a reply appeared almost immediately, on April 23rd. Its contents were remarkable. In his view, the AI Summit was no dim memory but a foundation upon which he and others were attempting to reverse the cycle of violence. Rather than warn against President Carter's visit, he suggested postponement for a few weeks. Excerpts:

I am very much honored to receive such an important mail ... The "Imagine Nepal" along with the Appreciative Inquiry for Peace Building and Development Summit was really a very suitable model for Nepal which every nation builder should realize at this time of crisis. Since Nepal has been passing through the razor edge of armed conflict as well as political turmoil these days, I think this methodology of appreciative inquiry will transform the positive thinking, values, beliefs for the professional changes of the leaders in the upcoming days.

As you know, we have an unexpected political chaos and till this date nothing has made it calm down. I think the present situation needs another two weeks to solve politically. So you can't think the visit of President Carter before mid of the May 2006 ...<sup>7</sup>

As this officer had predicted, things had begun to change and news came of another massive but peaceful protest that pressed into the city center in defiance of a “shoot-to-kill” 24-hour curfew imposed by the king’s security forces. Consistent with his reference to the AI peace-building summit, the *New York Times* reported, in an article buried on p. 15 of its issue of April 21st (headlined mysteriously “Nepal Chaos Gets Worse, As India Tries To Strike Deal”), that when protesters confronted the security forces,

“... the police just melted away ....”<sup>8</sup>

Was it really possible that both the protesters and police had begun to see the situation through a “positive lens?”

Within the next few days the king saw the handwriting on the wall, acceded to the protesters’ demands, relinquished power, reinstated Parliament, and apologized to the families of protesters who had been killed by security forces. A Public Broadcasting Service announcement summarized the changes that had just taken place:

The king appeared on television Monday night to say that he would return power to the people and reinstate the parliament he dissolved in 2002.<sup>9</sup>

National Public Radio elaborated the news:

The move appears to meet a key demand of the seven-party opposition.<sup>10</sup>

The people had spoken, the king had finally listened, and Nepal’s democracy was back on track. The new government, within the week, declared that it would seek a peace agreement with the Maoists. The cease-fire held. Protests grew festive, clashes with security forces disappeared, and I received another remarkable email from our police colleague:

Nowadays it’s going well which was supposed on my previous message. As you suggested earlier, we’ve been keeping up the great, non-violent response to the people’s voice .... Have you forget to share my words to the Carter Center? But I really thank you very much for appreciating my suggestion regarding the proposed visit. Anyway my assessment seems true ... isn’t it .... More than it, we are really happy for the joint effort of Government of the Seven Parties (Alliance) to bring peace forever.

Let’s wish peace reinstated in Nepal again towards its pace on the declaration of “Zone of Peace” ....<sup>11</sup>

When several among us in the international AI network sent congratulations to the police official, we received another remarkable reply, entitled

“Lord Buddha was born in Nepal.” Excerpts from his message of May 22nd:<sup>12</sup>

... every time I used to direct my fellow officers ... to behave with the members of public with due decorum and courtesy; to promote amity; to protect life, property, liberty and pursuit of happiness of citizens; preserve and promote public peace; ensure that the rights and privileges under the law or in such a manner as to uphold and protect the dignity and rights of the citizens.

It's the general duty of any Police Personnel to serve the nation and citizens as a servant not as a ruler. It's a more blissful moment for me too, to be reminded [of] some great heroes of the world such as Lord Buddha, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi. We are really proud to be the Nepalese and feel glory to walk away along the path guided by Lord Buddha who was born here. Thank you again so much from the core of my heart to your theory of “Appreciative Inquiry to build the Peace and Development”.

Nowadays, it is really a great example that Nepali people have shown, as you too have already realized and accepted. Nobody is [more] powerful than the people's power. Even Maoists war and insurgency which has remained uncompleted for past 10 yrs. has been guided towards the peaceful movement joining hand in hand with people as they learnt the people's power during the successful non-violence revolution of People and Seven Party Alliance (SPA). After all, it's only due to the appreciation of the non-violence movement made by the people which succeeded here ....

This man's concerns regarding the task of establishing peace with the Maoists, and the need for agreement around drafting a new constitution, as his AI working group had proposed in September 2005, were rewarded with more good news on November 7th, 2006 – just as Americans were bringing about a major political shift of their own in protest over their own conflict in Iraq. A midnight BBC bulletin announced an historic peace agreement between the Maoists and Government:

Nepal – a turning point in history?

By Charles Haviland, BBC News, Kathmandu

Nepal's midnight peace deal between the government and Maoist rebels aimed at ending the 10-year insurgency is being hailed in fulsome terms.

In the words of one politician, it is “a new era for Nepal.” Another sees it as the beginning of the end of the monarchy; while for one Maoist leader it is one of the biggest breakthroughs in the history of Nepal.

With it, the politicians are trying above all to bring an end to the bloody conflict that has brought this desperately poor country to its knees ....

Above all, this is about the Maoists – the communist faction that went underground 10 years ago to wage insurrection, complaining that six years of democracy had brought no good to the country and had failed to uplift its people....

... [B]y 1 December they will take their place in a temporary cabinet, sharing ministerial posts equally with each of the other main parties – an attainment of political respectability.

They have made a concession on their weapons ....

The Maoist army will soon be confined in camps and its weapons will be separately locked up ... under strict United Nations surveillance ....

The official Nepalese Army is also having to make concessions: it will have the same number of weapons confined.

It would be presumptuous indeed to infer from this tale that the solution to Nepal's crisis emerged directly from the September 2005 AI Summit for Peace Building and Development. There were numerous individuals and organizations, from national to international, grass roots to academic, news media, and political parties. Business leaders like Karna Shakya and editors of national magazines and newspapers, some jailed for their outspoken criticism of the king, were calling for harmony and accommodation, often risking further punishment. And there were increasing numbers – ultimately hundreds of thousands – of people from the warp and weft of the national fabric who marched openly for peace. Yet among all these voices were the 200 participants in that Summit who made a collective commitment to bring about positive, peaceful change. And in the streets and villages across the country were women from the WORTH empowerment program adding their voices to the call for peace and democracy. Together this rainbow array of actors has helped bring about the change they sought. And they did it themselves, without the United Nations, and without Jimmy Carter, which is the way it should be.

## **A POSITIVE DESIGN LENS FOR MICRO-BUSINESS AND POST-CONFLICT DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

To complement the historic process that has taken place in Nepal, there is more good news, and this time it is coming from Africa, a continent too often written off by many in the West as beyond hope. Using an AI approach, through the simplified APA model, Pact's WORTH program is now being replicated in half-a-dozen African countries as part of a global initiative to stop the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Women across this impoverished continent are looking at life through a positive lens...and getting results. Groups are

organizing, women are teaching each other how to read, write, and keep simple accounts, Village Banks are being organized with the savings of women once considered too poor to save, businesses are starting and expanding, women are making money. With their new incomes, from wealth they have created themselves, they are taking care of HIV/AIDS orphans, widows, and the sick; they are burying their dead; they are starting campaigns for the promotion of condoms and safe sex; they are ending domestic violence.

In Sierra Leone, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) through a streamlined and intensive 6-week APA training-of-trainers program, has adopted APA as a key process for helping repatriated refugees from a bloody 10-year civil war rebuild their lives and communities. Under a program “Linking Relief, Rehabilitation, and Development” (LRRD), IRC has trained field staff in the application of the tools and concepts of APA to bring a positive lens to the difficult transformation process. Self-help initiatives, encouraged by APA, have been undertaken by hundreds of villagers engaged in reestablishing their agriculture, rebuilding their communities, opening up new roads, and crossing streams with locally constructed bridges. A follow-up refresher course and advanced training a year later found the process was well embedded in the LRRD program and that staff were training others in the process. Drawing on APA, traditional Chiefdom leaders have recently instituted human rights by-laws to protect the rights of children that one seasoned human rights expert calls “...fine examples of sophisticated civil society/community development and human rights implementation – in Europe and Eurasia we do not often, if ever, see such rapid examples of legal/human rights reform, civil society, and rule of law development...”<sup>13</sup> Through these and other initiatives the application of the positive lens is clearly bringing hope to Africa.<sup>14</sup>

## **THE POSITIVE DESIGN LENS IN GLOBAL BUSINESS**

At the opposite end of the business spectrum from micro-entrepreneurs are global firms that operate on a multi-continental scale. For several years, the members of British Petroleum’s Kazakhstan/Russia Business Unit had worked long hours, presenting various strategic investment scenarios to senior management – with other priorities always seeming to eclipse their proposals. In 2001 the KaRuBu business unit leader wanted something that would be (in his words) “a breath of fresh air” – a strategy process that was “transformative, compelling, inclusive, informative, and engaging.” BP’s Learning and OD team with Bernard Mohr (Innovation Partners

International) designed a temporary strategy development organization to meet those criteria. Partly because of that temporary organization, proving that BP could conduct business profitably in Russia and remain true to its brand values, BP took a 50% stake in TNK, creating the third largest oil and gas company in Russia. With over 110,000 employees and production of 1.2 million barrels of oil per day, the new company TNK-BP, nearly equals the size of the existing BP Group. This is globalization at its best, enhanced by AI.

## **BUSINESS AS AGENT FOR WORLD BENEFIT: FROM NEPAL TO THE GLOBAL ECONOMY**

Meanwhile, back in Nepal, Karna Shakya's book is selling widely and he has become a national guru of positive thinking. A new book is soon to be published. Shakya's approach to life, business, and the future of his country epitomizes the findings of research being done by a fellow countryman Mukul Acharya as part of his PhD program at the University of Massachusetts. A key staff trainer with Nepal's WORTH program, he sums up the essence of his study of successful women entrepreneurs:

“... only the positive attitude is going to make one a successful entrepreneur ....”<sup>15</sup>

Reflecting the findings of Doug Peters regarding performance management, Acharya notes the critical importance of the positive lens to the bottom line in business – be it among poor women in Nepal or the “dot.com” high-flyer in California's Silicon Valley:

Attitude is the multiplier of the result of the knowledge and skills. People with the negative attitude could still possess the knowledge and skills but perform nothing<sup>16</sup> (Acharya, 2006; Peters, 2004).

An email from Karna Shakya suggests that his positive lens, in today's Nepal, has established him as something of an authority, bringing hope not just to fellow business and political leaders, but to the general population as well.

My book *Soch* [Inquiry] has somehow established me as one of the opinion builders of the country. I am getting lots of invitations from various organizations such as Rotary, JCs, Lions, educational institutions and political parties in different districts of Nepal to give speeches on the power of positive thinking. Nowadays, I am traveling a lot. One Indian publisher is also translating my book into Hindi. Anyway, the result is accomplishing but equally challenging. Reaching the top is not difficult but to stay there for long is not easy. Anyway I am not a Guru of any kind, and I have no intention at all to be so in future. I am a down-to-earth pragmatic dreamer who just wants to translate dreams into action. That's all.

Specially, young people in various part of Nepal have formed a group called “positive thinker.” Their mission is to spread constructive opinion in the grass root level. A few days ago they invited me to Hetauda, to give a speech in the mass meeting. It went extremely well. On 7th of Oct there was big conference of Non Residential Nepalese where I give a speech. I requested all 500 members of Nepalese Diasporas to email positive stories ... and request their friends to re-email again.

Any way I am trying hard to bring some positive changes whatever I can. A drop in an ocean sometimes makes a difference.<sup>17</sup>

A recent message elaborates Karna Shakya’s thoughts:

My book Soch is not political. I think it became so popular because there is a big hunger of hope and confidence in Nepal. Soch gave them some hope ... Someone said “Soch is a biography of a person who always loves to think, talks what he thinks, does what he talks, and writes what he does.”

The foundation is in place. A national network of AI-trained professionals, programs, and organizations that uses a “positive lens” is now established and operating across the country of Nepal and beginning to emerge in several African countries as well. An eminent business leader has become recognized widely as a guru of positive thinking. The future of Nepal remains at risk, however. As in Sri Lanka, where the accords between Tamil Tigers and Government have recently foundered, the peace-building process faces a bumpy road with many roadblocks ahead. Nevertheless a movement is afoot in which business, government, non-profit institutions, and grass roots women’s groups are all taking important roles, and if it continues, it has the potential of bringing light out of darkness and giving hope to other nations mired in poverty and conflict around the globe.

## CONCLUSION

Whether among social and business entrepreneurs in Asia or Africa, among corporate leaders, line managers, and employees on the front lines, or among grass roots organizations at the village level, successful, profitable businesses, institutions, governments, and entire nation states are in the process of continuously redesigning themselves and operating through a positive lens. What’s more, those institutions which do embody this spirit also are living evidence of “business as agent of world benefit,” contributing to positive change at the local, national, and international levels.

What are the next steps? Harness these resources; engage the leadership of groups like Imagine Nepal and the Nepal National Appreciative Inquiry

Network, and the International Rescue Committee in Sierra Leone, of WORTH women in Africa, and businessmen like Karna Shakya of Kathmandu, top management of BP, Roadway Express, and Nutrimental. Bring these and other visionary leaders and organizations into the process of involving all the stakeholders in constructive social, political, and economic design and development while contributing to peace-building and development processes. Together these individuals and organizations, and what they have achieved, enable us to imagine the power of the positive lens in helping bring about organizational and institutional transformation that can move the peace-building, development, and democratic processes forward in Nepal, Africa, and beyond.

Thinking back to the Frank Gehry building on the Case Western campus, and to Christopher Alexander's search for QWAN, we can revisit the questions we asked at the opening of the conference: "How can we keep design from destroying itself by becoming too 'scientific'?" "How can we design a systematic approach to being creative?" "How can we manage and capitalize upon the tension between the creative and the business sides of an industry or organization?"

The lessons learned from Nepal and many of these other successful examples of the "positive lens" at work suggest several common elements that may be useful to others seeking to harness the creative, affirmative energy that can be tapped to solve extraordinarily difficult and complex problems. Some of these include:

- Focus on the positive, on the successful, on what works. Don't get mired down in the discouraging process of dwelling on what's broken, what's wrong, and who is to blame.
- Seek the windows of opportunity. Build success on success.
  - Look for the "positive deviance" – the exceptional and successful, the positive experiences, stories, efforts that have, for example, contributed to building trust, enhancing communications, resolving conflicts, bridging cultures and viewpoints.
- Streamline processes like AI so that people at all levels can embrace them quickly, easily, and enthusiastically in the system.
- Address APA's three basic questions:
  - What's working? What's the best?
  - What does 'even better' look like?
  - How do we get there?
- Keep everlastingly at it; don't expect quick fixes...but do expect miracles.

The Imagine Nepal vision of a future international AI conference in the peaceful country of Nepal is not just a dream. Nor is Green Mountain Coffee Roasters' commitment to fair trade practices a CEO's fantasy – it is building a great place to work, helping small farmers make a living wage in the developing world, and generating steadily increasing margins. Together these and other far-sighted social, political, and business leaders are part of a process in motion that embodies the principles and promise of “Designing Information and Organizations with a Positive Lens.” Using an AI process, those institutional designers are generating creative and positive responses to major, even overwhelming, problems. They have successfully capitalized on the tensions among creativity, imagination, and bottom-line results.

## NOTES

1. Pact's Women's Empowerment Program (WEP) was originally funded by USAID and subsequently renamed WORTH, the name by which it is currently being introduced in Africa. [www.worthwomen.org](http://www.worthwomen.org)
2. <http://www.imaginechicago.org>
3. [http://www.unicef.org/say\\_yes/asia.htm](http://www.unicef.org/say_yes/asia.htm)
4. See, for example, *New York Times*, March 22, 2006, “33 Killed as Nepal's Forces Clash With Maoist Rebels for 2nd Day,” by Tilak P. Pokharel and Somini Sengupta.
5. Deccan Herald, Mysore, India, March 30, 2006, “Jimmy Carter tries his hand at Nepal peace,” by Sudeshna Sarkar.
6. *New York Times*, April 22, 2006.
7. Personal email communication, April 23, 2006.
8. *New York Times*, April 21, 2006, p. 15.
9. PBS: “The News Hour,” April 24, 2006.
10. NPR: “All Things Considered,” April 24, 2006.
11. Personal email communication, May 18, 2006.
12. Personal email communication, May 22, 2006.
13. David Sip, personal email communication, Sept. 19, 2006.
14. See <http://www.worthwomen.org> and <http://www.pactworld.org>
15. Mukul Acharya, Amherst MA, private communication, March 22, 2006.
16. *ibid.*
17. Personal email communication, Oct. 18, 2005.

## REFERENCES

- Christopher, A. (1979). *The timeless way of building* (Vol. 1, p. 19ff). Center for Environmental Structure Series, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Delahaye, P. (2002). *Imagine Nagaland, video produced by UNICEF, New Delhi*. Reported in *The State of the World's Children 2002*. UNICEF, NY, p. 34.

- Odell, M. (1998). Appreciative planning and action: Experience from the field. In: S. A. Hammond & C. Royal (Eds), *Lessons from the field: Applying appreciative inquiry* (pp. 127–143). Plano, TX: Practical Press/Thin Book Publishing Co.
- Odell, M. (1999). “Issues in participatory development: From ‘Participatory rural appraisal’ to ‘appreciative planning and action,’ a personal journey of discovery from peace corps to women’s empowerment,” paper delivered at *Participatory Development Forum*, Ottawa, Canada.
- Pascale, R. T., & Sternin, J. (2005). Your company’s secret change agents. *Harvard Business Review*, 83(5), p. 72ff.
- Peters, D. (2004). The performance equation: The formula for dramatic and sustainable performance. *Performance Improvement*, 43(10), 5–8.