

## Intervention – “Transitioning From Hope to Optimism and Back Again”

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### Introduction

In this Intervention, we consider what happens when collective hope is no longer needed, when hope is left behind and replaced by cruel or cautious optimism. Yet hope is needed yet once again in Nepal. These musings run through our minds when we consider Nepal, an economically precarious, post-conflict, post-earthquake country. Nepal, sandwiched between the political and economic behemoths of India and China, is a country of almost 30 million residents and where over 120 languages are spoken. Nepal has survived a ten-year internal conflict (1996-2006) in which according to official figures 13,000 people died; an earthquake in 2015 that resulted in almost 9,000 deaths; and an ongoing everyday economic and social landscape where international remittances from young men and their bodies are increasingly the backbone of the economy (Ruszczyk 2017). Since 2015, due to political and administrative battles taking place on a national level between ministries as well as the multi-dimensional impact of the earthquake, the central government transformed Nepal into an administratively urban country where power has been transferred from a central government to a new federal system where local governments have been given tremendous responsibilities and power.

### Needing Hope

This is a culturally specific account of hope, collective hope rather than individualistic expressions of hope. In Rebecca Solnit's book, *Hope in the Dark*, she gives voice to the history of activism, people power over five decades, and she

1986: 3] To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable.”

During almost eight years of conducting research in this country beginning in 2012, and through repeated, granular engagement with one particular city (Bharatpur), I (Ruszczyk) have found people to be overwhelmingly hopeful. Full of hope, that one day their country would no longer be in “transition” (Byrne 2018). The “t-word” has always received a significant place in political discourses and in the agendas of all political bodies in my view (Bhandari). Transition from what to what was not always clear. Many spoke specifically about having stable government. Others spoke about an elected government. A government that led its citizens towards a reality that was moving forward for a common good. People were frustrated with the lack of systems and lack of a government that addressed their needs. Even when there has been resentment towards the government, the people used this sense of transition to console themselves and hope for a better time. Writing about Cairo, Pettit (2019) alludes to this phenomenon, describing a “sense of suspension”, or a desire for “stability” after a period of turmoil. In both Egypt and Nepal there was and continues to be political upheaval and economic precarity for the masses, the majority.

Hope is related to a temporary space, that connects the past to the future. Snellinger (2016: 27) saw hope in Nepali youths as a force that “enables change and links aspirations for the future”. There was a hope for the not-yet in Nepal (see Figure 1). A sense that a good way of being is “still not” here (Anderson 2006a: 695). Anderson (2006b, 733) also engages with Ernst Bloch’s invocation of the “not-yet” of human consciousness, and suggests that “thinking through hope touches something that remains elusive to an act of explanation or description”. “Hope anticipates that something indeterminate has not-yet become” (ibid.). Yet thinking about hope must acknowledge the specific point and place in time that is being considered (Arrigoitia 2019; Back 2020).



**Figure 1:** Hope in Nepal, 2015 (source: Hanna Ruszczyk, 2015)

### Transitioning from Hope to Optimism

The 2015 earthquake changed Nepal. The positive Nepali collective response post-earthquake galvanized Nepali people to move beyond hope to something resembling optimism. Nepali people, as a collective, took their future into their hands. The political leaders in Kathmandu were spurred to come to consensus on the long-debated constitution after the earthquake. The earthquake mobilised leaders who were relieved that the impact of the earthquake was not as devastating as had been expected (Ruszczyk 2018). The Nepalese government and the constituent assembly utilised the





which 85 percent of international trade enters Nepal, was devastating. This resulted in economic turmoil and dissolution of trust in India. The deafeningly quiet lack of response from the international community to India's actions hurt Nepali people. The passing of the constitution led to profound changes including a federal system of government with seven provinces and significant decentralisation of power to local authorities. More recently, municipal elections have taken place in the spring and autumn of 2017, the first such elections in 20 years. These administrative changes have been radical.

Since 2017, hope has been displaced or replaced with optimism. Hope and optimism are different. In Nepal, there is no more reference to being in "transition" or a temporary space; rather, people are firmly relying on the new federal system of decentralization and the new locally elected government officials to create an environment where progressive change will occur in their daily lives. People are expectant yet patient with their new forms of local government. Residents and government officials have been waiting for two decades for locally elected leaders. Everyone knows change is in the making. Residents plan to hold locally elected officials to account. They are aware change will not happen immediately; the common refrain in the spring of 2019 was "slowly, slowly", change will occur. They are optimistic.

Scholars such as Anderson (2006a: 705) suggest that optimism, "in comparison to hope, avoids encounters with the emergence of actually existing potentialities and possibilities. It is, as Lasch (1991: 81) stresses, based on 'a blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best'". Pettit (2019: 726) uses the concept of hope rather than optimism because hope is "directed towards something desired, it defines a more basic sense of having something to live for". In Nepal, people have transitioned from hope, they are optimistic about the future of Nepal.

### Cruel and Cautious Optimism

For Berlant (2011: 14), optimism is "a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently". Berlant (2011: 2) also describes optimism as cruel "when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving".

An Asia Foundation (2018) survey revealed a level of "cautious optimism" in Nepal, with just over half of Nepal's people being optimistic regarding the route the country is heading towards. The same survey highlighted the fragmented level of enthusiasm in what the country has gone through – the uncertainty seems to be around the "persistent issues of geographic imbalances in development", the economic outlook, and the slower improvements in social relations. While social development has always been side-lined, people think that physical development is also skewed towards urban areas and places with easier access. Remittance is an important aspect of the country's economy and almost three in five households' financial condition either worsened or did not improve in the recent period. Interestingly, even with all these worrying figures, more than four in five were optimistic that their economy will improve in the next five years.

When we reflect upon two recent developments, the monsoon season and the Covid-19 pandemic, the level of optimism seems to be fading. In the first example, the first two years of decentralization (2018 and 2019) went by in a state of confusion and the incompetency in mitigating the damage of the monsoon-related disasters (flooding and landslides) ended up in blame shifting and finger pointing from one level of government to the other. In the second annual monsoon after decentralization and local elected officials running local governments, citizens were expecting the state to step up and provide a safety net for its citizens (as it should) in a time of crisis. The historically embedded societal response of mutual support was withheld because government was expected to lead. The impact of monsoon events this year are the worst in recent times, with more than 300 feared dead and around 100 people still missing (Nepal Disaster Risk Reduction Portal 2020). Despite moving to a federal governance structure, the newly formed local governments and those in the centre have not managed to clarify segregation of duties. All tiers of government appear to have missed the opportunity to internalise the true sense of federalism. Nepalis are devastated.

In the second example, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the current chaos of government, and still the governing bodies are using it as an excuse for their ineptitude. The role of central government (one of the strongest in terms of political representation, having a two-third majority) in managing the ongoing crisis and the destruction from the monsoon has come under strong scrutiny from the public. Financial irregularities while handling these testing events have again raised concerns among the general public. People have taken to social media platforms to warn the government; they have stepped onto the streets to protest; and youths are initiating hunger strikes. These are just a few acts of ongoing action, protest and resistance. Once again in Nepal, there needs to be conscious action, defiance and even acts of control from civil society and the general public to keep the different levels of government from drifting off, away from their duties. Surrounded by the grievances of the public, the government at all levels seem to be overwhelmed.



government (with its collective history of locally elected governing) will provide more than stability. Why is the intervention about transitioning from hope to optimism and back again important? Because as the multiple layers of the government of Nepal learn (or not) how to work in a decentralised and elected manner, collectively people need to continue to advocate and push for the changes they want to see in their society and through the multiple manifestations of activism they are part of. A famous Nepali saying comes to mind, *saas rahungel aash rahanchha* (“we should keep our hopes alive until the last breath”).

We must never stop hoping; we also need to be vigilant, active, and to hold our governments to account. This must not stop. Being cognisant that governments do not necessarily have the same desires for society as the people they were elected by is vital. Stepping back and stopping to hope, stopping activism and mutual support, is not an option. We must hope and act.

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