

Opening Address on the occasion of the Inaugural Action Asia Peace Leader's Forum, 2009

Firstly let me begin by welcoming you all here to the Action Asia neutral forum of Malaysia!! As it happens we have no program, no history, no relationships and no members in this part of the region. So it is rather ironic we have come together to meet here in this country. However as you all know we had intended to meet in Sri Lanka until President Rajapakse took it upon himself to unilaterally declare peace thereby making it insecure for peace builders to meet together it was not possible for us to go there. I would like to therefore begin today by acknowledging our Sri Lankan host committee – Jayatha, Monica, Rajan, Dishani and Sushi for the preparations they had made, the wonderful vision they had for holding our meeting there, and for accepting their reality that it was not safe for us to meet there. I am pleased we will have a chance to hear from them in these four days and understand more deeply the very real challenges they are now facing. I am sorry we missed the chance to be together with you there.

Secondly I would like us to take a moment to remember the people of the Philippines. I would like to ask us to take a moment of silence to remember the friends and colleagues of our Action Asia members there who have lost houses and property and have been swept away by this terrible flooding and those who are working tirelessly to provide relief and clean up the situation. This morning on the BBC they announced 250 people have lost their lives, most of the children. And more than 450,000 have been displaced by flood waters and the weather reports suggest the cyclone is heading back toward the Philippines.

Today Bopha is providing each one of us with 40 RM for our lunch allowance for yesterday. I would like to propose each of us give Bopha back the allowance as donation to the work of AKKAPA who are helping people to clean up in the worst affected area of Manila, Quezon City. If you would like to do this, please give it back to Bopha when she gives it to you.

Before I worked in Cambodia and with Action Asia I worked for the Anglican Church in Australia. For a few years almost every Sunday I would prepare a sermon and reflect on the state of the world in relation to whichever theological text from the Bible was being read during that week's service. I don't intend to preach a sermon to you today, but I did decide to take some time to put together in writing my own reflections about the state of our network and some key issues for you given this is our first ever Inaugural Peace Leader's Forum and the first chance for us to really sit together, figure out how it functions, and share the ownership, and widen the number of people involved in decision making and direction setting.

Action Asia began with just a few people. There are just three of us here today, Baht Habiba, and myself. Ngarm had hoped to be with us but had other commitments.

Podinilame of Sri Lanka has retired from peace work, handing on his Centre for Human Development to his sons. Mohammed Suleman today serves the Afghan government as the deputy Minister for education, and Fahim Hakim serves as a commissioner for the afghan Human Rights Commission. In the beginning we had a vision of a movement of people in Asia working for peace and really taking 'action' to address violent conflict in this part of the world – hence the name Action Asia.

While I believe it is important for us to acknowledge our founders and those who went before I think in this moment it hardly matters what their intention was and what they had envisaged. Today and in this moment the ongoing founders of this network are all of you. What matters today, and in this moment is what all of you envisage for the future and what you want to do with the foundation that has been built to this moment.

Nevertheless I would like for us to go forward remembering the lessons and reflecting on the past ten years. We will have a chance to reflect on this more together as baht walks us through a chronology of the last ten years, but let me say my ten ringgits worthwhile I have the floor!!

Lesson One – individuals count! We have always said that Action Asia is a network of individual peace practitioners. It does not matter whether today we are working for Helvetas, tomorrow for an Action Asia project and later for International Alert—you are still a member of Action Asia. Wherever action Asia members are they are carrying the shared vision and values of Action Asia. It is the commitment of peace and transforming violent conflict. It is the champions who initiate peace processes in Mindanao, hold together Christian and Hindu communities in Orissa, work with the Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka, who mobilize women for peace in a country like Afghanistan, who challenge notions of ethnic nationalism in Cambodia, who transform martial arts leaders in Timor Leste and so on and so on and so on that make up this network! Individuals count.

Lesson Two – none of that work is sustainable without vibrant and viable peace organizations which reflect the same vision and values as those individuals. Across the region we have relied on organizations like the Alliance for Conflict Transformation in Cambodia, Shalom Foundation in Myanmar, Balay Mindanao in the Philippines, HAK Association in Timor Leste, Friends for Peace in Nepal for support – for bank accounts, co hosting and facilitating our meetings, for security for our work, for connection and relationships, and credibility, and so much more. Without those organizations trusting in us and our approach we would have achieved very little.

Lesson Three – people who live and work in violent conflicts need each other. The peace builders of Myanmar and Cambodia first met together in 2001 and taught us this lesson. It was extraordinary powerful as they shared the suffering of Cambodia's past but also how they had come through to achieve peace today, thus giving hope their colleagues from Myanmar hope. Those from Myanmar reminded the Cambodians of what they had come through and affirmed the processes that they had achieved. We have all worked

with external experts and know while they have useful things to share the real heart connection comes from those who know our suffering, but have also tried to address it some way, at some time. It is indeed significant that the majority of our active Action Asia members come from situations who have been confronted with protracted violence – Cambodia, Myanmar, Timor Leste, Nepal, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Manipur, Orissa and Mindanao. All are represented in this room today because you have been the most active in achieving this network.

Lesson Four – to achieve the task relationships matter. In most professional organizations it is the task which binds people together. In Action Asia to achieve the task well we have seen we need to grapple with our relationships with each other. Understanding each other beyond national, ethnic or religious identities is important. Knowing each other as human beings is significant. Communication, meeting and really valuing our diversity is essential. Trust is fundamental. There is no doubt we can get on each other's nerves, we don't fit into each other's notions of a 'model peace builder' when we don't agree the way forward we need to struggle to transcend these things and find a way forward together. This is not easy but deep and lasting, respectful relationships between members will guarantee the sustainability of this movement.

So why a Peace Leaders Forum?

I would like to share with you a fundamental Action Asia story that happened in 1998. It was the time when we were trying to find ways to meet each before we had even started the network and we were grappling with what we were trying to do. Responding to Conflict in the UK had organized a consultation in Northern Ireland, inviting peace practitioners to come and to evaluate their work and a number of people from around the world were there. Both Dekha and Baht, in this room, were there, as was Ngarm. During the course of the meeting there was a chance for people to meet in regional groups. At that time, Baht and Ngarm were already carrying their idea of a network and shared their idea for a regional network. The members of the group were very excited and proposed we begin by electing a president, a vice president, a secretary and a treasurer! They apparently went on to discuss at length the process for election, the roles of the positions, and who could be what. Poor Ngarm and Baht – no vision, no values, no action. Finally exasperated, Ngarm and Baht threw their hands in the air and gave up on that discussion. I can honestly say this incident has really shaped our thinking for some years as we've rejected repeatedly the idea we need such a structure or office bearers. In that moment, we saw the network was defeated even before it had begun.

However we have had two failed attempts at forming steering committees. One steering Committee was formed during ACTION global meetings and consisted mostly of the founding members. The second was nominated during the first Action Asia Forum in Mindanao representing the places where Action Asia had particular projects or

significant numbers of members. In both cases there were too few resources to meet, not enough connection between members, limited responses to communication and so on. In effect that model also failed....

So in recent years the question has loomed large. How do decisions get made in Action Asia? Who sets the direction? Who prioritizes? Who owns this network? And so on. Of course our funding partners in recent years also asked more pressing questions about legality. So two years ago we registered the Centre for Peace and Conflict studies in Phnom Penh as a standalone regional focused organization working for strategic peace building, and mandated to host the Action Asia network. This solved the questions for funding partners, but I do not believe it has addressed the questions members have about who drives Action Asia.

Further in Kathmandu I noticed that a number of you were enjoying your time there, but having been engaged in Action Asia for some time, in many ways you were now looking for more strategic engagement and more challenging interaction with the work and with each other in the region. It seemed to be the forum is a wonderful way to gather all of our membership together and get a full view of all the members and the inspiring work you were doing, but at the core there was indeed a small group of committed people who wanted more.

So we put these two “problems” together. The need for ownership and direction and the possibility to engage you all more.

So why all of you?

As I have mentioned we have a large Sri Lankan delegation because in reality this was our host committee! But in essence, each of you has been selected to be here because in one way or another you have all worked on an Action Asia program, and in most cases it means that you have worked on a conflict other than your own. But I think beyond that what we have experienced from each of you is fourfold:

1. Trust – you have trusted us to take decisions for you, and we have entrusted you with the work. So at some level there is trust in this group of people.
2. Involved – you are all deeply involved in your own conflict and context, and in many cases in someone else’s as well.
3. Committed – through your ongoing presence in Action Asia events, trainings, workshops you have shown your commitment and your desire for this network and what it stands for.
4. Leaders – you are leaders in your own context and in this formulation of people. Many of you have said something significant over time which we have heard and adopted to take the work forward. We have listened and absorbed what you have said.

Of course there are key people who could not be with us. From Myanmar Ja Nan, Nang Raw—one of the very early members of AA and who enabled us to work in Myanmar in the beginning--Father Chris and Irene--the first from Myanmar to participate in our training—from Timor Leste Aniceto and of course Ngarm! We know they are thinking of us nevertheless.

If you can bear with me for a few more minutes I would like to outline what I think are some of the challenges we face as a region and in Action Asia.

Over the past decade we have watched our field professionalize. There are now courses the length and breadth of the globe on peace keeping, mediation, conflict analysis, reconciliation, trauma healing, conflict and development, etc. There are summer schools, winter schools, short courses, Masters programs, PhDs, accredited professional certificates, etc. There are websites and copyrighted materials, there are manuals and an increasing number of books, tools and frameworks for us to access. There are consultants, experts and advisors. But I find something very critical and very serious lacking in all of this professionalizing. Where do we send out staff, our colleagues, our fellow peace activists for their formation? How do we nurture their heart and their commitment and help them to understand the ‘spirit’ of the work that you have committed your lives to? What I understand in this field is that to sustain the commitment for the work, these need to be a nurturing of the spirit, of the passion, perhaps even some zeal to go the distance. Formation of the peacebuilder is what is lacking. How do we help emerging, young, new peace builders to see their role as a commitment of the whole – the head, the heart, the hand? How do we help them to see beyond the frameworks, logical frameworks and methodologies to the people they are trying to serve, to the people they hope to change, to the people they hope to transform and to challenge. My fear is with all of our professionalism we have taken the people out of the equation.

A few weeks ago a small groups of us were sitting together in Colombo to hear first hand from Rajan about his experience of working in the internment camps in Northern Sri Lanka. Please if you have not already had a chance sit with Rajan and Sushi in these days, do so and ask them for these stories. They are terrible stories of a people locked and denied all human rights, with no protection completely susceptible to the whims of a megalomaniac President. As Rajan shared those stories in Colombo I could feel myself get angrier and angrier with ‘these oppressors’. And then Rajan turned to me and said,

“You know Emma it’s very important to remember that those soldiers doing these things are human beings too. They are also asking why is this happening, and are traumatized by the terrible tasks they are being ordered to do. They also feel like victims and are so horrified by what they are seeing that they cannot make sense of their own humanity”.

I was of course completely confronted by what Rajan had said, but in that moment he epitomized what I understand to be a true peace builder: someone who sees the humanity in the oppressors, the violator also as human. That is an essence we have trouble packaging in a three day course, a logframe or a framework. The discomfort of having to see those who do terrible things as like ourselves—human—and therefore someone we should engage, accompany, challenge and embrace is in fact our hardest task. But who or how do we teach it to others?

Baht will share with you later in the Forum one proposal to begin to try and address this but I leave it here as a challenge to us all. How do we bring the humanness back into our field?

Then there are some challenges and questions about our network:

- The question of membership – who are the members, how do we select them, what do we offer them, and what do they offer us? Are they individuals or organizations? I think this is the time we need to start to clarify these processes and make them explicit.
- Do we have the model right? We have forums every two years, this is our first leaders forum, the emailing, inviting individuals to work here and there, the long term accompaniment of people working in violent conflict? Is the model right for this region? Is it big enough, fast enough, strategic enough?
- How to trust the spirit of our network when we can't see it, quantify it, touch it? How do we discern amongst ourselves the way forward between us?
- And finally, taking us back to the story I described in 1998, how do we resist the human temptation to over organise? To build heavy, hierarchical structures? To fill up our schedules and programmes with many activities in the name of peacebuilding? How do we stop ourselves 'being busy' and over doing it all as we embrace a space that has nurtured us and try to address so many conflicts that are out there? How do we protect that space that we have and not suffocate with freneticness and expectations?

Finally I want to say something to you about myself and my own leadership. I have been enormously privileged and humbled to have been allowed to lead this network forward over the past ten years. Don't worry this is not a retirement speech, YET! Nevertheless my own leadership is also a challenge for this network. I am fully aware my own imprint, along with Bahts and Ngarm's is firmly on the Action Asia foundation of the first ten years. But it is in this moment, that we have reached a level of relationship, trust and mobilization that that needs to change. It's time for us to pass on the possibility to shape and guide this network. It's time to share the ownership. We do not intend to drop the baby into the bathwater, but together we continue to raise this child together.

Further one of our fundamental aims in Action Asia has been to contextualize peace building for the region. It came as our reaction to the many frames and tools we have

been given from the West. I do not know how many times I have explained this aim to new members, peace organizations and donors with my head held high, fully aware that I have a white face and yet I am saying I represent a network of Asian peacebuilders!! I am confident my heart is brown, but my face is most certainly white, and probably a piece of my brain is white as well. Without trying to take this physiological imagery further I think you know what I am saying. I cannot go on being the frontline face of this network if it is to survive, and for it to be true to itself and to be authentic!

Finally I want to challenge you. It's time. This is the moment. Many of you have been trained, resourced, exposed, exchanged, de-briefed, have travelled here and there from the length and breadth of the region and been challenged. Mostly, you know each other. You have varying degrees of trust and relationship which we all need to nurture and grow. But this meeting is the moment we share the ownership, that we take responsibility together. That we becomes our. Action Asia belongs to you. I expect you take it from me, from us, with a reverence and a deep sense of responsibility. We becomes our. Action Asia belongs to you. I expect you to take it from me and us with reverence but with a deep sense of responsibility. Every single person in this room has star leadership qualities, has the ability to lead us forward and to take us new and exciting places, to different levels, to different ways of thinking. I want to be led by you as I believe I have now done what I could do to move this network forward.

Let us make these four days count. We were the people who shaped it and took this network forward for the next ten years.

Thank you for enduring with me through this opening speech. It is indeed a unique possibility, and I want to acknowledge AFSC for giving us this opportunity to be together. AFSC is a significant peace organisation. They work in places many cannot reach: North Korea, Myanmar, Timor Leste. They bring into this room new possibilities, new members, and new places to work. I also want to thank my good friend Dekha for being with us these days. Dekha has understood and known about Action Asia from the beginning, so in that sense she is an insider, but at the same time she is an outsider who brings in perspectives from the African continent. Finally I want to welcome Halima again. She is here for several reasons, African peacebuilders have always accompanied us in our journey in Action Asia. Our African peacebuilding colleagues have been important in our formation and we are grateful Halima is here to challenge us to move forward. She is also here because she is the future director of a peace organisation in Africa. We welcome you Halima and Patricia and we hope you will feel welcome with us during the next few days. I hope by airing almost all I want to say at the beginning I can sit back for the ride and be one of you as much as possible in the coming days. Thank you very, very much.