

LET'S BUILD PEACE HERE AND NOW: MARTIN MACWAN IN CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN PITTAM

*Here, **Martin Macwan** talks to **Stephen Pittam**. Both are seasoned activists from two different countries but united in their commitment to social justice, human rights and peacebuilding work. Drawing on their own extensive experience, the two talk about what it takes, on the ground, to create transformative change, to build peace that lasts and what the role of philanthropy is in all this.*

*The conversation is introduced by **Rasha Sansur** of the Dalia Association, Palestine, and moderated by **Barry Knight** of CENTRIS in the UK.*

Barry: There are three things that Stephen and Martin have in common. They are both brave, humble and spiritual. At Stephen's retirement from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust five paramilitary groups came together and paid tribute to Stephen and what he had done in Northern Ireland.

Martin Macwan is *persona non grata* in India because of the work he has done in pursuit of the Dalit cause. As far as his spirituality goes, at the time when Foundations for Peace was being launched, Martin had vowed a month of silence. The Ford Foundation wanted to speak to him and his colleagues refused on his behalf. Yet, here was this very spiritual person sitting in the back of a New York taxi with me reading a speech on his Blackberry – so he draws on both the modern and the ancient at the same time.

These two remarkable peace-builders find their ways through organizations like [PSJP](#) and [Foundations for Peace](#), and I'd like to hand over to Rasha to tell us how the Foundations for Peace fits in this conversation.

Rasha: For those who don't know the FFP, it's a network of grassroots community philanthropy organisations grounded in social justice and peace building. What we believe as a network is that local activist funders can play a vital role in delivering and sustaining peace building. That means we really focus on local knowledge and direct access to affected communities, because the resources are within the communities. We create relationships that work toward building equity, diversity and interdependence, which is how we believe we can actually achieve true peace and true justice.

When I joined the [Dalia Association](#) in 2016, I was curious why it was a member of FFP because I was really sceptical about the term 'peace'; as a Palestinian I have a negative reaction whenever I hear the word because it has been used by Israel to mask the continued colonialist project of the Israeli Occupation, which includes building settlements,

grabbing land, spreading terror and violence, all under the label of peace talks. After many meetings and peer exchanges with fellow members, I came to understand that the terms 'peace' and 'peace building' are misused, and that they are more likely to mean security than peace. We try to change that by directing community philanthropy towards achieving social justice at the local level, which we believe realises stable societies and true peace. It is what we call a process of conflict transformation and it differs from country to country depending on the stages of conflict. Today's conversation is crucial, because we can see the rise of nationalism, particularly in the most recent incident at the US Capitol. These events remind us that conflict is not just 'over there', in areas like the Middle East, it's happening around us, we are living it, and we must be able to tackle it. We must open our eyes.

So through the first of what we hope will be a series of dialogues today, we want to bring you stories of people who have been closest to the ground. We want to move beyond reporting guidelines. We are here to create the compassion, the empathy and solidarity that sometimes is more important than a success story.

Stephen: Thank you, Rasha. I think one of the things to start off with is to say that philanthropy is such a varied sector, and I'm very conscious that I spent my working life in an endowed foundation, so we didn't have to think about how to raise the money, but we did have to think very carefully about how to spend it. That of course is very different from the situation I know that many of the people who are involved in this conversation will be in.

The values of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, where I worked, are rooted in peace and in equality but much of the work I did was in Northern Ireland and while I had lived in Northern Ireland and knew it to some extent, I was from the outside. I think, Martin, it would be true to say you're the complete opposite to that, because you're completely rooted in the place where you are and the issues that you're working on.

Martin: That's right. I was born in a Dalit family, and after my undergraduate degree, I joined my professors who had resigned from the college and started a development centre called the Roles and Behavioural Science Centre. So from the age of 17, while I was still studying, I used to accompany them to the villages and get involved in the whole organizing process. When I was 20, I joined them full-time. It was a very deep process and there were very very shocking realities, something that we had never studied in school books. The men from the dominant caste would enter Dalit homes whenever they wanted and do anything with the women they wanted, and there was no protest. The law said that if you would be paid seven rupees for eight hours work, but people were paid only one rupee. They were forced labour.

There are any number of those stories, but there was a major tragedy which changed my life, and made me much more intense. On 25th of January 1986, four of my colleagues were shot dead by the landlords. That was also the first case which went to court from that area; previously, people had been murdered and raped but nobody would file a complaint. Not only did the case go to court, we also got a conviction. Eleven people got life imprisonment, but the incident also changed my convictions and made me realize that when you deal with caste, a lot of violence is involved, because it's a very systemic issue and because it's a systemic issue, you also need a very broad based organization of people who can fight it. So I set up Navsarjan First in 1989 and soon it spread into more than 3,000 villages. I've set up several organizations since then and for almost 41 years I've been completely involved in this, in the villages. Now, I travel less, I train more of the young people who can do this work. But, that in short, is my life story.

Stephen: I want to come on later to talk about philanthropy and activism, and where the two interrelate. But I think all of us who are interested in Foundations for Peace and Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace are interested in thinking about the structural inequalities, the underlying causes of conflicts that we face. That's often difficult to work out, but in many ways, in terms of the conflict that you're facing, Martin, it sounds as if it's relatively obvious. But how do you go about addressing that in the situation you found yourself in? How do you go about it, in terms of thinking about justice and human rights?

Martin: This is a very complex problem. Our conviction is that when you work with the poor and the most marginalized, you cannot shut any door or window. So you have to work at the same time with multiple approaches.

Let me start at number one; the main part of my life and work has been in organizing people, but that word doesn't really explain the situation. The people who suffer the injustice of caste discrimination believe that they are facing this treatment because of the sins they committed in a previous life, so they internalise the caste system and blame themselves for the injustice rather than somebody else and therefore a very prolonged educational process is involved to get people to understand that it is not they who are responsible for the position they're in. Then there are very clear economic realities; in India, most people who are poor are Dalits. Most people who are landless are Dalits, most children who are malnourished are Dalits, most people who face the violence, most of the women who are raped and sexually assaulted, are also Dalits. We understood from experience, that because people are dependent on the dominant caste for their survival, they have no option but to become subservient. So you have to take an economic approach, right?

For example we took on a massive land campaign – you know, under the land reforms in India, people were given title to land but they didn't have possession, and when they tried to take possession, people with

guns prevented them. That was when I lost my four colleagues in the village. Most of the Dalits are landless labourers, and the only protection that they have is what we call the minimum wages legislation, which is hardly implemented. So we took on those issues, to make sure that people's livelihood is secure so that they can then confront the ideological questions.

But there are other things, too. One is we saw that young people bear most of the trauma and frustration right now, because they don't have a formal education, they don't have few employment prospects and because of these things, most of them find it very difficult to get married, and so the suicide rate among Dalits has almost doubled in the last decade. To counter this, we set up a vocational training centre called Dalit Shakti Kendra. The students come, they go through vocational training of some kind for two months, and at the same time, they are also being provided with an ideological education. When they go, they're not only employed but they also become community leaders, and we have trained more than 10,700 people in the last 20 years.

Lastly, we see very important work to be done with the children; because as they grow up, they are socialized into believing that they're born into an impure family. When they go to the school, they face discrimination, for example they sit separately, or are served food separately, and therefore the cycle is repeated through a new generation.

So organizing comprises all of this, but we also realized that we have to take one more step. At the beginning of the conversation, you raised the question of philanthropy. Fifteen years ago we set up an organization called Dalit Foundation, because we realized that there's not a single funding organization in India which will support the grassroots groups who want to organize communities. Our idea is not to give money, because we don't have much money. It's more about holding hands. The Dalit Foundation is a philanthropic foundation, which not only trains activists, but also supports the fellowship programme, where people in their local area are funded and helped to develop the kinds of skills which they then carry forward.

Stephen: Thank you. One of the things that I pull out of that is that philanthropy is about tangible outputs like jobs or healthcare or education, but, more importantly, it's also about changing the social and political dynamics, and that's the real core I think of the kind of philanthropy that we're interested in because neither the state nor the market are likely to want to do that. I've been really inspired reading of some of your work which has actually changed the mindset of people, and the dynamic of the political relationships.

You've talked about the Dalit Foundation, but I've also read that you think that if the position of the Dalits in Indian society is going to be addressed then the whole of that society needs to change. I was inspired by Amanda Gorman's poem at the inauguration of President Biden:

*We will rebuild, reconcile and recover
and every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful,
will emerge battered and beautiful
When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid.
The new dawn blooms as we free it,
for there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
if only we're brave enough to be it.*

I thought that was a really inspiring message because it's about reconciliation. Could you talk to us a bit about that in your work, because, as Rasha suggested in her introduction, we need to go beyond our boundaries and to think about other people in trying to create peace.

Martin: In my dreams, thoughts and actions, I always think of equality. I think, the work is all about upholding the value of equality. I remember the time when I lived with the community for three days and three nights every week in their homes, for many many years. What happens with the whole question of caste is that unfortunately people perceive it as the problem of the Dalits. Actually, it's the problem of the whole of India. because if some of the citizens of your country are not treated as citizens, then the whole country cannot grow, no matter how much development, so called, you bring about, and how many schemes that you introduce, that simply will not happen.

We also saw that even within the Dalit community, we had to change a lot of things in ourselves, because not only does the caste system divide society into pure and impure, and it further divides the Dalits into sub-castes. In India there are more than 1,250 sub-castes within the Dalits – and each one thinks 'I'm higher or lower than somebody else'. So while it's really the caste system that we want to fight, at the same time, it's that very caste system that they are trying to protect. Also, very painful to say, within the community, we do not respect women as equals, so if we think that what we need is equality, that equality has to be a non-negotiable value. We cannot make exceptions. This realization actually helped me to discover who a Dalit is; I define Dalits as all those people who believe in equality, all those people who practise equality, and all those people who protest inequality. Without embracing the value of equality and without bringing other-than-Dalits who believe in equality with us, we cannot break the caste system and bring about change.

This definition is not very popular. People from the dominant caste accuse me of inciting people against them, while some of the Dalits accuse me of trying to destroy the community by talking about equality and breaking the internal structure. For example, I remember one case where the community told me not to enter their village. A Dalit man in the village had burned his wife to death, and because we took up her case, they accused us of being anti-Dalit. They expected us to fight only the acts of injustice of dominant castes. Well, we did not compromise our position. If I seek justice and equal treatment, I have to respect the rights of others, too, or I will not be able to strengthen the whole movement. So this is where I think that minds have to change across the whole of society.

Stephen: Most of the people who are reading this will be from different styles of philanthropy and it would be good to emphasize the importance of various things that you've said. One is obviously the fact that it's local people that really have the answers in many ways; and also that local situations or local organizations have assets, not only money, and they can contribute in different ways. But there's also the question of outside philanthropy as well, and one of the things you've mentioned is duration. The kind of conflicts that we're talking about are deeply rooted. In Northern Ireland, the foundation I worked for has been engaged for more than 50 years, yet so many funders just think short-term it seems to me. They engage at a time of crisis, but soon move on to the next issue. I wondered what your experience has been of dealing with philanthropy from outside. Have external funders stuck with you in the work or have they moved on to something new? How do you develop the strength at the local level that can sustain long-term peacebuilding work?

Martin: Yes, some philanthropic organizations have worked with us for 25 years and more, because they understood the value of the long term education process. But the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) struck a blow at us. The law regulates the receipt of foreign funds by Indian organizations and the government withdrew our registration, with the charge that we are an anti-national activity organization. That makes it difficult for us to receive foreign funding and faced with dilemma of standing by their convictions or obeying the government Diktat, many external philanthropic organizations decided to withdraw their support. I believe that, as philanthropic organizations, we have to take a moral position when political forces threaten the poor and disadvantaged.

Also, the corporate sector is becoming prominent in Indian philanthropy, and most of them will not take up controversial issues, like social justice. They don't understand that if you do not invest in true social security and human rights, you will end up investing much more in security issues because of growing unrest. That's the reality.

The second thing that is making life very difficult is that philanthropic organizations have been increasingly focusing a lot on the managerial

aspects of funding - you develop log frames, you want to measure every success, and you want to make sure that everything is viable. But as you say, your foundation has been involved in Northern Ireland for 50 years and you wonder whether the cause of people who have been marginalized systematically over 3,000 years will ever become viable from a market perspective. Obviously, in a way they are viable. Forty years back when I went to the village and I saw the things I talked about earlier, nobody would dare to do that today, because we have been able to organize communities. So that's a form of viability, but viability tends to be seen by philanthropic organizations in terms of money. That is one of the biggest challenges we face.

What we see right now is that the space is shrinking; when I look back at history, at the kind of importance that freedom fighters gave to social reforms along with political independence, you can see that, since independence, that debate has gone. We believe we have a free country now and we have all the laws in place, even if they need some repair here and there. But the space to talk about human rights, injustice is not there. That has happened even to very committed voluntary organizations. And there's one more thing. I may have trained, through my organization, over a 1,000 people, but after that, it takes two or three years of continuous hand-holding, or even more, before that person really makes an impact. Now we don't have the patience, and patience is another non-negotiable value in this work.

Barry: Thank you Stephen and Martin. Can we turn to some questions from the audience to Martin. First, from Jon Edwards.

Jon: You suggest quite rightly in my view, Martin, that to change the circumstances through which people are discriminated against, through which there is an absence of peace, you need to make change across society. A lot of philanthropy will either focus on that societal level, or it will focus on local action and I wonder to what extent philanthropy, and particularly philanthropy from the outside which is where I'm sitting, can help to do both and to link those two things?

Martin: Well, that's not very easy to answer. From my little experience, there are greater possibilities in investing in community leaders, than in organizations. Let me explain; when we support an organization, it happens invariably that 30-40 per cent of the resources go into management and administration of the organization, and the energy also. When you train community leaders and activists, without the limitations of the organizations, their effectiveness goes up. So that has been our experience in India, number one.

Number two, what I see as a very important role for philanthropy is research. That's a field which is completely ignored. If I'm invited to speak at universities and I talk to the professors, they say that research is lacking so no new information is coming out and people who work in this sector, especially at the grassroots, have no other way of being exposed to current developments.

Lastly, governments across the globe are trying to say that these kinds of problems are local issues, rather than global issues. But if you look at history, whether it is the Irish movement, or the movement against apartheid or the civil rights movement, it's only through global cooperation that we have been able to bring some change. And I see that as role for philanthropy, to find creative solutions and creative ways so that global cooperation becomes strong. I think that's what I would suggest.

Barry: Thank you very much Martin. The next question is from Avila Kilmurray.

Avila: You've described the many aspects of your work, from education to working on mobilization, and I know you also have a long record of taking on the government in different ways. Looking back, what would you have done differently, and why?

Martin: I realize that I should have given more time to work with the young people, to train more community workers. Ultimately, it is the human resources which are the key factor in bringing change about, it is not the money, so we need to create a huge cadre of people who will take up these issues. I still do it, but in between, I explored a lot of other avenues because of the situations pushing me, but I think it's one thing I should have done much more of.

The second thing, which is very dear to me, is the work with children. We have to make sure somehow that the new generation is not exposed to this kind of discrimination. Unfortunately, we can't do much work because of the lack of funding, but this is one thing that we should all get together and do, whether through textbooks, moral storybooks, videos or films, but we need to work on creating educational material for the children. And given the time, I would definitely give a lot of time to that.

Barry: Thank you Martin. Next Galina from Serbia and then Christopher Harris.

Galina: From your experience, what's the best tactic for keeping community leaders and communities engaged over a long period? Because that's something that we are seeing as quite challenging in our part of the world. When you support a non-formal group, community or initiative they are here while it's a project, but not all of them stay for long-term struggles.

Martin: I would say that we need to bring a lot of creativity to our programmes. I want to give a very short example of the next move that we are planning now in India. The new parliament house is being built at some multi-billion dollar cost and we have a tradition in India of putting a coin in the foundation before the building work starts. The practice comes from a story about the digging of a pond. A Dalit man was beheaded as a sacrifice, because only with his blood touching the soil would water come into the pond. The man was willing to sacrifice

himself on the condition that untouchability was removed from society. Drawing on this tradition, we are going to get donations of brass utensils from I don't know how many thousands of houses, and we're minting a coin of about 1,111 kilos – a huge coin. We are planning to give it to the government to put into the foundation of the new parliament house to keep alive the dream that we had in 1947 to make India untouchability-free and to try to accomplish that dream in 2047, when India becomes 100 years old. This programme will mobilize I don't know how many thousands of people across villages. It's one community-driven, community-funded programme, so we have to think constantly of bringing creativity into organizing. That's what I would say keeps people engaged.

Barry: Thank you, Martin. I'm going to turn next to Christopher Harris for the last question before the wrap-up.

Christopher: My question has to do with the growth that we see around the world of, call it a racist, sexist nationalism generically, but it's manifesting in virtually every place that's being represented in this webinar. There's also been an interesting growth of different kinds of resistance to it, in different places. I'm curious about both of your experiences and whether you see those growths of resistance as an opportunity that we didn't have before. Are you considering altering your work in any way, because of the growth of both that racist, sexist nationalism and of the resistance to it?

Martin: I see one area now of work which we have to plunge into, which I call political education. It is not about fighting elections, but political education, because now it is the state which is undermining people's rights so, to me, this is becoming very important.

Barry: Thank you very much. We're coming towards the end of our time. For me this discussion has been not only brilliant but it illustrates how much really important work there is in local areas, which is completely invisible to the hierarchies of philanthropy and development aid. Peace building is seen as part of something that's an industrial complex in Geneva, when actually people like Martin and Stephen and many others, too, some of them on this call, are on the front line, where it really matters. Last year we published a study that shows how invisible peace-building is to philanthropy, and I hope through these conversations and the work of Foundations for Peace that we can change that. To conclude this conversation, I'm going to turn to Stephen to reflect on where he stands after a lifetime of struggling these kinds of issues.

Stephen: I'd just like to pick up on Chris's question, and relate it also to one about how the local fits with other levels of funding. My fundamental analysis would be that we need to create social change at many different levels, but if you don't create it at the local level then it's not likely to be sustainable. So in terms of the issue that Chris was raising about the racist, sexist and nationalist way in which our world

seems to be going, I think the local is crucial. But it also needs to be framed within the wider context, and I wanted to just give an example. In the UK, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust was very keen on supporting human rights NGOs wanting to get the Human Rights Act passed. That was a national campaign, it was about trying to persuade political parties to get it adopted and it was successful, but the problem was that there was no work done at the local level and, lo and behold, 15-20 years later, the terrible government that we have now is talking about weakening or even repealing the Act. The Act is vulnerable because the sense of local ownership is not there. In terms of peace-building, focussing on the local is really important, and from there linking it to the broader agenda. The human rights agenda, the agenda around democracy, the equality agenda, all of these things are so important. We need to remember always that we are all human, and we need to find the common things that actually unite us, as well as trying to work on those things that divide us.

Barry: Thank you very much, Stephen. This has been a fascinating conversation and we want to continue to have more of them, because Foundations for Peace has been working for 15 years or more, trying to get peace out of the closet, and we really need to make this work visible. Martin, the final word is with you.

Martin: I wish I could have a final word, but there's a long long way to go before that, but I'm not pessimistic at all, because I've seen things changing. We need people who can have faith in the entire system, who believe that this is possible. My request to the philanthropic world would be to not be so preoccupied with the question of viability. With the increasing challenges in every country, I see the need of increased collaboration. That is the only logical conclusion that we can draw. And I see what local activists can do, the amount of grief they take, and their work is something which needs to be supported. Finally, as I've mentioned in some of our meetings at Foundations for Peace, we must take beautiful stories of change, and make a book for the children across the world. Because this a new generation, we have to invest in education, we cannot wait for the problem to come, and then find a solution. We have to pre-empt it.

I'm going to read the poem by Rabindranath Tagore, who was the only Nobel laureate in literature from India. When Navsarjan Trust published its first book, this poem was printed at the back:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow
domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary
desert sand of dead habit;*

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

Barry: Thank you, that's a wonderful note to end on. Thank you to all for participating in what has been such a rich conversation. We will continue. These are chronic issues and we are trying to create a learning community around them. I think the one thing that both Martin and Stephen have said in their different ways is that we really need to work with the next generation, to make sure that these kinds of values persist, because they are under attack.

To become part of the FFP learning community or to find out more about its work, please contact Chandrika Sahai at chandrika@psjp.org or Rasha Sansur at infoffpn@gmail.com