



Jindra doing fieldwork in Sierra Leone, 2009

photo by Elizabeth Manga

All of Us as One

Interbeing in International Development

By Jindra Cekan

I have worked as an employee in international development for thirty years, interacting with grassroots organizations, big international charities, and bigger donors. My work led me to Niger, Africa for Catholic Relief Services to ask people in the villages affected by agriculture and health projects if they could be sustained or not. It led me to Kosovo for the American Red Cross and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to help design and monitor food security activities. It led me to interview government ministers in ten countries for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on what is needed for water and sanitation projects to be successful.

My grant writing in Nigeria in the 1980s showed me that “development” is challenging to do, for donors fund what they believe people need, while local people may want something entirely different, and the task to negotiate the overlap is rarely easy. My studies gave me tools to understand the politics and economics of how countries work but did not prepare me to do more than prioritize, judge, and differentiate, rather than deepening my understanding, compassion, and love for those we were trying to help.

As a follower of Thich Nhat Hanh for twenty-three years, and as an Order of Interbeing member for seven years, I increasingly use his tools in my work by aspiring to be more compassionate and by measuring success differently. One of the key tools I use is walking meditation. For example, when I worked in Kosovo, there were many land mines along the Kosovo-Macedonia border, and people waited in long lines for up to four hours to cross at the border crossing. I had to go back and forth about a dozen times a year, and I used to do walking meditation there. I felt my frustra-

tion and fear and I walked with it, slowly unearthing my tiredness and sadness from all I had tried to do under the Red Cross flag for both sides. I felt my guilt at not being able to help everyone and at getting to return to a safe country and home. I walked with my privilege and the entitlements my US and Czech passports gave me. I walked until I could clear these thoughts to be more present with the moment—gravel crunching, trucks idling beside me, the looks of people wondering what I was doing—until I could find more ease and space within.

Once I could walk enough to move beyond my own feelings, perceptions, and discomforts, I could sometimes move on to feel the anger of the protagonists who placed the land mines on either side of the road with the intention of killing and maiming others. I could feel, under their anger, their own great fear for their lives and the lives of their families and friends. This was true for those on both sides of the war. When I was able to focus on their suffering, I practiced *tonglen* in my walking meditation, breathing in the hatred that led to the land mines being placed, breathing out peace to all who placed them; then breathing in the fear that the mines fostered in all of us, breathing out calm to all around.

The Thirteenth Mindfulness Training on generosity is another tool I use to foster interbeing: “Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, we are committed to cultivating generosity in our way of thinking, speaking, and acting.” When I see others as me, that we in the privileged north can cause suffering, and that we all need generosity, I can work lovingly for a world where we all have more access to the world’s resources. I nourish this awareness when I go to my sink to wash dishes, knowing that water is available twenty-four hours