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Development, Civil Society and the Conflict in Nepal

For more than two decades now, scholars such as Etienne Balibar and Antonio Negri have argued the ‘total subsumption of capital’; there remains no ‘outside’ - all aspects of social life are governed by commodities and wage labor. This process, given impetus by the processes commonly referred to as economic globalization or market liberalization, also came to be synonymous with ‘development’. Imperfect markets, the widely implemented ‘Washington Consensus’ package of economic policies further implied, were far better social mechanisms than imperfect states.

The study and practice of ‘development’ worldwide, however, is in flux. Critiques of the mainstream ‘development’ project, widely implemented in countries categorized as ‘underdeveloped’ after World War 2, have argued that ‘development’, in aggregate terms, has done nothing virtually nothing to reduce poverty levels around the globe, and in fact, has only accentuated poverty by increasing inequality. This critique has now also been incorporated into the mainstream, which can be gauged by the fact that the UNDP’s 2006 edition of the *World Development Report* is entitled ‘Equity and Development’

Today, with the resulting erosion of many state powers and functions in ‘developing’ countries, such as Nepal, virtually all ‘social’ concerns are mediated through a rapidly expanding ‘civil society’ consisting of NGO’s, INGO’s and humanitarian organizations. The study of ‘development’, however, is still coming to terms with the proliferation of these types of organizations and associated concepts such as ‘self-empowerment’ and

‘participation’ that are now being advocated, as a result of the ‘shift’ in the dominant discourse of development.

The object of this paper will be to trace the history of NGO’s in Nepal, and to analyze their methodologies with respect to issues of social change, justice and equity- as well as to interrogate concepts such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’. For NGO’s to be actually considered a part of ‘civil society’, I will argue, depends on a somewhat radical upheaval of their institutionalized mechanisms, in particular, their funding concerns and the resultant apolitical nature of their work. This will be contrasted with the recent political upheaval in the country, which is starting to be described as a ‘civil society led movement’.

The Rise of the ‘development NGO’:

Broadly defined, an ‘NGO’ is an organization that is not a part of the government, and is not founded by the ‘state’. The World Bank defines NGO’s as a ‘wide variety of groups and institutions that are entirely or largely independent of governments, and characterized primarily by humanitarian or cooperative, rather than commercial objectives.’¹ The definition of the specifically ‘development’ NGO, however, is understandably more complex. A UNCTAD meeting, interestingly held in Kathmandu in 1989, came up with this for a definition of the ‘development’ NGO:

“..there cannot and should not be too rigid a definition of development NGO’s...they are community organizations, concerned for global development and pay particular attention to the plight of the poor..”²

With the decline of the rigid 'import-substitution-industrialization' economic development models in the late 1970's, and a worldwide impetus towards liberalizing economies and 'rolling back the state', NGO's have risen to the forefront in providing public goods. The economic policies associated with the 'Washington Consensus' stressed fiscal discipline, and hence, many state services were diminished in the countries adhering to these policies. The presence of NGO's in a society, therefore, has mushroomed wherever such 'liberalization' has taken place- as they provide public goods, safety nets and are concerned with environmental conservation, whereas such provisions and 'concerns' are usually not articulated by the state in question.

Today, the NGO is seen as a key actor in the development discourse. A functionalist explanation would see this as also a result of the market process. For example, the 'comparative advantage' of NGO's as compared to the state is often mentioned in development literature. NGO's have lower costs, are more transparent and flexible, and hence, more efficient when it comes to carrying out development projects. This is one of the reasons that funding to NGO's from donors has so rapidly expanded, and that now, in many instances, governments are bypassed and NGO's are expected to carry out developmental activities.

There also exists, almost across the board in 'donor' countries', disenchantment with public sector performance in the 'developing' world. Post-colonial bureaucracies, in particular, are considered too inefficient and absorbed in 'red tape' to make correct use of development aid. Corruption and elitism are also concerns. Direct development aid to states was called into question as early as the 1960's, with economists like Milton Friedman arguing that aid to governments only further entrenches their power, supports

incorrect policies and increases the likelihood of corruption. By the early 80's, in fact, development aid in donor countries was talked about as the 'taxing of the poor of rich countries to give to the rich of poor countries'. In *Non-governments: NGO's and the Political Development of the Third World*, Julie Fisher further argues that it is indeed this 'governmental failure' in the Third World that has necessitated the need for NGO's, and so they have become an integral part of what is seen as 'political development' in these countries. The trends towards NGO-led development became further entrenched by the beginning of the 1990's, as Norway and the United States, two major international donors, announced that they would be channeling at least 40% of their development assistance through NGO's³. Since then, these percentages have also been on the rise.

Further, by the mid 1990's, increasing attention was also being paid to the 'cultural sensitivity' of small NGO's as compared to large international agencies and even centralized local governments. This came out of a theoretical shift in the practice of 'development', with institutions such as the World Bank and the UNDP admitting that the 'top-down', hegemonic nature of the way 'development' was being practiced did not always incorporate the needs of all stakeholders. This resulted in an extremely influential UNESCO publication, *The Cultural Dimensions of Development*, which had this to say about NGO's:

"The work of NGO's, very different as it is from the large bilateral and multilateral co-operation agencies, is of considerable value primarily in terms of cultural sensitivity and the quality of results achieved".⁴

'Development' NGO's today, therefore, are seen to be performing vitally important functions worldwide. On the 'local' side, they provide badly needed goods and services on a not-for-profit basis, and more importantly, on the donor side, they promise greater

efficiency, transparency and also address 'cultural' concerns that donors themselves are unable to.

NGO's in Nepal:

Many Nepalese historians have referred to the country's rich history of civic associations and social support mechanisms. Dikawar Chand points to ideas of 'social service' that can be found in practices such as *Dhikur* and *Guthis* as well in the practices of building temples and monasteries. Roughly translated, the concept of *Dhikur* involves non-formal credit cooperatives, while *Guthi* is seen as a 'trust'.

Chand sees the great earthquake of 1934 as a pivotal moment in the institutionalization of modern social service organizations in Nepal. He argues:

“This was probably, for the first time in the history of Nepal, an event which significantly revealed the inherent strength of the community and the relevance and impact of social services. It was said that volunteers from almost each and every household rendered their assistance voluntarily, to those directly affected by the earthquake”⁵

The expansion of volunteer activity and the cash inflow received from charitable donations, he further argues, was responsible for the setting up of many organizations and paved the way for institutionalization. The 'Registration of Societies' Act of 1959 began this process, which was formalized by the formation of a 'National Coordination Body' for NGO's in 1977.

The early 1950's was a time of immense political and economic change in the country, as the country 'opened it's borders', so to speak, for the entry of transnational flows of people, media and capital. 1951 was the year USAID arrived here, and by virtue of its

arrival, also ushered in the era of 'development'. The arrival was a result of the incumbent regime accepting the 'Delhi Compromise', and thereby signing on to the United States' 'four-point' development agenda. All of a sudden, it seems, Nepal's rich cultural history and legacy of self-sufficiency were disavowed, and it became an 'impoverished' nation. Since then, it has seen a remarkable amount of foreign 'aid' enter its borders. As of 1991, Nepal was receiving external assistance in the form of project aid, commodity aid, technical assistance, and program aid. Project aid funded irrigation programs, hydroelectric plants, and roads, and many of these projects were being undertaken by NGO's or public-private partnerships. Between 1984 and 1987, foreign aid as a percentage of GNP increased from under 8 percent to almost 13 percent. By the year 2000, the amount of development assistance Nepal had received stood at \$5.2 billion; the highest per capita ratio of any South Asian state⁶.

Specifically 'development' NGO's started to make their presence felt in the 1980's. Saubhagya Shah outlines this expansion:

"What started as an NGO trickle in the 1980's turned into a tide in the 1990's and later. The growth in the number of NGO's in Nepal has been phenomenal- over 11,000 NGO's had been registered by the year 2000 compared to a few hundred that existed in 1990. The NGO's have become so ubiquitous of late that their pervasiveness has become the other distinguishing feature of a Third World condition where per capita NGO distribution is inversely related to per capita income."⁷

Concurrently, NGO's in Nepal have been concerned with a wide range of issues. From the 'traditional' sectors of education and health, they have expanded to incorporate issues relating from gender trafficking to minority rights and AIDS. NGO's have also taken on the concerns of marginalized ethnic groups, with many organizations devoted specifically

to the furthering of particular disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, micro-credit and 'community-based' initiatives are also on the rise. Micro-credit, in particular, has been given much tutelage by the development industry, following the relative success of initiatives in neighboring Bangladesh. Since the early 1990's, Nepal has been in the process of restructuring its banking industry, ostensibly to increase foreign investment into the country, but also to support rural credit delivery by a whole host of new financial institutions. Over 70 INGO's and 4000 NGO's have launched at least 9,000 saving and credit 'solidarity' groups across the country, replicating the Grameen model⁸. Even in cases where credit delivery is not the primary aim of the NGO, the formation of such groups invariably becomes a part of the work they do, as a way of 'supporting and building community'.

Saubhgyan Shah estimates that the NGO industry currently employs up to forty thousand people- and with the amount of foreign cash inflow it draws, the industry has become vital to Nepal's economy. However, has NGO-led development been any more successful than previous efforts? By its own standards, 'development' can be considered to have been a failure in the Nepalese context. Many social indicators continue to be dismal, and the country has been ravaged by a Maoist insurgency for the past decade; which proposes an altogether ambiguous, but nevertheless alternative, vision of 'development'. Nepalese society is increasingly stratified, with wide disparities between the 'life-chances' of urbanites and rural people, as well as persuasive caste-and-ethnicity based inequalities. The rest of this paper will seek answers to this question, and interrogate the changing context in which these organizations will now have to operate. I will first outline theoretical explanations for NGO-led development's shortcomings, and

than, by taking a slightly more ethnographic approach, I will attempt to situate these theories in the interactions between state and civil society currently ongoing in Nepal.

NGO's and the 'development' *dispositif*:

For theorists of what is now being described as the 'post-development' school, 'development' has 'failed' in its desire to institute positive social change because the concept itself is an erroneous one. Using the work of Michel Foucault as his frame of reference, Arturo Escobar outlines the emergence of 'development' as a discourse based on essentially normative and culturally specific assumptions about the nature of human society. The 'discourse' gained legitimacy because of the power relations it was embedded in, namely the economic and military supremacy of Western countries. With the widespread acceptance of this discourse, 'development' became a discipline- something that could be practiced and implemented using pseudo-scientific methods.

Escobar goes on:

“Development fostered a way of conceiving of social life as a technical problem, as a matter of rational decision and management to be entrusted to that group of people- the development professionals-whose specialized knowledge allegedly qualified them for the task. Instead of seeing change as a process rooted in the interpretation of each society's history and cultural tradition- these professionals sought to devise mechanisms and procedures that make societies fit into a pre-existing model.”⁹

NGO's can therefore also be seen as part of a wider development *dispositif*, or 'apparatus'. Foucault uses the term to describe a diverse set of material and discursive devices that facilitate the operation of 'power'. A *dispositif* may consist of 'discourses,

institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, philosophies, scientific statements or laws'.¹⁰ The various elements of 'development' today; neo-liberal discourse, economic liberalization, the 'developmentalist' state as well as NGO's and civil society- although heterogeneous- therefore, can also be seen as reinforcing the same 'power' by acting in relation to the same goal- 'development'.

Escobar and associated theorists seem to equate 'development' with Westernization, and this forms the basis of their critique. By marginalizing 'indigenous' and pre-capitalist ways of life, the 'development' process is not only insulting, but culturally totalitarian in its scope. 'Development' becomes the modern form of colonialism, with Third World subjects being actively 'acted upon' and rendered incapable of making their own decisions. This does not, however, adequately address the 'power' of the development discourse, as development has always operated through the aspirations of 'Third World' subjects and the active involvement of nation-states. That 'development' is indicative of the inherently elitist nature of these nation states, as Escobar seems to suggest, also does not explain the ubiquitous nature of the discourse, and how the idea has permeated virtually all social relations in countries like Nepal. Does the 'colonization metaphor', as Morgan Brigg terms 'post-development's methodology, explain why an elderly woman in the remote village of Thame, 12,000 feet high, actively seeks 'development' through an NGO-led 'intervention'?

Brigg encourages us to engage more closely with Foucault to get a better understanding of how the development *dispositif* operates. The very nature of the concept of the *dispositif* can allow us to look at 'development' as anything but monolithic and uniform. The recent 'shift' in development thinking, heralded by the expansion of NGO's and a

resultant commitment to concepts such as ‘empowerment’, ‘participation’ and, even, ‘equity’ in the development process may be evidence of a renegotiation on the part of some of the actors in the *dispositif*, however, they should not be understood as a renegotiation of the operation of power within the apparatus.

Central to such an argument is the notion of ‘biopower’, a concept introduced by Foucault and built upon by other French philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. More recently, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have put forward ‘biopower’ as the most important aspect of the working of the contemporary global capitalist economy. As a result, ‘biopower’ is also a useful way of understanding why ‘development’, as a narrowly defined social phenomenon has become such a persuasive goal for societies.

For these theorists, ‘biopower’ began to emerge in Western societies in the late 18th century, as the emergence of capitalism required ‘bodies’ that were disciplined and productive. It was this ‘disciplinary’ nature of society that also created mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion (prisons and mental hospitals), and fixed individuals into institutions and the rhythm of productive and consumptive practices. It also necessitated the need for violence and colonialism, as the ‘colonies’ represented previously unexploited avenues for productive practices and exotic ‘Others’ that needed disciplining or ‘modernization’. ‘Disciplinary society’, however, soon gave way to the ‘society of control’, and this was best exemplified in the passage from colonialism to post-colonial sovereign states who embraced these very rhythms of their own accord. Further, the transition to post-colonialism also highlights the essential feature of the ‘biopower’ argument; that power is only affective when it becomes an integral function that every

individual embraces in the very processes of 'living'. The 'development' era, therefore, can be better understood in this way: a passage from forced 'discipline' to biological 'control', from the external control of bodies to the internal controlling of consciousness.

Concepts such as the *dispositif* and *biopower* may seem too abstracted from the reality of 'development' NGO practice, which in theory, works 'on the ground' to facilitate the fulfillment of basic material needs. However, it can be argued that as analytical tools for understanding the practices of NGO's and urging them to be more reflexive, by questioning their own locations in global power dynamics and by interrogating the language and discourses they use; they represent a departure point from previous 'development' thinking. I will now turn to two of the most popular concepts in contemporary NGO practice in Nepal, namely 'empowerment' and 'participation'.

Empowerment and Participation: Local Knowledge and Power

The UNDP's Nepal Human Development Report for 2004, *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction*, begins with the question; "Why do the poor remain disempowered"?

Although the report does not necessarily answer this question, it does tell us that poverty can only be successfully fought if the government brings the 'empowerment agenda' to the center of its poverty reduction strategy. 'Empowerment' is defined not only as 'economic freedom', but it also encompasses 'political freedom' and the ability to 'have a say in the decision-making processes that shape one's life'. 'Participation', therefore, is the key to 'empowerment'- and social mobilization is the process that brings these two things to the fold. As a result of the report's findings of recommendations, there are

currently 14 Nepalese NGO's with the word 'empowerment' or 'participation' in their titles.

Underneath this rhetoric, however, there still lies the dominance of multinational donors and aid agencies. At two of the 'empowerment' NGO's I visited over the course of this study, the Society for Empowerment (STEP) Nepal, and the Participatory Empowerment Society (PESO) Nepal, it was clear that the enduring decision-making power was held by the agencies and the donors. Moreover, both organizations reiterated the 'non-political' nature of their work and did not want to be associated with 'party politics' that is 'messy and corrupt' and 'discouraged by the World Lutheran Foundation' (the major donor to STEP).

In *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, Cooke and Kothari argue that 'participatory development' was supposed to serve as an 'antidote' to the power that experts and 'outsiders' have traditionally held in development projects. However, they point out that at the level of multinational agencies and donors, participation has proved quite compatible with central planning. Many international agencies and donors justify participatory processes by noting the efficiency and productivity with which participatory methods advance the goals held by development organizations. In corporate parlance, participation saves on 'transaction costs', and also does wonders for 'corporate image'. So, despite the participatory rhetoric, the status quo of top-down planning is maintained.

Furthermore, chapters in the book also detail how the 'participatory' model has turned 'local knowledge' into a commodity that can be extracted, rather than the diverse mélange of social relationships and local power structures that any 'knowledge' actually is. Local knowledge is in fact, an expression of local power. Case studies cited in the

book also point to the shortcomings of public forums: public discussions, particularly in tight-knit communities, usually inhibit candor, openness and critique.

In fact, ‘participatory’ rhetoric is often used to gloss over decisions that have already been taken. For example, at a visit to the Rural Access Program, an NGO based in Kathmandu that hires local laborers to build roads in remote rural regions, I learnt that the decisions to select districts for the ‘intervention’ were made only after the organizations main donor, the U.K’s DFID, had selected ‘high-priority’ ones. After a selection was made, the existence of laborers willing to work in the region was taken as evidence of local ‘approval’.

I have attempted to argue in this section that ‘participatory’ rhetoric used by organizations is often a shallow attempt to gloss over practices that are anything but. In Nepal, in particular, a decade of community-oriented development has done virtually nothing to reduce widespread class and ethnic-based inequalities. The conflict, however, has brought these issues to the forefront and now at least ostensibly, many poverty-alleviation NGO’s espouse the same concerns as the Maoist insurgents. But why did it take a violent insurgency to create this change in rhetoric? In the next section, I will argue that the explanation for much NGO ineffectiveness is contradictorily also the reason behind the NGO sector’s expansion: a dependence on donors.

Donors and Politics: Civil society or industry?

Within contemporary liberal-democratic institutions, there exists a basic assumption about the nature and ability of ‘civil society’. The assumption is that the state’s, as well as

the market's, power should be balanced by the public voice; a public that has the ability to choose between wide ranges of options about what it wants to see happen in the economic, political, social and environmental spheres.

Even without a concrete definition, this notion of 'civil society' is regularly brought up as a remedy for corrupt and inefficient bureaucracies. In the developing world, NGO's have become the vanguard of this altogether ambiguous conception of civil society. As the World Bank writes:

"NGO's seek to represent the voice of the weak and help them organize their communities to achieve a more powerful voice in the making of decisions and the allocation of resources".¹¹

In Nepal, however, for the most part, large NGO's are known more for their immense budgets and the ubiquitous nature of their transport vehicles. In truth, a jeep or SUV seen on the streets of Kathmandu is much more likely to be an official NGO vehicle than that of a private citizen. The offices of INGO's are likely to be impressive, well-guarded structures occupying prime real estate and much of the scarce water and electric resources. At one of these structures, the Swiss Agency for International Development's head office, I was denied entry, even though all I wanted to procure was a catalogue or brochure.

Rhetoric that props up these organizations as genuine representatives of civil society is quite removed from the reality of their activities, as well is their general perception. NGO 'successes' in Nepal have been few and far between, generally limited to the work of organizations following the Integrated Mountain Development (IMD) model and community forestry initiatives in the south of the country.

Almost across the board, NGO's display a committed detachment from party politics. This is understandable in the sense that international donors do not want their funds

caught up in the ‘messy’ nature of party politics; which in this part of the world is characterized by corruption, nepotism and cronyism. As a result, civil society groups registered with the Social Welfare Council (SWC) are given mandates to work on relief, charity, environmental protection and economic projects rather than on political education and conflict resolution. By being engaged in an intense competition for external funds, NGO’s have thus defined themselves in overtly non-political terms, whereas in its truest sense, ‘civil society’ is supposed to be overtly public and political as it mediates the between different interests in society. As Dev Raj Dahal eloquently writes about Nepal:

“The increasing NGO-ization of civil society has atomized mass-based social movements, sapped the civility of society to cooperate without financial incentives, killed its charity work, enforced an external perception of reality and fomented distributional and rights based conflicts in society”.¹²

It is also clear that many of these groups that receive aid are unlikely to be accountable to the state or citizens. The proliferation of NGO’s in the last few decades and the troubled nature of the rest of the economy have also meant that NGO’s now serve as an employment opportunity for much of Kathmandu’s English speaking elite. As Seira Tamang writes:

“English speaking Nepali elites function as gatekeepers of information for donors, who seek to fund because donors need to fund to exist. If the elite are sieving information, and making decisions for funders who do not speak Nepali, that is a huge problem in terms of the way information flows in a democratic polity. How much is information is sieved by the elite and the manner in which consultants sign

confidentiality statements and donor funded reports are not always made publicly available raises questions as to how donors are actually impacting the sphere of civil society'.¹³

Criticisms of aid-driven development have also gone beyond just questioning the efficiency of donor activity. Critics argue that it has promoted institutional corruption and organizational cronyism in the civil sphere, what many have started calling 'NGO culture'.

There is, therefore, a glaring contradiction in the rhetoric surrounding non-governmental organizations in Nepal and their actual practices. In reality, although doing important and necessary work in some areas, NGO's are clearly not the vanguard of civil society, and it is a grave mistake to think of the two as interchangeable, as the rhetoric often suggests. The relative ineffectiveness of these organizations to properly tackle 'civil' questions, which in my view, are not simply economic, political or social- but a combination of the three spheres, was best demonstrated by the events of April 2006.

Janandalon 2: A thousand plateaus of resistance

“Civil society is absorbed in the state, but the consequence of this is an explosion of elements that were previously coordinated and mediated in civil society. Resistances are no longer marginal but active in the center of a society that opens up in networks; the individual points are singularized in a thousand plateaus”.

Hardt and Negri, *Empire*

“Loktanta Zindabad !”.

The cry for ‘total democracy’ did not come from a political university student, or some left-leaning activist. It was an unaccompanied young boy, no more than 10 years old, who had joined the protests in his own neighborhood. It was the second day of the general strike called by the Seven Party Alliance, and the first day of what was to become nearly three weeks of daytime curfew.

Each day the streets exploded into a carnival; the hot tempers of the young men at the front of the crowds tempered by the singing and cheering of the elderly, women and children in the backgrounds. It is estimated that anywhere between eight and nine million people participated in the movement across the country, and it was the first time such a movement had spread outside the Valley area. Although untoward incidents did occur, and lives were lost, it is quite remarkable that not a single incident of looting was reported during the period of demonstrations.

Many analysts have since pointed out that one of the main reasons for the movement’s ‘success’ was the way efforts were coordinated between different ‘civic associations’. For example, a doctors union’s strike was followed by a lawyers’ union, a taxi drivers’ strike was followed by the teachers’ union. By the time the private banks also joined in, effectively crippling all financial activity, the pressure on the ruling junta was almost unbearable. Treatment for those injured during the protests was paid for by donations to a victims’ fund, and even government officials staged walk-outs and put their ‘pens down’.

The media also had an extremely important role to play; each day private news channels and newspapers documented the security forces’ heavy-handedness and gave

further impetus to the movement by detailing the events of each day, interviewing protestors and ripping apart government propaganda about the nature of the movement.

It seems, therefore, that a movement as broad based and ideologically inclusive as the one Nepal witnessed in April 2006 has created all sorts of new theoretical questions about the nature of social movements and civil society and, indeed, about the civil spaces in which human beings can be 'political' in the contemporary world. Perhaps it was successful because it identified a common enemy, the King, or perhaps it was because the movement never took up potentially divisive, concrete questions about the State or the nature of the economy. Whatever the reasons, there is evidence here that political education and solidarity on a grassroots level are more likely to create real change than the donor-elite nexus that serves as conventional 'civil society'. Shifts in established power can only occur through the creative, generative and constitutive power of the people themselves. What this experience tells us is that for there to be actual debate over the nature and meaning of 'development' today in countries such as Nepal, there must first occur a reabsorbing of political society into civil society.

Conclusions: Social research and transformation

The rebirth of the concept of 'civil society' in 'developing' countries portrays NGO's and civil organizations as a buffer against neo-liberalism and the 'tyranny of the market'. Non-governmental organizations are now at the center of the proliferation of a range of 'development' approaches such as the eco-friendly, participatory and sustainable, that are

not directly informed by the drive for economic growth. Although 'development' has always been multifaceted, and the 'economic' will always be important, these new approaches signal the increasing dispersion of the development *dispositif*.

I have attempted to argue in this paper that, for the most part, non-governmental organizations in Nepal have failed to act as a credible buffer and act instead as a part of a wider 'development' apparatus that has done virtually nothing to reduce relative deprivation in this country. With concepts like empowerment, autonomy and participation becoming more and more common, it is has also become imperative to further scrutinize these notions as a part of a critical development studies. Often, these concepts are ripped out of their local contexts and become part of corporate parlance in a development industry that is the eight largest in the world. Development efforts, in general, consist of people acting upon others and acting upon themselves. All efforts and 'interventions', therefore, become part of a particular political project. NGO's, as a result, do not operate in the apolitical terrain that their brochures suggest and what their donors encourage. For development NGO's to move forward, they must first investigate this glaring dichotomy between discourse and practice. At the same time, it is also important to take a deconstructive look at the constitution of the idea of 'civil society'. Vaclav Havel believes that 'civil society' has the potential to bring us to 'post-democracy', erupting out of 'life from below'. Similarly, Antonio Negri argues for a 'politics of the present', which involves people intervening in the 'here and now' to necessitate social change.

It is clear that civil society in Nepal has tremendous potential to renegotiate policies and engage in peace-building. What is needed is more grassroots political education and

‘empowerment’ - the term being used here in the political sense to mean a basic knowledge of all the different options available in the social sphere. Sustaining the increase in civic engagement, that had reached inspiring proportions during April 2006, is the only way to strengthen civil society and address social questions in a broad-based, democratic and inclusive way.

I have also tried to show how the ‘development’ process, even by progressive actors such as NGO’s, is inherently fraught with complexities. The process is dominated by constructs, and these come with implicit assumptions that are taken for granted. Reflecting on these assumptions, as well as taking insights from post-structuralism, has the potential to advance practices of social research and action towards actual social transformation.

Notes

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⁵ Development through non-governmental organizations in Nepal, Dikawar Chand, 2002

⁶ ...

⁷ From Evil State to Civil Society, Saubhagya Shah, in State of Nepal, Himal Press, 2003

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