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David Seddon

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DEVELOPMENT IN NEPAL: Issues and Approaches

Editorial by David Seddon

Development: A Subject for Debate

'Development' has over the last few years become very much an issue in Nepal, among intellectuals as well as among policy makers and practitioners. Controversial policies (eg. economic liberalisation and structural adjustment), controversial programmes and plans (eg. the Agricultural Perspective Plan), and controversial projects (Arun III) have all been the subject of debate. Recently, even the concept of 'development' (*bikas*) itself has come under attack (see, for example, the special issue of **Studies in Nepali History and Society**, December 1996).

Such controversy is to be welcomed as part of the on-going debate over the policy and practice of both government and non-government agencies operating in Nepal that is an essential feature of a democratic society. It is to be hoped that, in future, such debates will broaden and come to involve both a wider range of issues and a wider spectrum of Nepalese society, and not remain confined very largely to the Kathmandu intellectual and political elite (and a small number of expatriate commentators) and to a narrow critique of 'the development industry.'

Often, 'development' is identified (both by those who defend and by those who attack 'it') as a very limited and even distinct sphere of concern or activity, defined largely by experts. It has been referred to, mainly by its critics, as domain of 'the development industry.' Mary Des Chene adopts this term in her editorial introducing the special issue of **Studies in Nepali History and Society** mentioned above; I have done so myself recently, in an editorial introducing a special issue of **The Review of African Political Economy** on 'NGOs and the Development Industry' (March 1997). Graham Hancock adopts such a perspective when he refers, in his famous/notorious book **Lords of Poverty**, to 'Development Incorporated.' There are many reasons for believing that much of what goes by the name of 'development' (*bikas*) in Nepal is, indeed, part of the 'development industry.'

But development is—or surely should be—more than those issues defined by a limited and exclusive 'development community' or serving the interests of a narrowly constituted yet pervasive 'development industry?' And it is surely more than just the bundle of programmes, policies and projects designed and implemented by international and national development agencies, and the specific consequences attributed to these interventions?

A much broader—and more liberating—concept of development is one which refers to the complex and always unpredictable process of environmental, economic, political and social change—which includes both the intended and unintended consequences of 'development interventions' and the other, usually (although not always) more far-reaching consequences of what might loosely be termed local, national, regional and global forces. In this broader sense, development is virtually indistinguishable from history.

Here there is scope both for ambitious attempts to sketch out general explanations of Nepal's development—whether from a Weberian (eg. Bista's **Fatalism and Development**) or a Marxist (eg. Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon's **Nepal in Crisis**) perspective; or indeed, any other. But there is also scope for more focussed efforts to address specific issues of relevance both to those concerned with development policy and practice and to all those who contribute in millions of ways to development simply by the ways in which they live their daily lives.

For intellectuals, precisely **how** development is identified and defined is, of course, in part itself a matter for discussion, critical analysis and evaluation. It is also, however, in part, even for intellectuals, a matter of just 'getting on with the job' of describing, analysing and explaining that complex and unpredictable process of change which we can call 'development,' from whatever perspective and from whatever aspect we feel is fruitful and illuminating. If that process can contribute to a constructive debate, particularly one which challenges conventional wisdom and orthodoxy, and provides alternative perspectives and prescriptions, then it is surely worth while?

For that is the primary role of the intellectual—to bring critical analysis to bear on the ruling ideas of the day.

In development studies, generally, however, the concern of the intellectual is not just to try to understand the world, but also to contribute to changing it, for the better. That at least, is a view shared by the contributors to this issue of the **Himalayan Research Bulletin**.

In this issue of the **Himalayan Research Bulletin**—which draws quite heavily on the work of researchers who would broadly regard themselves as working within the domain of 'development studies'—we try to provide material for debate in what seem to us to be major policy areas of current concern, in Nepal and indeed elsewhere in the Himalayan region: rural livelihoods and long term change, foreign labour migration and income from remittances, environmental management and farmers' strategies, the potential for small-scale non-farm enterprise, and the role of agriculture in development.

David Seddon

School of Development Studies
University of East Anglia
Norwich

Contributors to this special section:

Jagannath Adhikari is a social anthropologist and also an independent researcher and consultant.

Piers Blaikie is Professor of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia and a member of the overseas Development Group. Trained as a human geographer he has written widely on issues associated with 'the political economy of land degradation', including books on **The Political Economy of Soil Erosion**, and on **Land Degradation and Society** (with Harold Brookfield). He is also co-author of several books on Nepal with John Cameron and David Seddon

John Cameron is senior lecturer in economics in the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia and a member of the Overseas Development Group. Co-author of several books on Nepal with Piers Blaikie and David Seddon), he has also edited a book on Poverty and Power: the role of institutions and the market in Development and is co-author of *Why Economists Disagree*.

Daniel Coppard has a Masters degree from the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia and has worked as a research assistant to Piers Blaikie, John Cameron and David Seddon on the 'Livelihoods' project. He is currently undertaking research into rural livelihoods and seasonal migration in West Bengal, India.

John Dunsmore is a free-lance researcher and consultant with many years experience in Nepal. He is particularly familiar with the eastern hills and has undertaken critical evaluations in the past of the British ODA-funded KHARDEP (Koshi Hills Regional Development Project).

Ganesh Gurung is a sociologist, an independent consultant and chairman of the Nepal Institute of Development Studies

Navaraj Gyawali has worked for several years with Actionaid, first in Nepal and now, currently, in Bangladesh. He was the Team Leader of the Nepalese team for the 'Livelihoods' project (in Nepal and India) directed by Piers Blaikie and David Seddon. He is currently Acting Director of Actionaid Bangladesh.

David Seddon, Contributing Editor to **Himalayan Research Bulletin**, is Professor of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia and a member of the Overseas Development Group