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Developing the Himalaya: Development as if Livelihoods Mattered

Developing the Himalaya: Development as if Livelihoods Mattered

Georgina Drew

Showcasing papers from a panel at the American Anthropological Association in 2012, the Introduction to this special issue on Developing the Himalaya highlights how each article in this collection advances critical perspectives and emerging themes on the politics of development planning and practice, with a specific emphasis on natural resource use. The author provides context for each of the articles featured, highlighting the pressing issue of survival challenges and the need for liveable futures in the Himalaya, while identifying the key contributions of each submission. Covering development trends and politics in India and China, the contributions point to the need for participatory, people-centric policies that encourage meaningful capacity building while fostering resilience in this ecologically significant and culturally rich geographical region.

Keywords: livelihoods, disasters, development politics.

Introduction

On the evening of 3 August 2012, a cloud burst flooded India's Bhagirathi River. The rushing waters devastated a sizeable tract of land from Gangori to Uttarkashi in the Uttarakhand Himalaya. Roads collapsed, houses were washed away, and over one hundred people lost their lives in the roaring floods. In the aftermath, workers toiled to rebuild lost stretches of the national highway and hoteliers tried to encourage nervous tourists that travel to the region was safe. These efforts were undone less than a year later when sheets of rain poured for three days straight beginning on 14 June 2013. This time, a much larger area was impacted as the Bhagirathi and Alakananda Rivers rose to previously unimaginable heights, taking away many more roads, bridges, hotels, houses, and far too many lives. Ill-equipped pilgrims were stranded and forced to walk over mountain passes, many of them to their ultimate peril. Back in the towns and cities, broken water and sewage pipelines meant that the risk of water-borne diseases increased. The repetition and amplification of a living nightmare in such a short amount of time sent the people who could afford to fleeing from Uttarakhand to the plains. Many survivors suffered posttraumatic stress and some reportedly went legally insane with grief.

The main task in the wake of the second series of floods was to help the injured, to provide relief to the newly displaced, and to help those who had been stranded. It took weeks if not months to rebuild enough of the infrastructure so that life could resume a semblance of normalcy. As

people regained their footing, the public discussion turned to the role that planned and unplanned development activities had on exacerbating the extent of the damage caused by the raging waters. When I returned to the flood-impacted region to assess the damage in January of 2014, it was this topic that occupied many of my conversations with friends and interlocutors. Could the hydroelectric dams, hastily built riverside hotels, and improperly constructed roads have added to the toll that those waters took? And what of the coming monsoon seasons now that the embankments were bare and exposed to the razor-like precision of rushing mountain waters? Would not a sound development response mandate immediate and swift action to reinforce existing infrastructure while preventing the unplanned sprawl that was so easily stripped away?

Each contribution to this special issue of *HIMALAYA* speaks to a similar, urgent query: What kind of development is needed to survive and prosper in the Himalaya? While this question may be academically engaging, it is not simply an academic concern. Real lives are on the line in these debates, a fact that Himalayan residents know all too well.

Such survival-centric questions are slightly different from the ones that dominated development studies scholarship in the Himalaya during the 1990s and the early 2000s. The then-growing body of development inquiries and exam-inations were often centered on the contested meanings of development, including how dominant definitions obscured or elided diverse knowledge systems in the process of development. Scholars have done this while investigating and debating the implications of the terms used to signal and promote the notion of 'development,' known in Hindi as vikas, Nepali as bikas, and in Mandarin as fazhan or jingji fazhan (economic development). Much of this work in the late 1990s and early twenty first-century were responses to or direct engagements with seminal work in critical studies of development by Escobar (1995), Esteva (1992), and Sachs (1992), among many others. Some concurred with their assessments of a hegemonic development mandate orig-inating from the Bretton Woods institutions that arose in the aftermath of World War II and others challenged the premise of a hegemonic discourse with totalizing and oppressive effects.

Looking to the Nepali context, Pigg (1992) and Shrestha (1995) added to the discussion by indicating that the processes of development and even the aspirations to be 'developed' were connected to senses of self, social statuses, and regional pride. Others working in the Indian Himalaya such as Sinha (2003) pointed out that some social movements place demands on the state that are not against

development per se and can at times be based in calls for regional and national government agencies to fulfill their development promises. Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan (2003) similarly argued that we look to nuanced domains of practice and agency when assessing development and the modernity project with which it is associated. They proffered that what the recent scholarship presents is a case for regional modernities wherein post-enlightenment modernities are modified to suit and adapt to particular circumstances (ibid). In this formulation, and running parallel to the work of Gupta (1998), and, people envision, practice, and embrace hybrid means and modalities for enacting regional versions of the development mandate. A growing body of literature also engages these debates within the People's Republic of China. As this special issues shows, there is considerable scope for additional cross-pollination of ideas and analyses from one side of the Himalaya to another.

These contributions have forced scholars and practitioners to accept more complicated stances in their approaches to the development project and to people's orientations to diverse notions of modernization and modernity. While recognizing the range of positions within these academic contributions, it seems that the rapid pace of contemporary ecological and social change in the Himalaya forces us to circle back to the question of livelihoods with evermore care. To my mind, it is this issue of the livelihoods enabled and endangered, combined with an overall concern for the prosperity of Himalayan settlements, which provides the charge for the papers assembled in this special issue.

By looking to varied locales across the Chinese and Indian Himalaya, the authors neither aim to undo the development mandate nor endorse unchecked development processes. While recognizing that development stories are not only complicated but also highly variegated depending on the socio-economic, political, and geographic terrains in which they take place, the authors present case studies in which participation in material transformations is at the core of the work that needs to be done to move development forward in the twenty-first century. In this respect, the contributions mirror much of the work done by development practitioners, including large agencies such as the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), based in Kathmandu but engaged regionally across the Hindu Kush-Himalaya and the Tibetan Plateau. The authors extend previous scholarship on development in the Himalaya by providing grounded, detailed, sympathetic, and ethnographically oriented descriptions of the ways people push to amend development processes, even when the means are subtle

in nature and scope. Their contributions build upon papers first presented at the American Anthropological Association's 2012 annual meeting for a double panel that I co-organized with Kelly Alley and Mabel Gergan entitled 'Developing the Himalaya: People, Projects, Politics.'

Article Contributions

The issue opens with Brendan Galipeau's discussion of socio-ecological vulnerability in a Tibetan village on the Mekong River. Galipeau's work reminds us that macro-level development visions and policies often omit, and are sometimes entirely unaware, of the nuanced ways in which the projects designed in faraway places will impact the people living at the sites of implementation. He is particularly concerned with the impacts that large-scale hydropower projects will have on the resource knowledge that helps people profit from harvesting forest products, including caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), and the grapes that are used for China's rising wine production industries. In highlighting the importance of these items, Galipeau urges us to consider a fuller understanding of the socio-economic *costs* of development projects underway in the region. His contribution urges that scholars and development practitioners investigate in a more integrated manner the many livelihoods impacts that will make resettlement difficult for the displaced.

Galipeau's work should help to direct future scholarship as well as development policy. Specifically, his work illustrates the possibilities for applied and engaged scholarship that could let villagers participate in assessments of the cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions of their current emplacements. Such collaborations would further amplify how displacement and resettlement may jeopardize the components of everyday life that provide people with meaning and physical sustenance. At the same time, Galipeau notes that hydroelectric development projects do have some cumulative benefits. His work is therefore a strong call to neither dismiss the local impacts of dams nor their potential for increasing the kind of *economic* prosperity that countries like China seek to support. This middle path offers a more balanced approach to dichotomous pro- versus anti-dam antagonisms.

The work of Kelly Alley, Ryan Hile, and Chandanan Mitra seeks to address the problem of the aggregate load of large-scale hydroelectric projects. For Alley and her co-authors, it is the access to and exchange of information that forms a cornerstone of efforts to push for equitable development projects and praxis. They review citizen mapping projects and explain how Geographic

Information Systems (GIS) technology can be used to turn existing information into more durable ways to visualize development and ensure open access databases for public use. The dam sites they introduce are located within the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin that spans the Himalaya from Pakistan to India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and China. Their article highlights the vital work being done by project-impacted peoples, activists, journalists, and scientists who are pushing for assessment reports, additional expert monitoring committees, and court orders to check the ill-advised practices of industry, government agencies, and public sector companies. They assert that the political pressure created by information sharing, media reports, and letters to funding agencies and government authorities forces incremental yet potentially significant change. The result may not always be the cancelation of a project deemed ecologically unsound but it may force an open discussion that critically interrogates what kinds of development is viable, feasible, and desirable in sensitive mountain regions.

One of the many evocative arguments that the article by Alley et al. contributes is the idea of the value of 'visualizing' hydropower development. This involves the use of technologies such as GIS for the initial mapping of a space as well as the open access to maps in which people can update and modify data based on ground realities. The dual process is critical since it opens up more potential for citizen activism and remedies some of the past problems with getting accurate information of how, when, and where projects are being constructed—and with what sorts of impact. People who are impacted by such projects can upload images of muck disposal sites, the damage to land caused by dam building, and perhaps even the effect of project construction on culturally meaningful or sacred domains. These sharing procedures constitute the formation of a dispersed network of data compilers that help expand understandings of the scope, costs, and benefits for hydroelectric projects. Ideally, this can ensure that project evaluations include not just the energy production and carbon offset calculations but also the ecological, hydrological, and sociocultural costs incurred by hydropower development.

The article by Mabel Gergan examines the agency of those impacted by hydroelectric dams and efforts to challenge state-driven practices of development. In looking to young indigenous activists from the Dzongu reserve of the Sikkimese Himalaya, Gergan explores how youth dam protests and hunger strikes are part of a larger effort to question and reimagine the future of indigenous livelihoods in culturally meaningful landscapes. These actions

are articulated within wider problems of outward migration, high regional unemployment, and perceptions about the disintegration of cultural heritage. In situating youth protests within the socioeconomic and political landscape of Dzongu, and Sikkim more broadly, Gergan connects the agency of marginalized indigenous groups to development debates and democratic politics. Her contributions highlight the less explored area of youth activism in environmental movements while remaining attentive to class disparities, ethnic divisions, and the gendered divergences that appear to give more opportunities for male youth to engage publicly as movement leaders as compared to young women.

Gergan productively oscillates between the themes of precarity and possibility in her study of Dzongu youth activism. Noting that indigenous youth are often portrayed as 'lazy' and/or apathetic, she situates activist struggles as part and parcel of an attempt to overturn stereotypes by way of demonstrating what youth are capable of achieving. The simultaneous sense of precarity and possibility is marked by the means through which youth activists are constantly traversing lines between the old, what might be termed 'tradition,' and the new, an amorphous yet pervasive sense of something akin to 'modernity,' existing lucratively outside of the reserve. Gergan explains how attempts to reclaim the old while embracing the new can lead to contradictions wherein Dzongu youth essentialize the 'indigenous subject' as guardian of the reserve while simultaneously critiquing state neglect. She shows that attention to such contradictions can help to show the playful ways youth subvert oppressive structures. In so doing, they fashion ideal visions of the reserve, ideal visions of the indigenous subject, and ideal visions of how the state should help support economic self-sufficiency and cultural continuity. Ultimately, Gergan's study of youth activists demonstrates how people are struggling to navigate conflicting values and hybrid identities in contemporary Himalayan landscapes. Readers may be reassured by her findings that indigenous youth are not unwitting subjects of state exclusion, given the stakes at hand. Some may even find in this article a call to examine this population more closely through sustained ethnographic research, including the intimate terrains of self-making, notions of belonging and repertoires of resistance.

Further examining the relation between state programs and local development processes, Stéphane Gros' contribution focuses on the agriculture and livelihood changes that resulted from the implementation of the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) in the Dulong Valley of Northwest Yunnan province in China's Gongshan County. This program aims to convert agricultural land into grasslands or forests in response to the widespread problem of deforestation across the length and breadth of the country. But as Gros discusses, the philosophy behind such programs is often based in the state's mistrust of ethnic tribals such as the Drung to properly manage their resources. In dictating programs for borderland and hill residents to implement based on considerations and priorities initiated by the central government, such efforts often do not meet the needs of those forced to adopt the initiatives in question. As Gros describes, these programs are thus part of the hegemonic paradigm of 'developmentalism' based on techno-economic policies designed to trigger growth and, as such, they can be ignorant of more people-centered ways to promote nature protection and biodiversity conservation. In the case of the Drung, Gros emphasizes that SLCP policies have increased villager dependency on the state via rice and cash handouts without necessarily improving the ecological context. In the meantime, the programs have come at the cost of losing the otherwise productive practice of swidden agriculture, which helped to cultivate dozens of varieties of crops and promote biodiversity through rotational clearing and planting practices.

Phasing out swidden agriculture to make room for SLCP has had numerous cultural and livelihood impacts. Swidden agriculture has been an important part of subsistence economies in Northwest Yunnan for centuries and Gros emphasizes that numerous cultural practices are built around its use and continuation. In the wake of SLCP, many villagers no longer have work in the fields. Since there are few other economic opportunities, there is more time for leisure activities and for alcohol consumption. Gros also notes that the rates of suicide seem to be on the rise and that this contributes to the bitterness of the rice and cash handouts. He draws upon Ingold (2000) to suggest that the government policies have partly severed the human-environment relations and the sense of 'embeddedness' that helps enrich everyday life. These ruptures in practice have relegated Drung peoples to a dependence of market forces and state provisions. This results in the sort of anomie that leads to drinking, suicide, and other indicators of social unease. Gros indicates that, despite the costs, there appears to be little resistance to program enforcement due to past relationships of dependence and subordination that have allowed the Drung to survive over centuries. In the absence of protest, Drung are either left to sit idly in their villages or to migrate in search of wage labor. Gros' commentary offers another cautionary note indicating how non-participatory development projects can exacerbate the marginalization of those living at the economic and geographic peripheries.

The contribution by Edwin Schmitt extends the discussion of rural programs to reduce swidden practices by the Chinese state in Western Sichuan. Proposing that we examine the trend as a 'de-swiddening' process, the author looks at how such programs have developed and the socio-economic impacts that they have entailed. The focus of his discussion is on the way that ideas for managing resources among the Han have influenced how this dominant group has tended to view the agricultural and cultural practices of minority groups as 'backward.' Schmitt takes a long-term lens to the transformations in question to show that the impact of de-swiddening is a 'historically contextualized negotiation of power' wherein the trend away from swidden practices reflects on how difficult the crops are to govern from a state-centric view and how much more lucrative commercial crops have become.

Similar to Gros, the article by Schmitt engages with turns towards developmentalism while situating the rise of 'scientific agriculture' in Western Sichuan. The trend reflects many of the transitions that have taken place around the world, although it retains distinct Chinese characteristics. The agricultural and socio-economic transformations were propelled in the 1940s with increased settlements of Han Chinese in the rural areas. This was followed by the increase of monoculture crops, which were seen as vital for feeding China's growing populations while providing lucrative sources of tax revenue for the nation. Schmitt describes how over the years the trend away from swidden agriculture persisted despite the challenges of famine, deforestation, and the 'decentralizing shifts' in social governance that left rural regions to focus on local development. Even now, swidden agriculture continues to decline while monocultures of commercial crops grow in number. The author describes how minority groups such as the Ersu are complicit in these trends as they desire financial engagement with the market economy even while many acknowledge how the loss of customary crops and non-commercial grains has impacted cultural practices and religious rituals. Despite this, he also notes that some Ersu continue to multicrop and produce some of the non-commercial grains that have been important for their communities for centuries. Such practices indicate entrenched knowledge about the benefits of multicropping, or the planting of numerous plant varieties in the same space. Due to this, the author argues that, "there is no reason for us to assume that de-swiddening is a wholly encompassing and irreversible process. In other words, it is crucial to recognize de-swiddening as a hierarchical political discourse while simultaneously allowing for responses of resistance and acceptance by individuals affected by that discourse." By pointing to these complexities, Schmitt sets the ground for future work on the topic.

Reflection and Discussion

The contributions point toward several critical items of reflection and they also indicate elements of analytical synergy despite the vast cultural, political, and geographical terrain that they cross. In most of the contributions, for instance, we see the persistent notion of rural Himalayan areas as 'backwards' and the implications that this still dominant discourse has for the modification of practices and the implementation of externally dictated programs. This is perhaps most clearly indicated in Gros' presentation of how state programs have destroyed more long-standing agricultural practices among the Drung, leaving many in a state of dependence and anomie. This is not only an issue in China; Indian development practices have similarly evidenced the imposition of development projects imposed by the state that have ultimately become part of the apparatus of control (Harris 1999: 304).

Moving beyond established scholarship, the articles also point to the simultaneity of acquiescence to externally dictated programs alongside everyday resistance. These vacillating stances challenge us to consider the evidence of complicity in development practice as well as points of radical opposition. The implication is that repertoires of everyday resistance, or the minor acts of rebellion that do not make the headlines (Scott 1985), are perhaps even more important elements of study than they typically present in Himalayan development scholarship, and that they merit evermore examination. This reveals itself in most of the cases presented, from the seemingly contradictory stance of indigenous youth dam opponents presented by Gergan to the concessions of the Ersu in the process of de-swiddening described by Schmitt.

Despite the shifting terrains of practice and discourse represented in these contributions, this suite of articles suggests a fairly coherent desire for public participation in debates over the scope and parameters of Himalayan development. The article by Alley et al., for instance, highlights the large number of people, organizations, and institutions now involved in efforts to promote public discussion and oversight of the kinds of development pursued in regions like the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin. This pairs with a new information access era in countries such as India where a Right to Information Act (RIA), in place since 2005, has enhanced the ability of citizens to gain data on private and government agencies through judicial activism. Data accrued from RIA processes has served to open up entire new fields of discourse and has arguably helped to mobilize widespread movements against corruption that span various regions and socioeconomic sectors in India. Combined with better cultural and socioeconomic data along the lines that Galipeau argues is necessary, we

see how the demand is for work that makes more visible the development impacts and project assemblages that are often otherwise concealed.

These points reflect back on larger questions that are longstanding in development debates. As Bryan Tilt commented when discussing a selection of these papers at the AAA meeting in 2012, the contributions remind us to revisit familiar questions: Development for whom? Under what conditions can development serve the needs of 'local' people? And by what criteria should their 'success' be measured? At issue is also the concern of how academics can best contribute to the examination of these questions. As Tilt pondered, by way of encouragement, do we address these queries from the perspective of development anthropology—an anthropological approach designed to apply academic methods, skills, and theories to improve development projects—or from the perspective of the anthropology of development, which aims to be more critical of the development enterprise as a whole?

Jeremy Spoon, another discussant at the AAA panel from which this special issue emerged, noted that while the state discourses and hegemonic development practices observed are influential, there is even more room to investigate how they are being remade by 'local actors' in their own terms. Increased ethnographic investigation in more Himalayan field sites will help reveal how people are revising, remaking, and re-envisioning development discourse and practice while continuing to observe how diverse notions of modernity fit into the ongoing dialogues. This, of course, is only possible if ruling governments allow such investigations to take place. One of the contributors to this issue has subsequently been prohibited from expanding their ethnographic investigations on the impact of development discourse and practice in minority regions of China. Such censorship can hinder the scope of understanding how historical transitions have impacted politically marginalized people, including the socio-economic and cultural-religious implications of fading local knowledge about the surrounding environment.

This somber caution leads us back to the question of livelihoods. While we can and should continue to investigate nature/culture dynamics, minority/dominant development discourses, and public/state-dictated development dialogue, we should remember that as we debate development projects in classrooms, conferences, and meeting halls, the issue of survival looms large. Himalayan residents—continually subjected to floods, droughts, deforestation, and a myriad of other threats—are well aware of these concerns. We risk academic

abstractions based on their experiences to our mutual peril. Instead, a sustained commitment to enhancing the scope of Himalayan prosperity through our investigations is required. In the future, this will mandate ever more collaborative, participatory, and interdisciplinary studies. These critical yet action-oriented endeavors can in some modest measure help people prepare for the next natural or human-induced disaster. They may even preempt or minimize the scope of the damage that could ensue.

Looking at the scope of the work needed, I am encouraged to see that the authors whose work comprises this special issue have aimed for approaches that sit comfortably both within development anthropology and the anthropology of development. This reflects the critical importance of development processes in the Himalaya as well as the unique and pressing vulnerabilities of Himalayan populations that must be addressed with an eye towards both academic inquiry and livelihood-enhancing pragmatics. The candor and sincerity of the commentary provided by the authors also reveals several points of inquiry for future scholastic and applied studies.

In drawing inspiration from previous scholarship on culture, environment, and development in the Himalaya (see Guneratne 2010) this collection of papers additionally attempts to describe the more established forms of ecological knowledge that have enabled residents of the Himalaya to thrive for so long in remote mountain regions. This could include a continued appreciation for swidden and non-commercial agriculture, the expansion of micro-hydro rather than large-scale hydroelectric projects, or the revitalization of community economies. It could also include the organization of Himalayan habitations in ways that heed longstanding cautions. As my friends and informants told me when shaking their heads in remorse over the destruction of the Bhagirathi and Alakandanda embankments, in the past people used to heed the regional axiom that one should never build along a Himalayan river. "What the river gives," as one interlocutor commented, "the river can also take away." When viewed in contrast with the hubris of externally driven state-led development planning, it is the latter's emphasis on dense riverside settlements downstream from deforested and dam-riddled tracks of land that seems inefficient and 'backwards.' If history is any lesson, development practice does not have to conform to these shortsighted trends. Indeed, it may not be able to continue to do so for much longer.

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