

## Locating Academic NGOs in the Knowledge Production Landscape

Pratyoush Onta

### Abstract

*Academic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are already one of the most important institutional sites of knowledge production in the countries of the global South. This article defines academic NGOs as those NGOs which produce not only documentation but also academically engaging articles, reports, edited volumes, bibliographies, journals and monographs. It argues that their growth in the recent decades has taken place amidst the mammoth growth in the number of NGOs in general for structural and personal reasons. A case study from Nepal is provided to illustrate, both at the level of procedures and at the level of outcomes, the kinds of contributions academic NGOs have made to the knowledge enterprise. The article ends by suggesting that the links between editorial control over what academic NGOs produce and the funding they receive are more complex than is usually assumed, and that the issue of their accountability needs to be rendered in a multiple-constituency model similar to that at work in conventional universities.*

**Keywords:** research NGOs, discussions, mentoring, editorial control, accountability

### 1. Introduction

Since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century we have witnessed an enormous growth of institutions related to the work of knowledge production, consolidation and dissemination in almost all parts of the world.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a public lecture I delivered at Trinity College, Hartford, US under the title 'Can NGOs Generate Knowledge? Reflections on the Landscape of the Knowledge Enterprise.' The lecture was given on 1 March 2007

Two aspects of this growth are noteworthy. First is the increase in the *number* of institutions of a particular type, namely, universities (and their colleges) in different parts of the world. This phenomenon is generally well-known (Altbach and Umakoshi, 2004; Béteille, 2010) and is considered to be one of the main ways in which today's world is different from the world of 1850.

Second, there has also been a growth in the *types* of institutions that are involved in the knowledge enterprise. As part of the general story of the increased institutional differentiation that various societies have experienced in the same century and half, several types of new institutions have come into existence in relation to the work of knowledge creation and distribution. Some of these institutions, namely, university departments and research centres and autonomous research institutes, are better known and are generally perceived to be the most usual locations from which to engage in this kind of work (Béteille, 2010). But there are other institutions which are less well known that are also parts of the same knowledge landscape. These include certain state offices devoted to research, private for-profit entities (usually called 'consultancies') engaged for the most part in contract research or in the commercial production and distribution of research results as books and journals, and various types of not-for-profit organizations. The category of not-for-profit organizations include entities such as informal institutions of people who share certain knowledge interests (and hence might be better described as collegial networks rather than institutions as such),<sup>2</sup> professional

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while I was a McGill Fellow in the International Studies Program at Trinity. I would like to thank Dr Vijay Prasad who invited me to Trinity and several other colleagues there who asked searching questions related to the theme and the argument pursued in the article. The argument presented here has come about in large part because of the long years of close collaborative work I have done with many of my colleagues at Martin Chautari. I am grateful to all of them for their help, insights and the great ride together. Chudamani Basnet, Bhaskar Gautam, Gaurav KC, Man Bahadur Khattri, Yogesh Raj and Rashmi Sheila provided extensive and useful comments on previous drafts. All factual and interpretive weaknesses are my responsibility alone.

<sup>2</sup> I have found the discussion by the Indian sociologist André Béteille on institutions and networks with respect to universities and researchers useful. He prefers to define an "institution as an enduring group, a kind of corporation with a definite identity" whereas a "network, by contrast, is an individual- or ego-centred social arrangement" (2010: 115, 116).

academic organizations set up along disciplinary lines, policy think-tanks that prioritize research that feeds into political and social planning efforts, research-oriented social organizations or trusts with closed membership and academic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with open membership. This article deals with the last of the not-for-profit type of organizations mentioned here, namely, academic NGOs.

This analysis is done under the assumption that academic NGOs are already one of the most important institutional sites of knowledge production not only in Nepal but also in the global South (cf. Levy, 1996). The main question that this article tries to answer is: what is the context in which academic NGOs have grown and what kinds of contributions have they made to the knowledge production enterprise? In seeking an answer to this question, I will, in the main, use examples from Nepal and implicitly compare the work of academic NGOs with that done by conventional universities.<sup>3</sup> The main body of this article contains four sections. In section two, I will define academic NGOs and discuss some of the reasons why they deserve critical public scrutiny. In section three, I will make the case that such organizations have come into being as a subset of the bigger growth of NGOs in recent decades. I will also list a few such organizations that are active in Nepal and characterize the context in which they have been set up and perform their work. In section four, I will provide a case study from Nepal to illustrate, both at the level of procedures and at the level of outcomes, the kinds of contributions academic NGO have made in the past 20 years. In section five, I will discuss two issues that are related to this analysis by suggesting that the links between editorial control over what academic NGOs produce and the funding they receive are more complex than is usually assumed, and that the issue of their accountability needs to be rendered in a multiple-constituency model similar to that at work in conventional universities. It should be noted that the purpose of this article is to provoke thought and discussions, not to demonstrate the results of exhaustive research.

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<sup>3</sup> In so doing I have chosen not to locate this analysis of academic NGOs around the analytic category of 'civil society' that is prevalent in discussions about NGOs these days (cf. Bazán et al., 2008).

## 2. The Definitional and Justification Dance

In the late 1990s, in an article published in the journal *World Development*, Anna Vakil defined NGOs as "self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations that are geared to improving the quality of life for disadvantaged people" (Vakil, 1997: 2060).<sup>4</sup> This is the kind of definition of NGOs one is likely to encounter in the so-called development literature. For my purposes, some parts of Vakil's definition are useful while others restrict the domain of NGOs. NGOs are self-governing, not-for-profit entities in the sense that the rules of their operation are formulated by its members who do not get to take home any of the profits the organizations might make in the course of their existence. However not all NGOs are "geared to improving the quality of life for disadvantaged people." Instead I think of them as entities created by individuals who, exercising their fundamental right to form organizations, have come together to pursue some interest without violating the legal rights of others: it could be an interest to pursue some hobby with no potential for generating any public good or it could be an interest that is academic in nature and thus has a potential for producing a large public good. This broader definition renders NGOs to be of interest also to individuals other than those interested in the development business.

Having defined NGOs in this manner, let us now look at a working definition of academic NGOs. Academic NGOs<sup>5</sup> are those NGOs which produce not only documentation but also academic articles, reports, edited volumes, bibliographies, journals and monographs. Some of them also organize activities such as lectures, seminars, workshops, and conferences, offer short-term and theme-specific courses, operate research libraries and publish academic reference materials. However we should note that in the case of many academic NGOs, some of their work will fall under the relatively

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<sup>4</sup> A different version of this section was published as Onta (2009).

<sup>5</sup> The term is also used by Zeleza (2002) to refer to the set of research organizations and networks established during the 1980s and the 1990s in various parts of Africa by former or part-time university-based academics. Others have used the term 'research-oriented NGOs' (Bazán et al., 2008) or 'private research centers' (Levy, 1996) to refer to what I have called academic NGOs.

more academic domain (in terms of reference to an existing world of related literature and protocols followed while researching and generating academic texts) while other parts of their work could be described as simply informative or serving the purpose of documentation. This is not surprising given that in some of these organizations, research is one of the multiple functions or components of the NGOs. It is also not surprising when such practice is juxtaposed with the fact that many academics based in first-rate research universities in the Euro-American world produce not only writings published in peer-reviewed journals and books, but also chapters in non peer-reviewed edited volumes, various types of policy papers and briefs, and reports (sometimes referred to as 'grey literature') that arise from engagements often described as consultancies.

Academic NGOs are often managed by academics whose knowledge and research skills have been credentialed by the same kind of universities that generate the faculty members who teach in conventional universities. These individuals make explicit claims to being knowledge producers, consolidators and distributors. In other words, through tangible end-products that are made public following very rigorous evaluation protocols that match those used by university-based academics and presses, these NGOs make claim to producing theoretically informed and/or contextually rich knowledge. Often lacking the credibility of the conventional university or the state-supported academies (*pragya pratisthans* in the Nepali context) and research centers, these academic NGOs have created a track record for themselves by producing good quality academic texts and events through a significant period of time, and by creating an enabling academic infrastructure.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Subedi (2010) provides a historical reading of the *Nepal Pragya Pratisthan* and suggests that despite the talk and action of restructuring it in post-*Janaandolan II* Nepal, other cellular civic groups and not the three *pragya pratisthans* that now exist (one each for literature, arts and theatre/music) will do important innovations in the domains of theatre/music, art and literature. He derives the word cellular from Appadurai who uses it to refer to formations in the recent history of globalization that work through these principles: "coordinating without massive centralization, reproducing without a clear-cut central mandate, working occasionally in the larger public eye but often outside it,

Why bother about NGOs in their knowledge production capacity? First in what I have read of the published literature on NGOs, I have not seen much discussion regarding this aspect of NGO existence in South Asia and elsewhere in Asia (e.g., Farrington et al., 1993; Lewis, 2005, 2006; Shigetomi, 2002).<sup>7</sup> The absence of attention to academic NGOs is perhaps a case of how the development imperative forces analysts to focus on service delivery of the immediate relief mode and prevents us from looking at the lives of NGOs in the broader social canvas. Second, since they constitute an important site in the landscape of the knowledge enterprise, academic NGOs should be a subject of critical public discussion. Their work needs to be elaborated and scrutinized in a manner similar to those in which analysts have looked at other institutions in the same landscape, namely, universities, academies, learned societies, think-tanks, museums, the publishing industry and media. Such a scrutiny is also a preliminary exercise in comparative thinking about the relationships between various types of knowledge production and producers. Finally I have chosen to discuss NGOs that produce knowledge because these organizations constitute the primary domain where I have done continuous and intensive work and fieldwork since 1996. Thus I speak about examples from Nepal as a participant-observer.

### 3. The Rise of the Academic NGOs

In the recent decades, there has been a mammoth growth in the number of NGOs, including academic NGOs, worldwide. Several analysts have documented this growth not only in the so-called developing nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America but also in the new states of Central and Eastern Europe. Growth of NGOs has also been observed in so-called 'advanced democracies' of

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leveraging resources from state and market to their own ends, and pursuing visions of equity and access that do not fit many twentieth-century models either of development or of democracy" (2006:136-137).

<sup>7</sup> Exceptions are Shrum (2000) who describes the involvement of NGOs in agricultural research, Bazán et al. (2008) who describe the experience of and challenges faced by such NGOs in Central America and Mexico, Levy (1996) who analyzes the phenomenon in Latin America, and Zeleza (2002) as noted earlier.

Northern Europe and North America. This growth has led some analysts to suggest, perhaps with some degree of exaggeration, that we are in the “midst of a global ‘associational revolution’ that may prove to be as significant to the latter twentieth century as the rise of the nation-state was to the latter nineteenth” (Salamon, 1994: 109).<sup>8</sup>

South Asia is no exception to this trend in the growth of NGOs. Apart from Afghanistan, Bhutan and the Maldives about which I do not have information, the number of such organizations has grown significantly in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and India. The beginning dates for this growth varies a bit. For instance, in Bangladesh, this growth can be said to have started in the late 1970s when the euphoria associated with its war of independence (1971) began to wear off and the country experienced several bouts of political and natural emergencies (Lewis, 2004). In Sri Lanka, this growth began in the late 1970s/early 1980s with the simultaneous liberalization of the economy and the rise of the civil war driven autocratic state in the wake of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)’s insurrection for a separate homeland for Tamils. In Nepal this growth began in the early 1990s with the simultaneous achievement of fundamental political freedoms—the freedom to think, express and organize guaranteed for real for the first time in the 1990 Constitution of Nepal promulgated in the wake of the first taming of autocratic monarchy—and economic liberalization which relatively de-emphasized the role of the state in the development enterprise (Maskey, 1998; Heaton Shrestha, 2010). In India, there had been a much longer history of voluntary organizations as part of the independence movement, but there too, the rise of the current breed of NGOs could be timed with the growth of what Rajni Kothari in the mid-1980s called the “non-party political process” (Kothari, 1984), although he was then talking mostly about grassroots activism. The rise of the NGOs in Pakistan can be dated to the late 1980s/early 1990s (Anzar, 2002).

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<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that entities now known as NGOs are of recent creation only. They have a much longer history of existence in different parts of the world (Lewis, 2005).

NGOs in general have come into such prominence in some of the South Asian countries that they have been the target of much criticism in the public domain. In Bangladesh, where it is estimated that up to 35% of the population receives some service from NGOs, they have been accused of running a parallel state (Lewis, 2004). In Sri Lanka, foreign funded NGOs have been accused by one recent author of undermining the rich heritage of local social movements and trade unions and participating in the agenda of ‘recolonisation’ (Goonatilake, 2006). In Nepal, NGOs have been dubbed by the press as ‘dollar farmers,’ namely, entities who carry out the neoliberal initiatives of the donors (primarily World Bank, IMF, northern donors, etc.) that do not have any long-term work agenda of their own. They have also been accused of being the vehicle for foreign intervention in politics in Nepal, one that has tamed the erstwhile left parties (Siwakoti ‘Chintan’, 2000).

It is in the midst of this very large numerical growth of NGOs in South Asia and criticisms of them that the rise of what I have called the academic NGOs happened. A comprehensive research on the life of academic NGOs in South Asia remains to be done. At this point, we do not even have a good idea of the number of organizations that qualify to be designated as academic NGOs in the region. However, it is safe to assume that there are at least a few hundred academic NGOs in all of South Asia.

In Nepal, there are many thematic areas in which academic NGOs are currently producing knowledge.<sup>9</sup> To give a sense of the variety and the scope of work, I simply list the names (in alphabetical order) and the areas of work of some Nepali academic NGOs:

- Asmita (research and publications on women in journalism and gendered analysis of media representations; publication of a feminist magazine *Asmita* for many years)

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<sup>9</sup> For glimpses of what is happening in the rest of South Asia, the following references might be useful even as their main concerns are not academic NGOs: Baig (2008) and Zaidi (2002) for Pakistan; Goonatilake (2006) for Sri Lanka; Chatterjee et al. (2002) for the whole region. Hachhethu (2002) provides a good overview of the social science research scene in Nepal at the turn of the century.

- Friends for Peace (research and publications on the armed conflict)
- Institute for Integrated Development Studies (policy research on various themes including elections, foreign aid, governance, regional water resources, conflict; publication of many books)
- Martin Chautari (research on media, politics, environmental justice, education, health and other themes; publication of the journal *Media Adhyayan* and many books; organization of discussions; operation of a research library)
- Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies (research and publications on politics and state restructuring; publication of the journal *Nepali Journal of Contemporary Studies*)
- Nepal Institute of Peace Studies (research and publications on the post-conflict situation in Nepal including security sector reforms)
- Nepal South Asia Centre (policy research and publications in human development and corruption)
- Nepal Water Conservation Foundation (research on water science and politics; publication of the journal *Water Nepal* and many books)
- Resources Himalaya Foundation (research on biodiversity, protected areas and wildlife conservation; active mentorship program)
- Social Science Baha (research on migration; publication of occasional papers and books; organization of lectures and conferences; operation of a research library)

The list could be made much longer but exhaustive listing is not the primary objective here. Even this short list is instructive in showing that the concerns of academic NGOs are varied and many different types of such organizations are in the business of knowledge production and distribution today.

Various factors gave rise to the work of academic NGOs within the more general growth of NGOs in South Asia. Personal experiences and anecdotal evidence suggest that the following factors have played some role. First, some academic NGOs were established to produce original knowledge and/or consolidate knowledge available at various sources to influence public policies on specific

issues (e.g., Institute for Integrated Development Studies, Nepal Institute of Peace Studies). Second, intellectuals—including some from a ‘revolutionary’ left political background—who are interested in producing and participating in critical debates about social transformations have also formed academic NGOs. Some of these entities have advocated explicitly feminist, *janajati*, dalit and most recently *madhesi* concerns in Nepal from various rights-based perspectives (e.g. Asmita). Third, individuals have opted to make a career outside of the conventional universities and colleges for various reasons, including the failure of universities to provide a congenial environment for academic work.<sup>10</sup> Some have also quit or taken premature retirement from their jobs in the university system to start academic NGOs (e.g., Martin Chautari, Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation, Social Science Baha). In pursuing their individual or collective academic interests through academic NGOs, they have committed themselves to continuing their knowledge creation and distribution work from a different institutional location. Sometimes the NGO as an institution has existed prior to the execution of academic activities. At other times, it was subsequently formed to provide a legal home to such activities.

Fourth, as regional dialogues between civil society organizations came into vogue in South Asia in the 1990s, institutions were created in some of the countries to initially have a national partner in a regional initiative of knowledge generation and sharing. When the life of the original regional initiative ran out, the national organizations continued to exist and engage in knowledge production or consolidation on topics of interest to its members (e.g., Nepal South Asia Centre).<sup>11</sup> Finally in the more recent past,

<sup>10</sup> ‘University failure’ is a term used by Levy (1996: 65-73) to refer to the crises of public universities in Latin America that led to the growth of what he calls private research centers.

<sup>11</sup> See Pai Panandiker and Behera (2000) for further details on and one outcome of the South Asia Dialogue initiated in 1990. Nepal South Asia Centre was founded in Kathmandu by Dr Devendra Raj Panday in connection with this initiative. The other institutional partners were the Centre for Policy Research (New Delhi), the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (Colombo), the Centre for Policy Dialogue (Dhaka), and the Independent Planning Commission (Lahore).

some academic NGOs have been set up under donor-funded schemes to work on issues closely tied to major political transitions. Examples of such entities would include those academic NGOs that have been set up in the last ten years in Nepal to study its internal conflict, transition to peace, security sector reform, constitution writing and state restructuring processes (e.g., Friends for Peace).<sup>12</sup>

While not being exhaustive, the above indicates the various structural and personal factors that have influenced the growth of academic NGOs.<sup>13</sup> As has been hinted, the people involved in their establishment and operation come from different walks of life, both in the professional and ideological senses. They include rights-based activists, party-near or party-free intellectuals, professionally qualified trade practitioners (e.g., lawyers), former bureaucrats, writers, journalists, public intellectuals and academics. The qualifications they bring to their positions vary. Some are formally credentialed by institutions of higher learning and use their qualifications both for legitimacy and quality production purposes. Others replace experience and their closeness with socially important entities such as political parties or media institutions for legitimacy. Still others use their personal or social background to champion knowledge production on related issues. Some of these academic NGOs and their operators are central players in specific social movements while others maintain a distance from such movements. The diversity in the trajectories of the founding of academic NGOs and their thematic concerns, and the plural professional and ideological backgrounds of their operators are important subjects for further investigations.

<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere I have discussed the factors that contributed to the proliferation of academic journals in post-1990 Nepal (Onta, 2010). I suspect that some of those reasons are closely related to the factors that have given rise to academic NGOs in the same period.

<sup>13</sup> Intermediate organizations that had social lives between a single individual and the state, formed under other dispensations, were also present in earlier eras of Nepali history. Three such research oriented formations that were active in Nepal between the 1940s and the 1980s are discussed elsewhere (Onta, 2011).

#### 4. The Case Study of Martin Chautari

Now allow me to focus a bit on one of the organizations mentioned above and its work so that this otherwise general discussion on academic NGOs can be enriched with an exploration of the historical record of a particular academic NGO as a case study. I will be talking about Martin Chautari, a public discussion forum and research centre located in Kathmandu, and asking what it has contributed, both at the level of procedures and at the level of outcomes, to the knowledge production enterprise in post-1990 Nepal. I must say—in the spirit of full disclosure – that I have been a part of the effort I describe here. Despite this personal link, I hope I speak as if I were an anthropologist of any nationality who had just returned from a long stretch of fieldwork, however partial a knowledge he might have gained from his research experience.

Political scientist John Gerring states that a case study “may be understood as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is—at least in part—to shed light on a larger class of cases” (Gerring, 2007: 20). He suggests that a case is a “delimited phenomenon (a unit) observed at a single point in time or over some period of time” and it “may be created out of any phenomenon so long as it has identified boundaries and comprises the primary object of an inference” (Gerring, 2007: 19). In what sense is the selected case representative of the ‘larger class of cases’? Other disciplines might approach this issue somewhat differently but in the discipline of history (to which I belong) where the specificity of the single case is of utmost importance, the issue of representativeness needs to be understood not in the sense that the case selected is somehow “perfectly representative of the population” (Gerring, 2007: 20), but that it provides us important insights into the phenomenon being studied. More than representation by a part of the whole as a perfect proxy, the case study research method becomes useful in history when the case studied is an important part of the whole, its importance being judged by contextual parameters within the boundaries of a given enquiry. The selection of Martin Chautari as a case study is prompted by the belief that it is an important part of the academic NGO landscape in Nepal. Its involvement in the organization of academic seminars, execution of research and research training,

and publications is deeper than is the case for most other academic NGOs in the country.

Martin Chautari (MC) began as an informal discussion group in fall 1991. In 1990 the people of Nepal had put an end to the king-led autocratic regime known as the Partyless Panchayat System and the changed political context provided better opportunities to exercise one's freedom of thought and expression. MC's original founders were interested in using this opportunity to discuss, in the main, Nepal's development problems. This group included Nepali citizens and some non-Nepalis who had lived and worked in Nepal for a long time. They met twice a month to share their insights and experiences on specific pre-determined topics.

In 1995, this discussion group adopted the name Martin Chautari (MC), after late Martin Hoftun, one of the founders who tragically passed away in an aircraft accident in 1992. In 1996 it began to be managed as a project by another NGO. MC began to hold weekly discussions in 1997 and the following year, it expanded its work into research and research mentoring. In 2001, it launched its own book publication series and in 2002, Chautari became a legally registered non-government organization in its own right. In 2006 it opened a public research library. Apart from running three public discussions/seminars a week, researchers in MC now edit two journals, do research and publish several books and policy papers a year, organize several conferences and workshops annually and run a research mentoring program to train young Nepali researchers. The main activities are briefly described here.

### **Discussions**

MC's discussion series has hosted hundreds of speakers from the fields of politics, activism, civil rights, academia (both university-based and independent), development, journalism, private sector, arts, creative writing, etc. and they have spoken on a wide variety of topics. Speakers are invited in a number of different ways. For instance, research presentations are made by academics on topics in which they have done work. For other presentations, occasionally the theme is selected first and speakers are sought by consulting people in the know. In any case, those who come to speak get to talk for about 30-40 minutes. They then face

questions/comments from participants for about an hour. These discussions are open and frank and some, in the earlier days, used to construe this characteristic as being irreverent to the speakers. The average number of participants in these discussions is about 30. These include students, academics, activists, journalists and others. It is not as if MC made the first-ever effort to run a public forum in Nepal. Such efforts have been recorded in the past (Malla, 1979[1970]) but they have not lasted beyond a few months or a few years. In completing 20 years, MC's discussion series has become the longest running discussion forum anywhere in the world about Nepal. The longevity of MC's seminar series has been assured only because its various caretakers over the years have been committed to a cross-professional dialogue, to inviting speakers in the know and to a notion of continuity as an everyday discipline.

More than the initial presentations of the invited speakers at Chautari, the dialogues that follow have been crucial to securing the participation of speakers who had not been heard in public before. Such free flow of discussions amongst professionals, politicians, academics, students, journalists and lay-folks is important precisely because Nepal's otherwise very hierarchical society does not put a high premium on the free exchange of ideas. For making it possible to talk beyond caste, class, gender and age barriers to a certain extent, one can say that these discussion series are contributing to the creation of a more democratic Nepali public. However, for the present analysis, the contribution of the MC discussion series to the making of a tradition<sup>14</sup> of presentation of ideas and arguments, the questioning by others who might be skeptical of arguments presented without fear of the consequences of such speaking in public, and the possibility of multi-directional dialogue as everyday academic practice need to be stressed. Such

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<sup>14</sup> The meaning of tradition that I am referring to here is captured succinctly by B eteille who writes: "When I speak of a tradition of science and scholarship, I have in mind something living that is renewed, even reshaped and recreated, through everyday practice. That tradition develops habits of thought and work over a long period of time. It does not exist everywhere and where it exists, it is not immune to decay and degeneration" (2000[1995]: 144). See also B eteille (2009: 246-272) for an extensive discussion of the role of tradition in scholarship.

cultivation of a tradition of listening to others and responding to them with queries and comments is noteworthy in a country where academic institutions have largely failed to organize regularly scheduled seminar series in their departments and research centres. They have held occasional seminars as special events, but their irregularity is not conducive for disciplined cultivation of the faculties of listening and responding.

### Research

In MC, the topics for research are mainly selected in one of two ways. First, MC staff who are interested in pursuing particular research themes falling within the broad research concerns of the organization are encouraged to pursue those ideas. They are encouraged to discuss their ideas with other colleagues both inside and outside MC. They are also encouraged to design and execute their research programs on their own or in collaboration with other MC colleagues. Second, certain staff researchers engage in research projects that have been agreed at the particular research group level (for instance, the ongoing Nepali magazine history research project of the media research group) or at the institutional level (for instance, research on various aspects of education and social inclusion).

In early 2011, research on media, education, politics and the constitution writing exercise, social inclusion, and climate change and its implications for human and food security were on-going at the institutional level in MC. In recent years, members of some of the research teams have worked on multi-theme connections such as media and social inclusion and education and social inclusion. Much of the research done at MC has been relatively academic in nature while others have had a policy angled emphasis. The research leading to the publication of several policy briefs on the Constituent Assembly process since 2009 is an example of the latter.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the research done from MC is executed by in-house staff researchers. They consist of individuals who have completed formal higher training in their subject areas (Masters or PhD

<sup>15</sup> Full texts of these policy briefs, both in English and Nepali, are available in the MC webpage at [www.martinchautari.org.np](http://www.martinchautari.org.np).

degrees) or are individuals who, after having attained some college- or university-level education, have opted for a rigorous mentoring exercise in research as either a staff researcher or a research fellow. Occasionally, MC has hired external researchers (both university-based and independent ones) to execute one-off research projects or parts of large group-based research projects. This option has been exercised when there have been no staff researchers with the appropriate expertise or when there has been a shortage of in-house staff researchers.

No matter who pursues research at MC, all researchers have to share their research ideas with colleagues in the organization. This sharing occurs both in the written form and at regularly organized internal research presentations that are open only to MC staff and members. While revising their research proposals and subsequently executing the research projects, the concerned researchers are expected to take into consideration comments and feedback received from their colleagues. The same applies for drafts that report research findings and conclusions. This reflects the high premium put on both team work and the following of the protocols of enquiry when research is planned and executed at MC.<sup>16</sup> Most of the time final research findings are also presented in one of the regular MC discussion/seminar series that is open to the public and the researchers are expected to revise their write-ups in response to comments received during such presentations. Written products of research – articles, monographs and edited volumes – are internally (and if necessary externally) peer reviewed and authors and editors are expected to revise them many times before publication.

### Research mentoring

The mentoring program is designed to create a larger group of Nepali researchers who are formally certified by conventional universities but who have mastered the skills of research in an academic NGO environment with in-house mentors (or occasionally university-based co-mentors) backed by a research library and funding from donors. The idea for this program is to

<sup>16</sup> Béteille is again instructive here: “Steadfast loyalty to the demands of disciplined enquiry, rather than originality, is what counts in the vocation of science and scholarship” (2000[1995]: 144).



take in students or graduates (BA or MA) from Nepali universities (most have come from Tribhuvan University) who have very little research experience and fully immerse them in research exercises over a number of years. This training involves the co-generation of knowledge and the transfer of research skills, attitudes and aspirations. Several apprentices have learnt the tricks of the research enterprise through this process. These include the conceptualization of research, its planning, learning of research methodologies, execution of research through field or archival work, analyzing raw data, writing and re-writing drafts of academic analysis as articles and books, and making presentations in seminars or conferences.<sup>17</sup>

Talking about the long years of research training imparted in a modern university environment, sociologist Bêteille has written:

The period of apprenticeship is one in which the neophyte's mental energies are concentrated on a particular body of data, concepts and methods. It is a mistake to believe that the observation and description of facts in a disciplined way comes naturally to everyone who is driven by curiosity. The new entrant...learns that the development and refinement of concepts is a cumulative process, sustained by the work of generations. Finally, there are methods and procedures that can be mastered only through a long and laborious apprenticeship (2000[1995]: 139).

MC's mentoring program is built upon the same assumption that there are no short cuts to becoming a researcher and the process of becoming one entails "a long and laborious apprenticeship." As the

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<sup>17</sup> See Onta (2005) for further details. Similar training exercises have been tried by other academic NGOs in Nepal. For instance, Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies (NCCS) has organized an annual residential workshop for research trainees for most of the past decade. During the workshop the trainees are expected to read a substantial number of academic articles and subsequently they are required to participate in survey-type data collection under the supervision of a senior researcher. However since their participation is not encouraged in the writing of the final analysis, few trainees have produced written work based on the surveys they have conducted.

present chair of MC Dr Seira Tamang once put it, this "building of professional standards and initiation into the field has to be under girded by trust, communication and certain skills built with a considerable amount of time, energy and other investment by both the mentor and the apprentices." The fact that several individuals who have undergone this mentoring process at MC have subsequently gone on to pursue higher studies in conventional universities in the North as well as produce books (monographs and edited volumes) and articles "shows that effective mechanisms for mentoring can be cultivated in Nepali research NGO settings."<sup>18</sup>

But the program does not have a 100 percent success rate. Trainees who wanted to pursue an eventual career in research have generally succeeded while others have either dropped out or not done too well in terms of research outputs. In that case, is MC's mentoring model good for countries where the conventional universities are falling apart or where they were never strong in terms of teaching research skills? With a success rate of over 50 percent, I would think so. But this practice has its own limitations. Given the relatively small number of research trainees who can be mentored in any one academic NGO at any given time or even over a decade, it must be acknowledged that such entities can keep hopes of intensive research training alive in an environment dominated by large student enrollments compared to the number of faculty members in the universities. In other words, given the high student-faculty ratio in many Southern universities, students do not learn much research skills even during the course of doing a master's thesis. In this context, the mentoring program offered by academic NGOs can be a model to adopt for intergenerational transfer of research skills.

### Publications

MC has put together and published some 70 books since 2001. One set of them have been what are called *readers* in the academic book market in Europe or America. MC's readers have focused on themes such as the dalit movement, the *janajati* movement, the Maoist movement, environmental justice, the poverty debate in

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<sup>18</sup> Personal communication from Seira Tamang, 2006.

Nepal, and the links between health, society and politics. Several bibliographies have also been published and most of them have been uploaded in MC's website. Other books published have been monographs and edited volumes on various themes including media, food security, urban livelihoods, the Madhesi movement of 2007, social inclusion, state restructuring, biodiversity and livelihoods, middle-class culture in Kathmandu, challenges of civil control of the Nepal Army, and unequal access to higher education. Most of the books have been in Nepali primarily because unlike elsewhere in South Asia, English is not the dominant intellectual and academic language in Nepal. The most effective writers and public intellectuals in the country write in Nepali and have little or no access to English as an analytic language.

Among the books published by MC, some 40 percent plus have been on the Nepali media. Eighteen books on various aspects of the print, radio and television media have been published based on MC's own research or research coordination. Similarly it has published six more books on Nepali media written by various journalism practitioners and scholars based elsewhere. Six volumes of the annual journal *Media Adhyayan* have been published since 2006. Most of these books and the journal issues have been produced in close collaboration with media practitioners (i.e., former and current editors, reporters and producers). Hence in most of them, the readers are likely to find writings that are a mix of products from various 'media studies' modes written by researchers and memoirs or reflections written by former or current media practitioners. MC has also published books on the history of media in different parts of Nepal and on other specific themes (e.g. women and television) written by media practitioners and researchers. The objective behind these publications is to work with draft manuscripts and help the authors turn them into books through several rounds of peer reviews and editorial support to improve their analysis and writing. These mechanisms, which are largely absent in the commercial academic publishing scene in Nepal, add value to the contents of books and characterize the making of most Chautari-published books.

How do the books produced by MC relate to how Nepal is being studied in Tribhuvan University in Nepal and in other universities

in countries (such as those in India, Japan, France, Germany, Austria, UK, USA, etc.) which have a research highway to Nepal? For in-country scholarship the increasing corpus of work in Nepali is already extending the domains of knowledge in several different subjects while making new knowledge accessible to students and scholars who do not read English with ease. Some of the books published by MC have included contributions from university-based academics while others have now been included in bachelor and masters-level syllabi at Tribhuvan University in related disciplines. A few others have been recommended as reference books to students. However, the new knowledge created is not beyond criticism. For instance, it is possible to characterize some of this new knowledge to be overly empirical, the kind that is lacking engagement with more subtle social theory. But even such type of knowledge production can be defended on the ground that it is a route well used in other national academic traditions. For instance, it can be claimed that the three-volume study of the history of radio in Nepal editorially prepared by the media study group of MC and published in 2004-2005 has established a base for further studies of the history of broadcast media in Nepal (Onta et al., 2004, 2005; Parajulee and Onta, 2005). It would be presumptuous to compare this set of work with the multi-volume institutional history of the BBC done by the British historian Asa Briggs but it should be recalled here – as has been mentioned by a second generation historian of British broadcasting Paddy Scannell – that “without the prior existence of a definitive ‘total’ history of the BBC” written by Briggs, his own “social history of the beginnings of broadcasting in the UK...could not have been written” (2002: 201).

With respect to how Nepal is studied outside of Nepal, MC books have had very little influence. For one thing, the fact that most of the books are in Nepali makes it difficult for non-Nepali specialists of Nepal to use them and engage with them. To date, no MC published book in the Nepali language has been reviewed by any non-Nepali academic practitioner with research links to Nepal. Despite lip service to the contrary, most non-Nepali scholarship on Nepal does not rely on reading published sources in Nepali and Nepal's other languages. The political economy of being a Nepal expert outside of Nepal has been such that fluent linguistic skills

and engagement with Nepali languages *in the analytic register* has not been part of the game. Hence, it is unlikely that academic NGOs that produce their work in Nepali or Nepal's other languages will influence how academic work related to Nepal is produced elsewhere. With respect to works in English, they will be consumed in the same manner in which similar products of academic labour from university-based academics are routinely used in the profession.<sup>19</sup>

MC researchers also edit two journals and the organization publishes one of them itself.<sup>20</sup> The first of the two journals, *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, established in 1996, is a biannual and bilingual journal editorially prepared at MC and published by a Kathmandu-based commercial publisher, Mandala Book Point. It is an academic journal not too different from the thousands of others out there in the world. However its editorial policy does emphasize “work that makes use of Nepali scholarship whenever it is relevant to the topic under study.” It is a journal that publishes “theoretical innovations...based precisely on careful and detailed study of Nepali history and society” (SINHAS, 1996: 1). After publishing the first 20 issues of the journal, its editors claimed “While we leave it to our readers to judge how successful we have been in consistently meeting these objectives in the past ten years, we say with some confidence that we have published some of the best examples of academic writings that meet both of these objectives in the various issues of SINHAS” (SINHAS, 2006: 1). By late 2011, 30 separate issues of the journal in fifteen

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<sup>19</sup> Since academic NGOs including MC produce some of their books via cross-professional approaches, it can be said that they are contributing to a new modality of knowledge production that, in their partial hybridity, are creating a corpus of knowledge whose foundational parameters are not necessarily the conventional academic disciplines. In challenging the dominance of the disciplinary academic mode that has spread as the international research regime (Appadurai, 2000), these academic NGOs are producing knowledge that does not necessarily take a citation-world of prior existing literature as the starting point of *all* research. Instead experiential politics and moral anger are equally likely starting points for research-based enterprises executed by academic NGOs. This subject deserves a separate treatment on some other occasion.

<sup>20</sup> For a number of years, MC was also one of the publishers of the biannual semi-academic journal *Rupantaran*. After the first four issues had been published, MC ended its participation in the publication of this journal in 2009.

volumes had been published. About 145 full-length articles, several dozen commentaries and book reviews and a few literature review essays and bibliographies have been published in these issues.<sup>21</sup>

The second journal, *Media Adhyayan*, established in 2006, is an annual journal in the Nepali language published by MC itself. The objective here is to publish work that examines various facets of the media in Nepal in the only journal dedicated to the subject. Media practitioners and researchers have been encouraged to publish rigorously empirical work on themes that interest them so that our understanding of how the media works in Nepal is enhanced. Its editors hope that the publication of such writings will also provide the foundation for more theoretically sophisticated studies of the media in Nepal in the future. All articles submitted to the journal or commissioned by the editors are peer reviewed and they undergo a significant process of revision before they are published. 46 articles, over two dozen commentaries, thirteen memoir essays, twenty book reviews and a few other items have been published in the six issues of this annual journal by late 2011.<sup>22</sup> Several articles published in both journals are now included in relevant reading lists for students in universities in Nepal and abroad. The editorial commitment of MC as a publisher is reflected in the way in which its editorial staff helps other writers say what they want to say most rigorously in a language that is accessible to readers.

All of these various activities – discussions, research, research mentoring, publications and the operation of a research library open to the public—contribute to MC's efforts to create a collegiate of academic practitioners in Nepal though the inculcation of a conducive tradition of scholarship generation, consolidation and dispersion. In the Nepali knowledge generation landscape, its most serious contribution is the establishment of relatively exacting protocols of research and publications. These and the end products

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<sup>21</sup> An author index that covers all fifteen volumes can be found online at [http://martinchautari.org.np/sinhas\\_biblio\\_author.html](http://martinchautari.org.np/sinhas_biblio_author.html)

<sup>22</sup> The editorial experiences of preparing and publishing the first five issue of this journal between 2006 and 2010 have been described by one of its editors, Devraj Humagain (2011). An author index that covers the first six annual volumes can be found at [http://martinchautari.org.np/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=205](http://martinchautari.org.np/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=205)

that reach the public have earned MC its credibility as an academic NGO.

Do all of these activities make MC a think tank?<sup>23</sup> In a landscape of higher education and research dominated by universities and colleges, small autonomous, not-for-profit research institutions that exist in the US often focus on one theme (say energy) or a small set of themes (security, illegal migration) and more often than not, produce researched texts that try to directly intervene in the policy debates in political circles. These institutions are often called think tanks. Since immediate policy prescriptions have not been the main output of MC, I don't think it can be called a think tank in the American sense. However since think tanks in different parts of the world come in different sizes and they pursue various goals with their work done in a variety of academic traditions and contexts (Stone and Denham 2004, McGann with Sabitini 2011), it is possible that MC's work trajectory makes the organization similar to think tanks that operate in some other parts of the world. The similarity would be especially sharp if both think tanks and academic NGOs are seen to be not-for-profit entities producing non-proprietary knowledge. Nevertheless, in this article I have chosen to locate MC in the academic NGO landscape as its legal standing as an institution in the context of Nepal's laws and its work in the Nepali knowledge generation field are best situated in that domain.

But that does not mean that the reach of MC's work is hermetically sealed within that domain. This becomes clear when we take note of the increasing linkages between MC and universities. As mentioned earlier, academics based in Nepal's universities (and increasingly those based in universities outside of Nepal) have participated in MC activities as discussion/seminar presenters, as contributors of academic articles in MC's journals and books, and occasionally, as external mentors to MC research staff or research fellows. On the other hand, several MC staffers have taught specific modules in various faculties at Tribhuvan University, given a number of guest lectures, and have been asked to develop

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<sup>23</sup> I was asked this question by several colleagues after the presentation of this material as a public lecture at Trinity College in March 2007.

new courses and their contents. Institutional interactions with specific university departments and co-hosting of seminars and conferences have also been realized. As mentioned earlier, articles and books produced from MC have been included or recommended in the readings for specific university courses. This two-way traffic has grown in the most recent years. Academic NGOs are not a substitute for full-fledged universities (cf. Zeleza, 2002) and their work is best done while engaging with existing university-based programs and academics.

## 5. Important Issues for Consideration

In the final section of this article, I would like to highlight two related issues for discussion with respect to the work of academic NGOs. First is the relationship between the work of academic NGOs and their sources of funding and second is the link between the nature of the work of academic NGOs and the regimes of accountability most appropriate for them.

### Funding and editorial control

Academic NGOs in Nepal such as MC are for the most part dependent upon funds provided by international donor agencies and foundations. This is so because state support for such type of institutions is few and far between in Nepal and there is virtually no private sector funding available for the kind of work done by academic NGOs.<sup>24</sup> This situation is unlikely to change in the near future. With respect to funds provided by international donor agencies and foundations, they usually come in three forms. The most usual one is funding provided for specific projects after their particular objectives and activities have been discussed and agreed upon by both sides. Such funds are mostly spent on project activities but also usually cover the full or partial salary of project-specific personnel, partial rental and communication costs, and

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<sup>24</sup> A Nepali company from the private sector Buddha Air supported Social Science Baha for four years to organize its annual Mahesh C. Regmi lecture. The support totaled over NRs 400,000 (four lakhs). Also an individual Nepali donor, Mr. Bihari Krishna Shrestha, has gifted a sum of NRs. five million (50 lakhs) to Social Science Baha to establish an endowment for ethnographic research. See Shrestha (2011) for a discussion of the factors that led him to make this donation.

often include a small overhead to cover organizational expenses. Since project-lives are usually a year-long and almost never longer than two years, this funding is by default short-term. Second, funding is provided to cover part of the expenses of the academic NGO after its medium-term work plan has been finalized. Here there is more flexibility for the organization regarding the choices it can make with respect to how those funds are to be allocated amongst the work to be done during the agreed upon period. An example of such funding is the four-year agreement signed in 2009 between MC and the Danish government's initiative in Nepal, Danida HUGOU that will provide MC a total of NRs. 48 million (4.8 crores) over the entire four-year period. Third, some Nepali academic NGOs have managed to get endowment grants from international foundations. Specific programs executed by them are to be supported from the interest earned from such endowments. An example of such a grant is the one received by the Institute for Integrated Development Studies from the Ford Foundation a number of years ago to support research on the economy by women economists.

Given this funding scenario, what is the relationship between the knowledge produced by academic NGOs such as MC and the donors who provide funds to carry out those studies? It is definitely the case that donor money is available to study certain themes and those are related to the broader priority areas identified by the donors themselves. Hence academic NGOs are to a certain extent constrained by what donor funding can be used for in the choice of their subjects of study.<sup>25</sup> But this is a phenomenon that is also

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<sup>25</sup> Shah (2002) went to the extent of suggesting that the availability of donor money for 'action research' has not only influenced the choices made by students in the selection of disciplines to pursue at the masters level (namely, this has resulted in an explosion of student enrollment in the discipline of sociology/anthropology in the past decade), but also in the content of the courses offered. According to him, when the Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology at Tribhuvan University was established in the early 1980s, it had "a strong focus on general theory and research, with only a minor emphasis on development issues. The market demand has now tilted the curriculum's emphasis towards applied courses in rural development, project design, appraisal and management" (2002: 148).

encountered to a certain extent by academics working in conventional universities who increasingly have to apply for grants earmarked for specific themes given the tightening of the funds available for any-topic research in the social sciences in many countries. Academic NGOs are further constrained by the short-lives of project funding cycles. This means studies that would require multiple years of research and writing are unlikely to be executed by them or these are conceptualized in multiple one- or two-year phases and executed when supporting grants are available.

If these are some of the given constraints of the context in which donor-funded academic NGOs work, does this then warrant the easy criticisms often made against such organizations that they do what donors tell them to do or they do not have long-term research interests of their own and change themes to work on different subjects as and when donor money travels?<sup>26</sup> While there is some validity in these criticisms, they hardly constitute the whole truth. The fact of the matter is that some academic NGOs like MC have been able to maintain editorial control over what they have researched, written and published even when their work has been fully or partially supported by donors with offices in South Asia (or elsewhere) or foundations located in different parts of the world. It is also the case that some academic NGOs have been able to work on a specific theme for over a decade (e.g. MC's research on media in Nepal), building cumulative knowledge on the subject by focusing on its various dimensions at different times. Furthermore, some academic NGOs are better positioned than others to negotiate with donors for full or large degrees of editorial control over the research process and outcomes. This situation demands a more nuanced and complex reading of the relationship between academic NGOs and their donors when it comes to the issue of setting the terms of reference for research work and editorial control over the written product. This is a subject that deserves more public self-reflection on the part of academic NGOs

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<sup>26</sup> The repetitious nature of such writings in the mainstream press indicates that Nepali media falls easy prey to unimaginative production sequences and rarely does its job in depth before making damning accusations against NGOs.

and their donor-funders who often characterize the former as 'partners' these days.<sup>27</sup>

### Accountability regimes

To think about issues related to the accountability of the work of academic NGOs, we first need to think about the kind of 'services' academic NGOs provide in relation to what the bulk of the NGOs do (namely, development service delivery). I think knowledge production is a service just like the delivery of vaccines or the building of a school in a relatively remote village. However there is also a difference. Since much of what happens during knowledge production and distribution cannot be shown in a tangible way (say, in the manner of a newly erected school building), it is much harder to publicly show the results of this particular service at a time when NGO work is increasingly audited under strict monitoring and evaluation (M & E) schemes by donors and their consultants. It is also the case that much of the knowledge production work cannot be shown to produce immediate results and the impact of such work, even in the longer run, cannot be fully captured by quantitative indicators in portable log-frame based M & E schemes. Hence this kind of work suffers from both a visibility and an accountability crisis.

In this context, how should we think about accountability regimes that are most suitable for academic NGOs? To begin with, it is clear that the accountant's sense of accountability – documenting how the funds that were given to a NGO was spent according to the procedures laid out in the project contract to do the mutually agreed work—is not adequate for academic NGOs. Instead the notion of accountability needs to be rendered in a multiple-constituency model similar to those that bear upon academics in colleges or universities. There, at least in the analytic sense, first you have an accountability system where the faculty member as a

<sup>27</sup> Here I am reiterating a point made by Tamang (2002) when she states "in the context of civil society, more complex and contradictory understandings of the role of donors and foreign aid is necessary" (2002: 310). To begin with, donor-funded academic NGO practitioners could explain to the public at large the degrees of freedom they enjoy (or don't enjoy) in their work in comparison with researcher colleagues in conventional universities in Nepal and elsewhere.

teacher is responsible to the students for the quality of her teaching (after all they are the paying consumers of her teaching). Second, the faculty member as a researcher is responsible to her peers for the intellectual originality and integrity of her work (they are the ones who evaluate these characteristics in any work put out for publication or public consumption). Third, the faculty member as a staff of the college or university is responsible to its management for her participation in extra-academic services such as departmental management or the hiring of new faculty members. In the academic NGO situation too, the organization is accountable to its members and the donors for the money it receives for any specific research project or general institutional support. It is responsible to the peers in similar organizations and conventional universities and research centres for the quality and the integrity of the work it does and makes public in any form. It is also responsible to the general public whose scrutiny it should invite as a public knowledge and research institution. Finding a balance between these various constituencies of accountability might not be so easy but is quite essential if academic NGOs want to be seen as credible players in the academic and NGO worlds. Credibility is not earned from the legal location of academic NGOs. It can only be earned by the track record of protocols established and followed during the course of knowledge production and the quality of the end products.<sup>28</sup> Here quality must be as that perceived by those who generate knowledge, its users and relevant peers in the landscape.

### 6. Conclusion

I have belabored the following point in this article: institutions other than conventional colleges and universities in the form of academic NGOs have grown in the countries of the global South for a variety of structural and personal reasons and are increasingly involved in the knowledge production enterprise. They are

<sup>28</sup> This is also the view endorsed by Bazán et al. (2008). Lister (2003) proposes a complex view of NGO legitimacy that goes beyond the technical/managerial issues related to accountability, representativeness and performance. An analysis of the sources of legitimacy of academic NGOs deserves a full treatment on some other occasion.

providing examples of how research, mentoring, publications, and seminar series can be realized in academic environments which lack traditional strength in these sectors. In closing, I suggest that the role of academic NGOs in knowledge production is especially important in countries where the conventional universities were never very strong in terms of research capacity. They are or will also be important in countries where the erstwhile research capacities of universities have been decimated or rendered functionally ill due to civil wars, insurgencies, ill managed growth, rampant politicization or privatization of higher education. Hence, their experiences deserve both a greater degree of international public scrutiny and critical-collaborative support from academics based in conventional universities.

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