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INTRODUCTION

DOING DEVELOPMENT IN THE POST-DEVELOPMENT AGE

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This issue of *New Angle: Nepal Journal of Social Science and Public Policy* focuses on the theme of foreign aid and development in Nepal. This issue intends to reflect on and question current development practice in Nepal and to offer pointers to the future. It made sense in that Nepal has been projected as a developmentalist state and society right from its opening to the outside world in early 1950s. Over the decades since, development or *bikas* assumed a privileged status in terms of its mission, narratives, agents, practices, and technologies, and indeed several agriculture plant varieties and animal breeds. A *bikase* chicken or pig, for example, sharply contrasts with what is, or used to be, local or indigenous breed. In public imagination, things *bikase* are more productive, more desirable, more emancipatory and more egalitarian. The *bikase* activists are claimed to be more enlightened and civilised, more transparent, and democratic yet politically

neutral actors.¹ Over the past seven decades, Nepal's political discourse, government institutions, non-governmental organisations, the "civil society" and several civic movements and the market actors have been thoroughly subsumed under the project of development. This craving for development is epitomised in the government's declaration of the target of graduating Nepal into a 'developing country' category from a 'least developed country' by 2022. Indeed, the civilising mission continues with its own rhythm, congratulating itself, and felicitating an ever increasing range of actors interested in pursuing their own interests in the post-development age.

Nepal also exhibits a constant ambivalence in regard to development and what it means for individual lives and livelihoods and shared destiny of its peoples. On one hand, a strong craving exists in favor of valorising ideas, institutions, technologies

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¹ See, for example, Bhabha, B. K. (ed.), 1990. *Nation and narration*. Oxon: Routledge; Rist, G., 1997. *The history of development: from western origins to global faith*. Trans. P. Camiller. London: Zed Books.

and processes as well as 'scientific' concepts and categories that have been promoted, or at times imposed, by ever-evolving range of international development agencies and domestic agents recruited by them. On the other hand, there is an unease with the same 'alien' themes, often seen as makings of *dollar kheti* of development industry. Emphasis here has been on the privileging of what is uniquely Nepali; what fits to the distinctive policy-institutional environment; and indeed what works under disparate socio-ecological contexts in the different parts of the country. There should then be no surprise in identifying a two-fold conflict of sorts, as one posits this ambivalence against persistent frustration over the 'failed', 'fragile' state, and 'failed development' and attempts at identifying the causes and the agents to blame for. Not surprisingly, this conflict also has to do with wide-ranging contestation over who is to be legitimate agent for delivering emancipation from poverty, miseries, neglect and exploitation.

These themes would necessitate a thorough examination of how development was envisioned for Nepal, how it was performed over the several decades of 'planned development', what worked and what did not, and how politics was played out for and against development. In this respect, *New Angle* has been projected with modest ambitions about coverage and contributions in the journal are envisioned

to be those that lie between journalistic write-up and a standard scientific paper of an international journal. The thrust has been not so much on insisting on highest academic quality, but instead on promoting a culture of contributing to policy-relevant debates amongst mid-career researchers and practitioners. The papers published in this issue were selected insofar they provide unique insights and perspectives on the practices, approaches and thinking on development in Nepal.

The four papers that have been collected in this volume speak a range of themes that problematise the way development project is envisioned, enacted, and evaluated. In the first paper, Sharad Ghimire focuses on the flood of 1954 that devastated a significant part of Nepal and provides detailed account of how that flood provided a ground for development interventions from donors and indeed in shaping the developmentalist outlook of the Nepal government. The paper shows in great length on how disasters are a politically contentious subject matter and provide a strong contrast to more recent framing of the response to disasters as being a technocratic and institutional fix. The second paper by Stuty Maskey, on the other hand, makes initial explorations on questioning the 'group model' of development intervention, which became a hugely popular approach from 1970s onwards and still remains a major pillar and 'entry point' of development to this day. The author emphasises the need

for questioning the group model in view of group fatigue caused by increasing number of groups, but with control of many of the groups by local elites, leading perpetuation of inequality and exclusion at the grassroots.

The third paper, contributed by Clement *et al.*, examines irrigation schemes developed under an aid-funded project in respect to modes of their delivery, effectiveness, ownership and outcomes. While considerable shift has been around on aid discourse since the declaration of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially on themes of ownership, policy alignment, participation and accountability, the paper identifies significant schematic loopholes that exist in realising outcomes of aid projects. The authors suggest that, in realising more transformative outcomes, aid projects will do better with reorienting goals in favour of social and environmental justice, rather than framing aid management processes and outcomes in techno-bureaucratic terms. In the fourth paper, Bhatta and Bardecki examine the effectiveness of foreign aid in effecting the desired change in local community. Drawing on a case study of Sagarmatha National Park Forestry Project, the paper questions the practice of self-congratulation in the performance of aid-supported projects and calls for the need of independent and objective evaluations.

The papers collected in this volume point us to a number of themes, which resonate

some of the ongoing aid discourse. First, they point out an unease with which aid discourse conceals the politics around the central state and in local contexts and detaches aid projects away from that context into a neat technocratic frames. This points to a need for an engaged aid project governance. Second, they also point to how the developmental outlook of Nepalese state matters in identifying and justifying the need of an aid project.

A third theme that emerges from the papers is the role of main actors – the government, donors and aid project managers/contractors and local beneficiary community. There is often a confusion about who is to do what and how. Often these are imposed by the aid agency, but at several points these questions are also resolved with political contestation at different levels, as we increasingly see a street level fight for resources amongst aid service providers. A fourth theme—which has come up increasingly with more force in the aid community—concerns with the need of monitoring and evaluation of aid projects. A problem on this, however, lies in recruiting who evaluates whose work and in determination of criteria and indicators with which the use of aid funds could be meaningfully assessed. The government of Nepal—through its National Planning Commission—has issued Monitoring and Evaluation guidelines, but there is yet no evaluation policy at work—and many projects end up in friendly notes of

congratulation. As Clement *et al.* suggest, it is also important to reframe the criteria and indicators of aid project outcomes so that their evaluation insights could lead to more transformative outcomes.

Overall, the papers highlight the need for more critical assessment of the ongoing approaches, aid project development modalities, and the role of different actors in design, funding and management of aid projects. With Sustainable Development Goals on the horizon, and as more and

more development projects come under corporate modes of operation, the questions of participation, transparency, policy alignment and cross-stakeholder accountability will certainly achieve more prominence. This issue of *New Angle* brought these prominent aspects of doing development at the present moment. And, coming issues will further strive to bring out both theoretical and policy insights on the increasingly elusive project of development.