Making Pickles during a Ceasefire

Livelihood, Sustainability, and Development in Nagaland

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Development projects in the North East are packaged as economic interventions to improve the lives of people, but are detached from militarised ground realities. These initiatives to rebuild post-conflict societies mainly focus on training entrepreneurs and promoting livelihood schemes while overlooking how violence has transformed the very foundation of these societies. Generalising from the example of a workshop on food preservation in Nagaland that had no participants, this paper points out that governance should be rooted in the political and social history of a place – it should not be categorised as a time-bound crisis management project.

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In 2001, the Government of India set up the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) to plan, execute, and monitor social and economic development schemes in north-east India, a region that has been in conflict since independence in 1947. The 1990s and 2000s was a period when insurgent groups and the central government signed numerous ceasefire agreements. Since then, there has been an increasing interest among policymakers and business groups to determine the "potentials and drawbacks" of north-east India. Such expressions to promote development have also found their way into India's five year plans in the last decade.

The section on "Spatial Development and Regional Imbalance" in the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007–2012) devotes a sizeable segment to the North East and describes how development has been slow in the region, but stops short of explaining the reasons for it. The document further defines all the states in the North East as "special category states," which require special attention in areas of governance as well as social and economic sectors.

While the Eleventh Five Year Plan is an important document to gauge the central government's sense of urgency in bringing development to the North East, my intention is neither to dwell on the document nor on the official strategies to introduce developmental programmes and projects in the region. I am afraid that such an exercise would quickly crumble into a critique of the state and my position would be anti-developmental, anti-neo-liberal, and anti-privatisation. I would conclude with a list of highly objectionable developmental projects that the central government is planning to carry out in north-east India such as building dams across the Eastern Himalayas in Arunachal Pradesh and its tributaries downstream. I would also condemn the Nagaland Legislative Assembly's resolution to declare the state as a special development zone, and protest against the exploration of oil and minerals in the hills of Manipur and Nagaland.

My position would resonate with the voluminous literature and political positions critical of developmental programmes in the North East. Of course, most grand projects have been detrimental and they seldom benefit the poor and other marginalised groups. Yet, denouncing these activities is not good enough if we have to engage and connect the paradoxical links they offer. First, development projects in the North East are packaged as economic interventions to improve the lives of people, but they are detached from militarised ground realities. Second, such developmental initiatives to rebuild militarised societies predominantly focus on training entrepreneurs and

planting livelihood schemes while overlooking how violence has transformed the very foundation of these societies.

In Nagaland, the ongoing emphasis on development and progress obliterates how everyday practices of ethics, morality, and solidarity in the family unit, gender relations, and, most importantly, in the relationship between Naga citizens and the Indian state have been profoundly shaped by the long conflict.

During the period of armed conflict and militarisation that has been on for more than half a century now, new forms of social relations have emerged in Naga society. Militarisation, as we know, is a system where the functions and structures of society are predominantly governed along the lines of militaristic principles and ideology. A militarised place conjures an image of a society where the ideals and guarantees assumed to exist in normal societies are put aside. For instance, in the North East, extra-constitutional regulations like the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (1958) have resulted in a high number of human rights violations, deaths, and violence against women and children.

Such distressing accounts often present people living in militarised societies as helpless and powerless. Today, however, the quest to promote development and growth in these places has produced novel ways to implement sustainability programmes and livelihood initiatives on the ground. These activities are carried out to rebuild societies that have experienced war, or as official documents announce, to nurture peace and harmony. In Nagaland, after Naga insurgents and the central government entered into a ceasefire agreement in 1997, villagers were relocated from interrogation rooms to microfinance classes, and farmers previously restricted indoors due to curfews and the war were invited to attend livelihood-awareness classes and demonstration workshops for cash crops such as rubber and tea.

As noted, it is not enough to denounce current developmental activities because they aim at improving the lives of people ravaged by war and conflict, and also offer them a possibility for rebuilding their lives and societies, however problematic the circumstances. What kind of imagination about development do such visions inspire? Can these post-conflict militarised societies be considered beneficiaries of a developmental regime?

Such enquiries and insights, I believe, lead us to ask quite different questions and bring us around to explore how governments and organisations – local, regional, and international – working to implement development programmes approach societies ravaged by conflict and war. Do these institutions take into consideration pre-existing conditions of inclusion and exclusion? In what ways do they negotiate the new power relations of developmental brokers and dealers that have emerged in these societies? And finally what are the emerging realities of the social world where infrastructural interventions and economic developments are taking place?

Livelihood and Sustainability

In the last decade or so, ecological sustainability has become a global theme for agricultural food production. It has appeared in Nagaland as well. After the ceasefire in 1997, a number of national and international organisations began working with the state government to promote livelihood programmes and assist subsistence cultivators. Funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in partnership with the state government, launched a project titled Sustainable Land and Ecosystem Management in Shifting Cultivation Areas of Nagaland for Ecological and Livelihood Security in 2009. This project is now going on and will wrap up in 2015.[1]

The UNDP-state government programme is concentrated on three districts in Nagaland – Wokha, Mokokchung and Mon. It is a part of GEF-financed projects to address global environmental issues, such as ecosystems and biodiversity, sustainable development, climate change, land degradation, international waters, the ozone layer, and persistent organic pollutants. The GEF is the world's largest public fund that aims to improve the global environment, and has provided $11.5 billion in grants since 1991 for projects in 183 countries, predominantly in developing ones where societies are undergoing economic transitions.

The UNDP-inspired project has organised workshops and programmes about sustainable agriculture, ecological management, and building institutional and support structures for cultivators across rural Nagaland since 2009. During my fieldwork, I attended one such training workshop on food preservation organised by the state government. When I arrived at the designated village, there was a training team of two employees with master's degrees in home science and an officer from the Department of Agriculture. None of the participants were in sight. "We have had to wind up early due to poor attendance," the trainers and the officer told me. Curious, I enquired whether the cultivators were properly informed of the workshop. The officer said,

> Cultivators cannot spare even 30 minutes (now). They are *jhum* (shifting) cultivators, so it is a time-bound activity. They have to tend the vegetables and other produce in the field – some of them are ready for picking now, others need attention. It cannot wait. Otherwise, the produce will be damaged. So the low level of attendance of people for the training does not mean they are not interested or that the department did not inform them in advance.

It appeared as though the UNDP development project and the cultivators were operating on different time frames. While officers and trainers on the field followed the project timeline, the cultivators stuck with the agricultural cycle. Villages and districts were chosen for the UNDP programme on the basis of the intensity of jhum cultivation. The objective was to control jhum cultivation and minimise its adverse impact on the environment. I learnt that responses to the UNDP-led project in other villages had also been unsatisfactory. One of the trainers explained the situation,

> Those who know are serious about it. But there are a lot of people in the village who are not aware of this programme, and so we have to go to all the villages and talk to them and make them aware of it. They are illiterate and uneducated about the programme. The order of the programme is the same, but only the places are different.

Interrupting, the officer said,

> This is a training-cum-awareness programme. We are telling them that UNDP has reached your village. We are announcing it to the

> participants. But they are not aware of UNDP. (They wonder) What is UNDP? What is their job profile? Who are they? They are also not aware of the objectives of this particular programme, which is for them to have sustainable livelihoods that maintain the ecosystem.

He began explaining the project, but stopped abruptly and handed me a pamphlet instead. "Everything is written here," he said, and added, "The translation is on the back, but it is not a good one. I am not satisfied with the translation. I carry my own translation when I conduct the workshop." The training brochure laid out the programme for the workshop. The cultivators were expected to interact with the trainers in a question and answer session, but the lack of interest reduced the programme to an official exercise.

When I asked him again whether he preserved food in the way advised by the UNDP and the state government, he smiled sheepishly, "My wife will not allow it. We have layman's technology to preserve chillies and other vegetables." The officer then described how his household preserved food.

> We wash the green chillies and pour bamboo shoot juice over them. We can thus preserve vegetables for seven to eight months. It is the same for tomatoes. There is no chemical and the bamboo shoot water will preserve the microorganisms inside. There is another technology for preserving bamboo shoots. We cut tender bamboo shoots into fine pieces and boil them. Then we pour the hot broth into a jar and store it. We preserved bamboo shoots in 2008, and we still use them.

One of the trainers, Tia, described how households in Nagaland followed indigenous methods to preserve food, but emphasised that the objective of the UNDP and the state government was to introduce cultivators and households to "new technology". This new technology, I learnt, was a pickle-making technique with two ingredients – mustard oil and vinegar. She explained this by comparing the lives of cultivators in Nagaland with those in other parts of India. She had earned her university degree in food preservation and management from Gujarat, and said, "In Gujarat it is different. Villages are more advanced." The measure of development and progress was not the existing knowledge about food preservation, but whether it was scientific enough to make the food palatable for the market. Underlining the importance of scientific preservation, Tia said,

> I have seen that most of the people here (in Nagaland) process a lot of food. They dry their food, but our main objective is giving them all the technology we have, so that there will not be any food spoilage. We get green chillies, which are organic, but they spoil fast. So they preserve the chillies in bamboo shoot juice. But only the Nagas or people in the North East region will like the taste. To market the chillies outside, we are teaching them another technology through the teaching manual.

The scientific methods of food preservation depended on the marketability of the taste. The field officer passed on questions about these to the trainers. He said, "Talk to Tia. She is a better resource person. Since we use chemicals in the food preservation workshop, it is better to talk to the expert." The presence of an expert not only gave the discussion an official air, but also made the programme more authoritative and prescriptive. The training, it appeared, was about training cultivators to acquire new tastes to join the global market. Gaining entry to the market economy was considered an important indicator of the success or failure of the sustainability, development, and livelihood programme.

The discussion soon became less about food preservation and more about the awareness and illiteracy of the cultivators. Words such as "sustainability," "ecosystem," "entrepreneurs," "management," "livelihood," and "food security" had been translated for the food preservation programme. The new ingredients, mustard oil and vinegar, would make the preserved food more palatable. When I enquired who would eat the pickles, the official did not respond, but instead said, "We are focusing on self-help groups (SHGs)."

The UNDP-state government food sustainability programme was ultimately geared towards creating a microcredit system to connect with the market and generating income for cultivators in rural Nagaland. There was a strong gender empowerment aspect to the programme. "We suggest that it is better for women to form these groups since they are more knowledgeable about produce," the officer explained. Women SHGs under the programme were given Rs 10,000 each to start pickle projects.

The target was to sell the first batch of chilli pickles from these workshops at the North East Expo in October 2010. "UNDP has said that if an SHG can make 300 packets of preserved chilli pickles, it will be given a UNDP-sponsored stall at the expo. But it depends on the women," said the officer, shifting the responsibility of meeting the deadline to women already overwhelmed with domestic and agricultural responsibilities.

The womenfolk that the programme wooed in the foothill village looked after their households and carried out their daily chores – cooking, cleaning, feeding the children, looking after the poultry, and taking care of the jhum fields. Many of them tried to make ends meet by selling produce at the weekly market. In the name of women's empowerment, development programmes on sustainable ecosystems and livelihoods loaded them with additional responsibilities. According to Ferguson, such developments and livelihood initiatives are part of a "worldwide shift in thinking about poverty and social and humanitarian assistance … (It believes) that hunger is best dealt with by boosting the purchasing power of those at risk" (2010: 178). Here, the state government and the UNDP link development and progress, employment, gender empowerment, and entrepreneurship to the market – they are not treated as issues that the state needs to look into.

Bringing Back the State

Philanthropic foundations, non-governmental organisations, and voluntary agencies play important roles in rebuilding post-conflict militarised societies. The Gates Foundation, UNDP, and Doctors without Borders have made their presence felt in Nagaland since the ceasefire in 1997. Ranging from conducting developmental workshops to carrying out malaria awareness campaigns, these organisations have, at times, taken over the roles and responsibilities of the state to deliver basic amenities, such as health and education. While these initiatives have had some real policy implications on the ground, it is important to recognise that such forms of intervention absolve the state of

any accountability to its most vulnerable and marginalised people. It is in this spirit that I argue that governance should be rooted in the political and social history of a place – it should not be categorised as a time-bound crisis management project.

Therefore, what does it mean to bring back the state in rebuilding societies where there is an ongoing ceasefire agreement, as in Nagaland? In what ways can we begin to engage with processes where the role of the state as a perpetrator is transformed into that of a rehabilitator? How can we connect pickle-making workshops in rural Nagaland with complex processes such as global sustainability, ecosystems, and biodiversity? It would be a mistake to demand that the Indian government rebuild Naga society to what it was in the 1930s and 1940s before the armed conflict began. When I underline the importance of the state in rehabilitating militarised societies, I am saying that the process of reconstruction of a democratic society, which establishes practices of justice and human rights, must begin by acknowledging that the state has played a fundamental role in legalising violence and creating a milieu of impunity.

An elderly Naga woman wearing rubber slippers and carrying a bamboo basket on her head against the backdrop of a virgin forest was the cover girl of the 2013 annual performance report of the UNDP-supported, GEF-financed projects. The frameworks and methods employed in awareness workshops, and the institutional structures that have come up to support subsistence cultivators in rural Nagaland through the UNDP project are commendable. Yet, the ongoing economic and social transformation of Nagaland tells us that a larger social and political process is at work.

As part of my research between 2009 and 2011 in Nagaland and Assam, I studied the experiences of subsistence jhum cultivators who sold their produce at weekly markets. The Naga cultivators, a majority of whom were women, shared their insecurities about the future. Stories of failed crops and poor harvests due to hybrid seeds were common, as were the challenges they faced in negotiating the pressure exerted by the government to introduce large-scale commercial agriculture and mono-cropping. In addition, there were financial constraints on sustaining agricultural activities and loss of soil fertility.

The cultivators, who were absent from the UNDP-state government food preservation workshop, are being pressed to take up market-friendly cash-crop farming and become revenue-generating sources. This requires, among other things, the privatisation of land. We must reconsider developmental and livelihood frameworks that shift the complex task of achieving global sustainability and biodiversity on to the shoulders of subsistence cultivators in militarised societies. It is naïve to pigeonhole the experiences of cultivators as a one-dimensional story of tilling the land. Agriculture is only one of the many things people do with land, and this is true in Nagaland as well. Even as cultivation increasingly becomes unviable, cultivators continue to nurse the desire to have access to land or to own it. Therefore, the ongoing transformation of agriculture calls attention to the larger politics of land distribution, its ownership, and the importance of land as a distributive resource. Several insights emerged from conversations with women-headed households engaged in subsistence agriculture and trade in weekly markets along the foothills of Assam and Nagaland. In the three districts where UNDP-state government projects for sustainable land and ecosystem management were under way, a resource conflict has been brewing since the ceasefire. Cultivators are increasingly losing their cultivable fields to extractive coal and timber companies, and to businesses that are establishing tea and rubber plantations, and other mono-cropping systems. To address the prevailing situation, new theoretical and conceptual tools, along with new ways to engage with issues of social justice and rights, have to be deployed. It will be redundant if the constitutional rights and guarantees for citizens in militarised societies are solely interpreted through an archaic understanding of customary laws that reinforce class and gender hierarchies.

This is especially true in Nagaland, where women's rights over inheritance and ownership of land and their participation in traditional decision-making forums (which fall under Article 371A of the Constitution) remain deplorable. Across rural North East India, households engaged in subsistence agriculture improvise to generate income from the land because it is impossible to sustain themselves with only farming. During the lean season, many households lease out their land to neighbours and itinerant groups for meagre amounts. Communities in Nagaland and across the North East, particularly women, have a tradition of foraging for wild herbs, yams, mushrooms, and plants. This has been disrupted in several places as large tracts of community lands and common reserves have been bought by corporations and private individuals for commercial ventures such as mining, educational institutions, resorts, plantations, and factories.

We have to be cautious of development and livelihood programmes that seek to train cultivators to become managers of biodiversity without grasping the social and political transformations on the ground. In the North East, the state's rhetoric of development and progress is fundamentally flawed. Policymakers shift the onus of change to subsistence and marginal farmers, leaving them with alternatives that have nothing to do with farming. Rural households are discouraging the next generation from becoming farmers. Instead, youths are motivated to become technicians, beauticians, masseurs, or migrant workers. Thousands of billboards across the North East invite youths to join the many service and hospitality training institutes that have come up. If one scratches the surface of these training institutes, they are simply labour recruitments camps for the globalised economy.[2]

Conclusions

After the 1997 ceasefire in Nagaland, the dominant discourse in the state was not about militarisation and crumbling infrastructure, but the urgency to embrace developmental programmes.

The Five Year Plan documents are the official road maps of the nation. They spell out how to reduce imbalances between

the North East and other parts of India. It is clear that the political and spatial geographies of post-conflict Nagaland have been reconfigured, and development is driven by a market-based, profit-oriented technique of government that seeks to produce citizens who are peace-loving, incentive-driven, and rational enough to solve their own problems. I cited a pickle-making workshop in a small village with absentee cultivators and disappointed officials wanting to meet a deadline. I argue that such events are not minuscule and insignificant, but critical lenses that allow us to identify the challenges between visions of development and livelihood and social realities.

It is often unhelpful to subsume militarised societies within the dominant discourse of security and conflict. While the state and security apparatus demonise these places, global visions about rehabilitation, hope, and sustainability are planted among the people in these traumatised zones every day. Therefore, it is important to understand how economic interventions in the form of developmental initiatives function in such societies.

The post-ceasefire period in Nagaland has ushered in numerous development programmes and witnessed the emergence of a new generation of economic entrepreneurs, while several issues that require immediate attention have been neglected. Among the most important ones is the absence of rehabilitation programmes for the armed combatants residing in civilian areas; the lack of mechanisms to address rising cases of domestic violence among them, and the absence of psychological and trauma counselling centres or truth and reconciliation forums. There has been no public consultation on development projects like the special development zone resolution that was introduced in the state assembly on 20 March 2014.

In addition, there are no measures to address the alarming number of child trafficking, rape, and domestic violence cases. Illegal sex shops and drug dens proliferate. How can we begin to grapple with the idea that militarised societies urgently require economic intervention and a model of development that is market-driven but pro-poor at the same time? How can principles of empowering the marginalised and dispossessed be converted into a monetary value and confined to a profit-oriented scheme? These riddles should make us reflect on the ongoing transformations in post-conflict societies.

NOTES

1 For more details, see http://www.in.undp.org/content/india/en/home/operations/projects/environment_and_energy/sustainable_landandecosystemmanagementinshiftingcultivationareas/.

2 It was impossible to imagine that thousands of youths from the North East had melted into the heart of metropolitan cities across India to work as dishwashers, security guards, sales assistants, and waiters until the mass exodus in 2012; see http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/article3796017.ece

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