

**North Indian NGDOs in the ‘Information Age’: Assessing the  
Opportunities of Information and Knowledge Flows in Contemporary  
Development**

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## **North Indian NGDOs in the 'Information Age': Assessing the Opportunities of Information and Knowledge Flows in Contemporary Development**

### **Introduction**

In 2009, as the world faces ecological and economic crises, knowledge and information are purported to be our greatest re-generative resource to face new and existing challenges in development. Technological advancements in the information age provide opportunities to share information, knowledge and ideas widely, as more parts of the globe are connected. Greater connectivity has the potential to result in virtuous circles in which knowledge and theory are continually developed through circulation (Castells 2000). Concurrently, the reflexive appropriation of knowledge as a feature of late modernity (Giddens 1990), has opened up existing discursive regimes for scrutiny. Development agencies and institutions have responded to these opportunities through initiatives to provide access to information and knowledge resources to the poor, at the same time as establishing strategies to enable more inclusive knowledge production.

While optimism is high on a global scale, little empirical evidence exists as to the actual effect of these changes within localized development contexts. This paper contributes to overcoming this lacunae by exploring how the changed conditions of the information age have impacted on nongovernmental development organisations (NGDOs) in Uttarakhand, North India. I present empirical evidence that suggests that NGDOs activities today are concentrated on information and knowledge based activities: they identify knowledge gaps; collect and/or produce knowledge resources; and disseminate them to different audiences. While such activities are not new, I argue that the increasing number of NGDOs focusing exclusively or predominately on them is due to changes in their working environment. Not least among them are the rhetoric and discourses of the information age itself, and the inclusion of connectivity as an indicator of development.

These changes require new ways of studying NGDOs. The concepts of brokers and translators have significantly increased our understanding of development agencies in

particular NGOs and are still relevant in the current context. My findings suggest, however, that these terms are limited in explaining the behaviour of small NGOs (discussed below) in India. I introduce the metaphor of 'pedlars of knowledge' as a means to understand the way that NGOs 'trade' in knowledge as a means of livelihood and survival. A rationale is provided for this metaphor through an analysis of the way NGOs describe development issues and the roles that they take on in the development sector. The final section provides a brief account of the preliminary findings of the implications of NGOs as pedlars of knowledge, particularly as they pertain to power relations.

## **I. Understanding Development in the Information Age: A Research Approach**

NGOs refer to organisations that undertake 'development' activities for the articulated purpose of improving the well being of the poor and marginalised. The subject of this study is a sub-set of this group: small, local NGOs with direct links and contact with the local communities that are the focus of development intervention. 'Small' refers to NGOs that cover at most a couple of districts, with no more than the equivalent of fifteen full-time staff. Local refers to organisations that are founded and work exclusively within the state. The geographical location is Uttarakhand – a Himalayan state in North India – concentrating on NGOs located in Dehradun: the (temporary) state capital located on the plains.

Fieldwork was conducted in India for ten months between February and November 2008. The primary method was participant observation with an NGO for eight months, in addition to a case study of an NGO initiative for six weeks. I attended workshops, which, in addition to being an interesting site of ethnographic research, afforded the opportunity to talk to NGO workers informally. I also conducted eighty formal interviews with NGO personnel (with a concentration on management), donors, experts and government officials. Analysis of NGO documents and local media was the final component of my research methods.

My central concern entering the field was the way that technological and discursive shifts had changed how NGOs engage with knowledge, and the effect this has on the flow of knowledge within the development sector. The availability and use of knowledge and information is said to have caused fundamental changes in society, which, according to some (see for example Castells 1996-8, Leadbeater 1998) are of revolutionary proportions. The changes are of two types. First, there is an increase in the volume of flows of information and knowledge. Technology that enables the dissemination of flows in real-time and without regard to geographical space has meant that information, knowledge, ideas and perspectives are being exchanged at a faster rate and with a larger spread than at any other period in history (Castells 1996). This connectivity is not even, and is dependent on the position of different actors and their membership to certain networks. I use the term differential connectivity to refer to the different access that actors have to knowledge and information.

Changes in the *content* of information and knowledge flows have been just as significant as the increase in *volume* and spread, but for different reasons and with different implications. Castells argues that the technologies used to spread information are also conducive to enhance and accelerate the production of knowledge and information, in a self-expanding, virtuous circle (2000: 10). Webster (2002: 26) presents a more nuanced distinction between the building-up of knowledge and the improvement of understanding through theoretical advancements. He bases this distinction on Giddens' concept of the reflexive appropriation of knowledge: the constant re-examination and questioning of knowledge and truths that has replaced practices of building upon knowledges and stable social norms (Giddens 1990: 38). This reflexive appropriation when related to Webster's theoretical knowledge and Castells' virtuous circles suggests that knowledge and theory can be continually developed through circulation, which, thanks to technology, is now more inclusive and widespread than even before.

The response of the development sector to the conditions of the information age has been to take advantage of the increase in volume (or quantity) of flows, and to improve the quality of knowledge about development. Subsequent perceived opportunities (with

an almost absent discussion about risks) reflect different approaches to knowledge. Information and communication technology (ICT) is considered both a means, and an indicator of development. Access to information is seen as a vital way for the poor to improve their competitiveness through innovation, ensure fairer markets, and to produce and utilize knowledge about a range of issues such as health and education (Coeur de Roy 1997, Mercer 2004). The goal has been to 'connect' the poor and people acting on their behalf so that they may reap the benefits of information and knowledge as 'non-rival' goods.

A second response has been reflection within the development sector on the way it generates and utilizes knowledge. The 'knowledge agenda' has come to denote attempts in the sector to reflect and learn from the mistakes of the past, incorporating a wider range of voices. Regardless of the success in these initiatives, the rhetoric of reflexive development itself has the potential to reconfigure power relations between NGOs, their donors and 'clients'. NGOs are increasingly seen as experts, and donors encouraged to be more responsive and less directive towards their 'partners'. NGOs' knowledge of the 'local' is increasingly valued, providing NGOs with 'symbolic capital' in their dealings with donors (Ebrahim 2003).

The scale of social transformations due to the information age is a topic of debate (May 2002, Webster 2002), and the empirical implications of the 'information age' are only recently being tested. Likewise, the enthusiasm for knowledge sharing and new ways of producing knowledge has not been accompanied by analysis of how these changes have been experienced in local development contexts. An important area of research is not only the impact of technological changes, but also how the discourses of connectivity and the knowledge agenda have influenced different development actors, their understanding of development, the roles they take on and their relations with other actors. I contribute to this task by exploring the implications of the 'information age' for NGOs in Uttarakhand. Although the research is limited to these actors, it has the potential to illuminate the broader picture of how the information age is affecting the development sector more generally.

## **II. NGDOs in the Information Age**

My findings suggest that impacts of the information age on NGDOs in Uttarakhand have been significant. Technological advancements and the growing emphasis on information and knowledge as a development good have influenced how development and underdevelopment are understood, NGDOs' role in development and the opportunities for NGDOs in these roles. I argue that current approaches in NGDO research are insufficient to understand these changes, and the most central aspects of their functioning. In the following section I introduce the metaphor of NGDOs as 'pedlars of knowledge' as a complementary way of approaching the study of NGDOs alongside brokers and translators. Using interview data I examine how NGDOs currently understand development and their self-identified roles. I then interrogate the metaphor of 'pedlars of knowledge' for its explanatory value. In the final section, I look at the contextual reasons why there has been a shift in NGDO functioning.

### **II.1 NGDO Understandings of Development**

NGDO actors' understandings of development are contingent on the location of the development 'field' the location and/or target group of development intervention. In Uttarakhand, the field is predominately located in villages. Of the forty-seven NGDOs covered, including twenty-four within Dehradun, only two were involved in urban development. The geography of this Himalayan state is important, as many NGDOs have their central office located in Dehradun, while development activities occur in the villages. Those villages located in the foothills and mountains are poorly connected in terms of transport and telecommunications. Many villages are accessible only by foot, and travel to even major centres in the hills entails arduous and long journeys. The experience of the 'journey' is important for many NGDO actors, who portray it as essential to understand their work.

The representation of the 'development field' often reflects these experiences. I identified five themes through coding of interview responses referring to the 'field': positive comparisons; remoteness; lack of facilities; lack of perspective and 'other problems'. Positive comparisons tended to describe less the villages, than the urban metropolis to which they were being compared. In the village, people retained their 'culture', did not suffer from vices, helped each other, and were free of crime. The village was therefore the 'development field' as well as representing what was lost in the cities. 'Other problems' is a residual category of issues such as women's drudgery, maternal mortality, poor livelihood options, migration etc.. Although as a single category they are significant, as a range of separate issues NGDO actors did not consistently raise them.

The geography of Uttarakhand makes it no surprise that 'remoteness' featured frequently in NGDO actors' representation of the field. One NGDO manager defined 'remote' as:

Where government doesn't reach: for development purposes. Reach of government is very bad, you can call it. In that way we call it remote. Inaccessible: we don't have roads, we don't have connectivity, we didn't have communication facilities (NGO manager).

This has, according to NGDO workers, resulted in neglect – primarily by the government. The more 'remote' the field, the more the locale needs intervention.

See the state of Uttarakhand – you will have your extremely difficult locales where you need to work. Cos anyone who is near a town or a block, he still has the accessibility in terms of knowledge, things like that (NGDO manager).

NGDO actors present 'remoteness' as both an indicator of underdevelopment, as well as a contributing factor. In the interview above, the NGDO manager suggests that it is the inaccessibility of knowledge among other things that makes remoteness a cause of disadvantage. NGDO actors present a lack of knowledge and information as a deficiency in itself, often without elaboration on how it causes deprivation, for example:

see if we talk about remote in terms of the remotest of the remote, they know nothing (NGDO manager,).

when you see people, they are not educated, they are not aware, they do not have any information, they are living in a different world (NGDO manager).

Information and knowledge are presented as a development good in itself, without reference to their instrumental purposes.

Other NGDO actors talked more specifically about how lack of information and knowledge disadvantaged remote populations. This lack, they suggested, results in limited perspectives, that hinder villagers's ability to identify and overcome their problems. NGDO actors observed that villagers are unable to identify their problems and accepted their harsh realities. This was often linked to their lack of an alternative reference point for comparison. As one manager stated: 'in a village that has eight to nine women dying during delivery you can imagine that she is actually not coming anywhere outside [the village]'. NGDO actors present villagers as having normalized certain conditions due to their lack of exposure of how things can and should be. Remoteness and lack of knowledge about the external world limits their ability to identify their own problems and potential improvements in their lives.

On a more localised level, lack of information about rights and entitlements disadvantages remote populations as it results in government neglect, and subsequent lack of facilities. Health centres, education institutes and access to government schemes are all curtailed due to the restricted flow of information about how to obtain these. NGDO actors complain that the government makes little effort in disseminating information to remote communities, resulting in a rural population largely ignorant of not only their rights and entitlements, but the proper mechanisms through which these can be demanded. Remote locations combine with other constraints such as illiteracy and lack of certain forms of cultural capital to prevent people accessing information and knowledge, or making further enquiries as to their entitlements.

## **II.2. The Role of NGDOs**

These understandings of the causes and manifestations of underdevelopment have influenced the roles NGDO actors assign themselves within development. 'Remoteness' and the lack of access to information and knowledge sources suggest that NGDOs can be most effective in roles that 'connect' different actors. The centrality of these roles is evident in the interview transcripts, informal conversations and documents such as annual reports and brochures collected from various NGDOs. Following is a summary of how NGDO actors describe their roles in the current context. As will be seen, although the roles vary in practice and in presentation, the majority are based on 'connecting' the remote by providing/disseminating intangible goods: information, knowledge and ideas.

The type of roles NGDOs undertake are influenced by their position on the interface between multiple actors. Acknowledging this position, the most commonly cited role for NGDOs was as an 'intermediary', 'catalyst' or 'facilitator'. A sample of their comments include:

Our main goal is to bridge the gap between the government and the community (NGDO manager)

The role of the NGO should be as a catalyst; this is the best way and most sustainable (NGDO manager)

So we just become a link person, mediator, between these people and the government, and that is all (NGDO manager)

This facilitator role often means a withdrawal from the direct provision of goods. This was explicit in interviews and conversations with NGDO clients.

We always say [to clients] that we are not going to give you anything. We are just helping you. We will help you as a facilitator, to help plan your future (NGDO manager)

I basically our role is to facilitate the people. And if people are not fighting against the teacher facility and health facility then we can't do it, because I who is facing the problems, they take leadership, so that is the best way for solving the problems (NGDO manager).

This withdrawal from service provision is commensurate with discourses of empowerment, participation and self-help, that have come to dominate development approaches (Cornwall 2007, Vasavi and Kingfisher 2003). According to these

approaches, development interventions are most effective and sustainable when the poor and marginalized are in the driver's seat of development interventions, able to obtain development resources themselves. NGDOs are therefore down playing their role in not only the provision of development resources, but also the processes through which they are obtained.

This role is linked not only to a particular understanding of development, but also reflects the comparative advantage of NGDOs in the broader development sector. The importance of their own connections to the grassroots, the media, government and other actors is a constant theme. This puts them in an excellent position to disseminate knowledge and information between various actors: for example informing the grassroots about changes in government regulations; and informing government officials about how certain schemes are working in the villages. This is reflected in the following quotes:

We try to go direct to the offices to find out about the different schemes, and obtain information about them. We also have connections with government officials like in the department of health and women and child. We find out their schemes, and try to link the community with these schemes (NGDO manager)

We get information from the various departments about different schemes that they have, and then we give this information to all the people at the training. We would give information on schemes such as the widow pension, accidental death (NGDO manager).

Part of the role of NGDOs is therefore to ensure the flow of information and knowledge by maintaining their own connections across multiple domains.

The NGDO not only has to disseminate this information and knowledge, but also convince the people of its relevance and utility. As noted above, NGDO actors identified a lack of perspective or inability to recognize problems. The role of facilitator and catalyst therefore also entails helping people to understand their position, and the resources available in order to address them. The role of the NGDO is not to improve the situation of the poor, but to help the poor identify how they can develop themselves. An NGDO manager explained:

Suppose they can't express their problems, and they can't raise their voice. So we do some specific exercise and meetings. Then they start thinking, what is the problem, what is the solution, what is the level of solution, where [do] we go, and what benefits [do] we take? What [are] the government programmes, policies, schemes. And we also distribute this (NGDO manager)

NGDOs identify problems not through an objective analysis of people's lived realities, but rather analyse and assess situations taking into consideration the types of resources available to them. In helping people to identify their problems in reference to these solutions, NGDO actors encourage them to buy-in to a particular vision of development, and of modernity. Their own understandings of different forms of development are limited to their access to knowledge resources about alternatives. If NGDOs can only access state-produced knowledge resources, likewise their understanding of the problems and solutions of development will largely reflect state development paradigms.

The dominance of state-produced information and knowledge resources in NGDOs access to knowledge resources more generally, results in the identification of problems and resources in reference to government programmes. Awareness about government schemes is a primary activity of Uttarakhand NGDOs, as reflected in the quotes below:

We can give them ideas, like government schemes, like health schemes, so we can tell them. We can tell them these are the benefits of the health system (NGDO manager)

We believe that it is the right of citizens to know the schemes and programmes of the government. Through training programmes we make people aware of these schemes. We bridge the gap in this way between the government offices and the people, we have meetings so that people understand the government schemes, and have discussions with the community about the different schemes, which ones are useful for them, which ones need modification (NGDO manager).

This reflects a different division of labour between NGDOs and the government, with the latter bearing the responsibility for the provision of development resources. The role of the NGDO in these instances is not only to make people aware of their rights and entitlements, but to convince them of the utility of these resources to achieving development in state-defined terms.

State entitlements are increasingly being channelled through the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), requiring the people's direct involvement in obtaining them. Many NGOs have therefore directed their attention towards 'social mobilization' and 'capacity building'. The former refers to the establishment of Community Based Organisations (CBOs) that can place pressure on the PRIs to perform their role. Capacity building is then provided for both CBOs and PRIs to ensure their proper functioning. An NGO manager explains:

To strengthen Panchayats, that is our main role. We need to make sure that the Panchayat is meeting, if it is working, if the work is good, and if it is not good, then we can ask why it isn't. We also work to make sure that they know their rights: how many educational facilities should be in their area, ANM centres and other medical facilities. We give them information about various acts, such as RTI. We need to give them information, if not then the people will not be able to get the benefit. We tell them how to get the different schemes (NGDO manager).

NGDOs have adapted to the changes in development delivery by creating a niche role of disseminating information and knowledge to ensure that these systems work effectively.

NGDOs not only entice people into state-led development systems, but 'educate' them to live in a 'modern' world. This entails more than making them aware of their rights and entitlements, to 'sensitising' them to correct norms, habits and behaviours. For example, NGDOs described such activities:

It was a difficult task to break through the old traditions of the masses. We tried to put across our message to the masses via meetings, street plays and puppet shows. Today the villages are much cleaner than before. People are alert about the small details of keeping clean. Today, people have realized the importance of toilets (NGDO brochure)

Through these activities [income generation] we reach the women and then we can change their mindsets. Tradition, which governs their thinking, has some good and bad aspects. We help them to see the bad aspects and encourage them to abandon them, while showing them how to use their good aspects (NGDO manager).

This sensitising to 'modern' ways does not necessarily mean an emulation of middle-class westernised culture. NGDOs also engage in activities to encourage people to celebrate their own culture, seen at risk from external influences. Regardless of the form

of modernity the NGDO ascribes to, their role is to provide people with the knowledge about the 'right way to live'

NGDOs not only use their connections to educate the poor and marginalized; equally important is making relatively privileged people aware of the situation at the grassroots. NGDOs present government officials, and less often donors and the general public, as ignorant of the 'field' requiring NGDOs to educate them as to the 'realities'. NGDOs, with their 'closeness' to the grassroots are in an ideal position to generate and articulate knowledge about local conditions and development issues more generally. Discourses of empowerment and participation have influenced how some NGDOs achieve this, with many organisations moving away from direct representation, to providing opportunities for the poor to speak for themselves through the creation of platforms and building of capacities. The ability to directly share knowledge and information, that is, to be connected to different actors, is seen as essential to development.

In the above roles, NGDOs are involved in the transfer of intangible goods: namely information, knowledge and ideas. NGDOs identify knowledge gaps amongst different actors, convince the actors of their ignorance and the utility of information and knowledge to fill these gaps. NGDOs use their connections to the grassroots, media, government and so on to locate or produce appropriate knowledge and information 'products' or provide opportunities for exchanges to occur directly. I am not suggesting that NGDOs do not play other roles in development, but argue that these activities (for reasons explored in section II.5.), are becoming the primary mode of operation for specific types of NGDOs. Workshops and conversations with NGDO actors highlight how development problems are increasingly seen as resulting from knowledge and information gaps, while awareness and sensitisation are seen as the most valuable role NGDOs *can* (as distinct from *should*) play.

### **II.3. Understanding NGDO Roles: Brokers, Translators and Pedlars**

I argue that these roles are not adequately understood in contemporary approaches to looking at NGOs. Ethnographic studies of development agencies have contributed enormously to overcoming simplistic accounts of NGOs from either a normative, or critical perspective. The literature on development brokers and translators has helped to locate NGOs within broader political and social systems, examining their contributions to the coherence of development projects. While I find this body of literature immensely useful, it was insufficient to adequately understand the type of organisations I encountered in the field site, and their central mode of operations as development organisations beyond the context of any specific project. I propose an additional metaphor of NGOs as 'pedlars of knowledge' to accompany brokers and translators in order to make sense of NGOs in the 'information age'. I examine the brokers and translators literature before outlining my conceptualisation of 'pedlars of knowledge'.

The location of NGOs between different development actors makes the literature on brokerage particularly useful in examining their roles. De Sarden states that the

term 'brokerage' in a sociological sense, designates social actors situated at the interface of two sociocultural universes and endowed with the capacity to establish links among themselves, be they symbolic or economic, material or political (1999:37).

De Sarden and his colleagues have usefully applied the sociological literature on brokerage to the context of development, describing development brokers as

The social actors implanted in a local arena (in whose politics they are directly or indirectly involved) and who serve as intermediaries who drain off (in the direction of the social space corresponding to this arena) external resources in the form of development aid (Bierschenk et al 2002: 4).

Brokers position themselves in a way that makes them indispensable to both actors on either end of the 'brokerage chain' while basing their legitimacy on supposed values of selfless service (2002: 17). They are 'a specific group of social actors who specialize in the acquisition, control and redistribution of development 'revenue'' (Mosse and Lewis 2006: 12).

Mosse and Lewis (2006) have made important contributions to the development brokers literature, not least through the introduction of the metaphor of 'translation'. Mosse's (2005) ethnography of a development project in India revealed how relationships between different actors enabled the combining of disparate interests into a coherent project

whole. This coherence was achieved through processes of translation, in which interests were *presented* as being consistent with project policy, even when the outcomes were quite different. He argues that 'development projects need interpretive communities; they have to enrol a range of supporting actors with reasons to participate in the established order as if its representations were reality (2005: 7)'. NGDOs, in their position between different actors, therefore play the role of translators: 'generating and translating interests, creating context by tying in supporters and so sustaining interpretations' (Mosse and Lewis 2006: 13).

The concepts of brokers and translators are both useful in understanding certain aspects of NGDOs behaviour in the field site. By providing information to entitled citizens, NGDOs play a role in acquiring and re-directing development resources towards their political and social spaces. At times, this involves direct negotiation and the implementation of related projects, as seen in the following quotes.

People come to me with problems and we will tell them how to solve them; which person in the government they have to talk to, and if need be we act as an intermediary for them (NGDO manager).

There was a government contract for training and so we asked the women what they would like training for. We then told the government and then we have an interview to see if we conduct the training. We tell them all the things that NGOs need to do the training, and the resources we have (NGDO manager).

In the first quote, NGDO workers use their relationship with government officials to directly intervene in the distribution of development resources. In the second case, NGDO actors identify a source of development resources, match this to the beneficiary, and then 'drain off' resources for the ongoing operation of the NGDO and staff livelihoods.

I argue, however, that the majority of NGDO activities fail to fit neatly into the broker role. The concept of broker relies on a 'flow' of resources from donor/state agency to beneficiary through the NGDO. As the above discussion of roles suggests, such a flow is not always characteristic of NGDO development interventions. First, the NGDO, provides information and knowledge to clients about how to obtain development

resources *directly*, that is, without going through the NGDO. Although NGDO actors may assist, they play less an intermediary role, than an advisory one. Second, the flow of material resources from funding agencies to NGDOs to undertake the above roles of information and knowledge dissemination does not flow to NGDO clients, but rather is retained within the organisation for their expenses. NGDOs thereby become institutions converting financial resources (from donors) into knowledge resources (that flow to NGDO clients).

Does the emphasis on information and knowledge therefore make the metaphor of translator a more appropriate means of understanding NGDOs? It can be argued that the provision of information and knowledge about development projects involves a degree of translation. This is especially so in the case of NGDO actors who encourage people to see their problems in ways that are compatible with the funding schemes available through the government. Awareness is used to convince people and sustain interest in certain development projects: be that state-led development or a particular project of modernity. The interests of the people are also translated in terms that are compatible with the interests of the donors, especially the state. This is achieved through direct representation or by teaching people the language with which they can represent themselves.

Again, although a useful metaphor, translation does not do justice to the majority of activities that NGDOs undertake. The focus on the project as the unit of analysis draws attention to how interests are combined within a single project, but is less useful in analysing the ongoing activities of NGDOs, and how they maintain relationships with a range of actors. Emphasis on the latter aspects of NGDO work reveals less processes of *translating* of interests, and more processes of *creating* interest in the types of information and knowledge that NGDOs have access to. As much of this knowledge is circumscribed, relating to specific schemes and acts that leave little scope for re-interpretation, NGDOs build their clientele by convincing them of the utility of these for their well-being (in the process also promoting a particular vision of development). As much of NGDO work is the dissemination of information and knowledge resources rather than cooption into projects with technical and material inputs, the value of

intangible resources needs to be sold as an end-point in itself, rather than representing different interests in a single project for material resources.

I suggest that pedlars of knowledge can be a complementary metaphor to brokers and translators in order to understand NGDOs in the information age. The term pedlars is most commonly used to refer to itinerant salespeople, trading in petty wares. It also has the connotation of a promoter of things such as a cause or viewpoint. Historically, pedlar is used to describe the travelling salespeople that brought goods to isolated rural populations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States. Pedlars were important not only in the provision of articles that rural populations lacked, but in selling a way of life. As Jaffee (1991) argues:

Peddlers brought to the rural peoples of the northern United States a new culture, a market culture, in the form of objects. Peddlers helped create a market for new consumer goods. But more important were the roles of peddlers as cultural agents, promoting the message of social transformation through the purchase of goods. The newly available commodities became emblems of affluence and status through the efforts of itinerant merchants (1999: 511-2).

Pedlars not only sold their goods, they created a market for them. The mobility of pedlars is also important, as they traded goods between rural centres and urban markets, and were thus important actors in a complex market network of exchange (Jaffee 1991: 514).

I use pedlars not to describe the selling of goods, but the promotion of intangible resources: information, knowledge and ideas. Just like the itinerant sales people of eighteenth century United States, modern day NGDOs in Uttarakhand have taken a role of reaching remote and isolated villages and linking them to the knowledge and information available in other rural communities, and the urban metropolis. As global connectivity has increased, so has the ranges of source for knowledge goods. NGDOs are therefore pivotal actors in the spreading of global discourses to the local level. Pedlars not only seek markets for their produce, but create them through the promotion of a vision of social transformation. Likewise, NGDOs must identify and/or create a demand for their knowledge products through the promotion of a vision of modernity. NGDOs

bring information and knowledge, at the same time as creating a culture where access to such resources is desirable.

Although NGDOs rarely receive financial rewards directly from the ‘consumers’ of knowledge, NGDOs do trade in information and knowledge for their livelihood. To understand these processes requires placing NGDOs within the development aid chain, and understanding how they negotiate a role within it. NGDOs are for the most part financed by donors in their awareness and advocacy activities, though many have started to attempt to directly charge the consumers of their knowledge. Disseminating information and knowledge also results in enhanced social and symbolic capital (Ebrahim 2003): important to ensure legitimacy, and to maintain relations with the field. To make a living from peddling knowledge and information therefore requires the identification or creation of a ‘market’ convinced of the utility of the intangible resources offered; evidence of the quality/veracity of the resources; and the contribution such resources can make in achieving broader ideas of development and modernity as envisaged by funding agencies.

It is this range of activities within the context of a development aid chain that makes the metaphor of ‘pedlars of knowledge’ useful in understanding NGDOs. The trading in information and knowledge, particularly considering the nature of the resources offered, entails relations of power. The trade is dependent on the identification and self-acknowledgement of ignorance by the recipients of knowledge (or consumers), as well as the NGDO’s demonstration of expertise, and the desirability and quality of their goods. Although space does not permit the presentation of supporting empirical evidence, my research also shows that information and knowledge is collected and disseminated in ways akin to trading in self-contained goods, rather than re-interpretation and re-conceptualisation of knowledge. Information and knowledge is shuffled between locations, often unchanged, in the process creating ignorance (Hobart 1993) *and* expertise. These issues are discussed in more detail in section III.

## **II.5 Prevalence of Knowledge Peddling Activities in Uttarakhand**

Although the NGDO sector is diverse making generalizations inappropriate, section II.1 suggests, peddling knowledge is a significant and growing aspect of NGDO work. Certain contextual features are important to understanding the attractiveness of these activities. The first of these is the current financial context. The so-called ‘mushrooming’ of NGDOs throughout the 1980s and 1990s along with the reduction in funding from foreign agencies has resulted in a large number of NGDOs competing for a reduced pool of development resources. An outcome of this has been the large number of NGDOs with only one funded project or none at all.

In this environment, knowledge peddling activities gain in importance in maintaining NGDO operations, and to retain as much funding as possible within the organisation. Knowledge peddling requires free or cheaply available inputs (information and knowledge); likewise the costs of dissemination or project outputs (measured through ‘awareness’ and knowledge dissemination activities) are also low. This means that NGDOs can continue to undertake such activities with little or no money. This continuity is important in building or maintaining relationships with the ‘field’ or their clients, and thereby maintaining their legitimacy and ongoing viability. These activities can also help NGDOs become established when funding is hard to obtain in the initial years. Further, as project costs relate mainly to staff and office maintenance (computer, vehicle etc.), the majority of project funding can be retained within the NGDO, and with the NGDO workers.

A second factor is the devolution of power and responsibility for development projects to the Panchayat level, reducing the role of NGDOs in state-sponsored development. The 11<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts devolved 29 functions to Panchayat Raj institutions (PRIs), which the Government of Uttarakhand is in the process of implementing. The PRIs are responsible for the correct implementation of schemes (including the recent National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) and ensuring that government facilities and services operate effectively. Money for schemes and development projects must, in the majority of cases, pass through the PRIs, making

them very important and powerful actors in rural development. As the Panchayat has, according to many NGDO actors, become the most important actor in development, the role of NGDOs has shifted from direct implementation to trying to make such institutions work. This primarily involves providing information and knowledge to mobilize people and improve their capabilities to make PRIs functioning and accountable.

The final set of changes relate to development approaches and the rhetoric of the information age. Changes in development orthodoxy has seen a shift from the direct provision of material goods to helping people to help themselves. Empowerment, participation and self-help have become desired development approaches, replacing what were seen as dependency inducing one way flow of development gifts (Stirrat and Henkel 1997). At the same time, the prevalence of rights based approaches have placed the responsibility of development firmly with the state, while the responsibility to attain these rights rests with the citizen. Combined, current development orthodoxy seeks to empower citizens (and groups marginalized from citizenship) to claim their rights, primarily through the state.

Information and knowledge are seen as important components to these approaches. As seen in the opening section, knowledge is seen as an essential ingredient for development interventions, as well as an indicator of development in itself. Activities such as awareness, sensitisation and capacity building have a built-in legitimacy in this environment, with the advantage that outcomes are easy to claim (though much harder to prove). The need and desirability for awareness is taken for granted: an automatic good in itself. In this environment, lack of awareness is often the starting point of analysis of development issues, with the need to provide it the justified development intervention. In just one example, a speaker from the Government of Uttarakhand at a workshop on climate change talked about the need to make the villagers aware of the importance of water resources. It hardly seems necessary to tell women, who carry their family's water needs often for several kilometres, the importance of water. Such activities, easy and cheap to undertake, not only allow development actors to do

something in contexts where other options may be limited, but shifts the problem back on to the ignorant poor.

My research did not extend to investigating the efficacy of such activities, or the extent to which they were desired by NGDO clients. Several discussions with rural based NGDOs suggest, however, that their clients were becoming dissatisfied with the lack of tangible action. In a meeting with an NGDO and a farmer's group, a villager complained that all the NGDOs did was 'come and talk'. The loss of client support for their activities is a threat to NGDO survival and NGDOs must therefore convince the recipients of the utility of the information and knowledge provided in their activities. This has implications for the way the relationship between NGDO and client is framed, issues related to power explored briefly below.

### **III. Implications of NGDOs as Pedlars of Knowledge**

The focus of this paper has been to explore the types of roles and activities that NGDOs are undertaking in the 'information age' and to make a claim as to the utility of the metaphor of 'pedlars of knowledge' in furthering our understanding. The novelty of this approach has required ample space to investigate its contours, and to make a case for its relevance. This has left little room to discuss the 'so-what', why is this shift in NGDO behaviour significant for development? As this is conference concerned about how to manage crisis and make the most of our opportunities in the contemporary era of seemingly rapid change, it would be remiss to ignore the broader implications of my research that are explored in more depth in my thesis. For the purposes of this paper, I briefly outline three implications that have emerged from my research.

The first implication is that issues of NGDO access to knowledge and information sources matter. While NGDOs are engaged in activities to connect the 'remote' to the 'metropole', their own level of connectivity is often limited. Barriers due to language, increasing costs of knowledge resources, the lack of time to search for appropriate sources or lack of supporting infrastructure such as internet, restrict the sources of

information and knowledge with which NGDOs engage. The result in Uttarakhand has been an overwhelming reliance on government sources, not only in regards to schemes, but in other awareness activities to do with health, resource management etc.. The government approach to development – its meaning and how it is to be achieved – are dominant, and disseminated almost unaltered to the –grassroots–. This reliance on only a few sources of information and knowledge reduces NGDOs capability to be an –alternative– (Mitlin et al 2007), or to offer alternative understandings of and approaches to development to their clients.

Second, the importance of connectivity for both sources and audiences of knowledge requires NGDOs to expend considerable effort in establishing and maintaining ties. These ties are important not only in terms of access to knowledge, but in order to make claims to expertise in certain areas. For the credibility and viability of NGDOs, what knowledge sources are available from different actors is less important than the actual connection itself. For example connections to the remote areas is important to maintain their *claims* to knowledge of the –grassroots– while state, national, international connections are important to make claims to expertise of the metropole. NGDOs in Uttarakhand must maintain these connections despite the difficulty in doing so, especially in reaching remote areas. This has increased the importance of partnerships, mother NGDO arrangements (with a central NGDO who –supports– smaller NGDOs) and formal and informal networks at the state, national and international level.

The third implication is that these connections are not power neutral, but reflect an ordering of relations based on the distinction between the knower and the ignorant. These relationships are heavily loaded with power; by merit of his or her status as –knowing– the expert can tell the ignorant the –truth– and in this way shape their reality. Further, power in one domain (for example over the control of material resources) can enhance claims to expertise, thereby reinforcing their power as they reinforce the –reality– that maintains their position. To suggest, however, that knowledge flows in the same direction as money, is simplistic. Rather information and knowledge shape different relationships in different ways, including between actors where no exchange of material resources

takes place. This necessarily includes relations with actors outside of the formal development project, including the media and general public.

It is these two aspects – connections with –development actors– beyond a specific project and multi-directional flows of knowledge with and against the tide of material resources – that makes it useful, but insufficient to view NGOs merely in terms of their position within the International Aid Chain (Bebbington 2004), or DOSTANGO system (Tvedt 2002). Although NGOs –position vis-à-vis states and donors is important to understand how their actions are connected to a broader development structure and discourses, the connections between NGOs are not limited to these actors, nor are their relations structured by uni-directional flows of resources. When we concentrate on the flow of information and knowledge resources, there are a multiple number of sources and audiences, with actors at both the –top– and the –bottom– of the chain being both source and audience at different times. NGOs position themselves between these sources and audiences, and present themselves as essential nodal points for the flow (and creation) of information and knowledge. This reflects less a chain than a web of relations; NGOs carve a niche for themselves by making this web resemble a bicycle spoke, with the NGO at the centre of a multitude of flows.

In order to successfully play this role, NGOs must make themselves essential to the flow of information and knowledge. The need to be experts of *both* the –provincial– (grassroots) and the –metropolitan– (modernity) requires the careful negotiation of relationships and strategies to maintain their relative status as –expert–, including at times the downplaying of others –knowledge. In relation to grassroots knowledge, this involves dismissing the ability of people who have not –seen– the field to have knowledge of it, including donor staff, government officials, corporate personnel and the general public. At the same time, the clients located in rural areas are described as lacking perspective and the ability to assess their situation. This requires the NGO to play a role in adequately understanding and representing it. These power dynamics make knowledge less, rather than more inclusive, as the NGO portrays itself as the only actor that has the capacity to know, or to find out.

## **Conclusion**

The power of information and knowledge for improved development outcomes is often taken for granted without empirical investigation as to the actual impacts. Technological changes and new approaches to knowledge production within the development sector are seen as tremendous opportunities to tackle issues of poverty and deprivation. The contemporary twin discourses of 'connectivity' and the 'knowledge agenda' are directing development interventions, and shaping the roles of development actors. It is the discourse, as much as actual changes in technology and the quality of knowledge that is encouraging NGOs to become 'pedlars of knowledge'. The role of identifying knowledge gaps and connecting 'ignorant' people to sources of knowledge and information have become the primary activities of small, local NGOs in Uttarakhand. The repercussions of this role is a new political economy based on differential connectivity. Although non-rival goods, information and knowledge cannot be considered power neutral, and appear to structure to an even greater extent relations in the development sector in the information age. The enthusiasm with which information and knowledge are celebrated as tools of development needs to be tempered by an examination of how specific actors, such as NGOs, engage with information and knowledge flows within broader social, economic and cultural environments.

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