

# Information Issues in Development: Ethical implications of community profiling by Developmental NGOs

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## Abstract

*In this paper, the authors critically examine some of the findings from a current research conducted in central India on 'Developmental NGOs' communication with their stakeholders'. These findings relate to NGOs' collecting developmental information on their target communities before, during and after a development initiative and passing this data on to their funding agencies. It brings into focus (a) the information demands from the funding sources, and (b) Developmental NGOs' communication with their target communities with respect to collecting this information. This raises questions in information ethics like, What are the **ethics** regarding the use of information on communities and other groups? How aware are the communities of their information being used potentially for purposes unrelated to current developmental projects under which the data was collected in the first place? Findings show that while all of the (NGO) respondents to this research collect very detailed information on communities while acknowledging that it is vital for successful implementation of their development programmes, they have no recognition of the value of their information gathering activity or of the contents' value to other institutional entities apart from their funding sources. Then there are questions around ownership and control—Who owns this information and who is accountable for its use and proper disposal? It is evidenced that a significant amount of resources go into detailed reporting so what justifies the financial and other resources employed in collecting and processing all that information—a funder imposed activity— which often distracts from pursuing the objectives of the intended social change through a developmental initiative?*

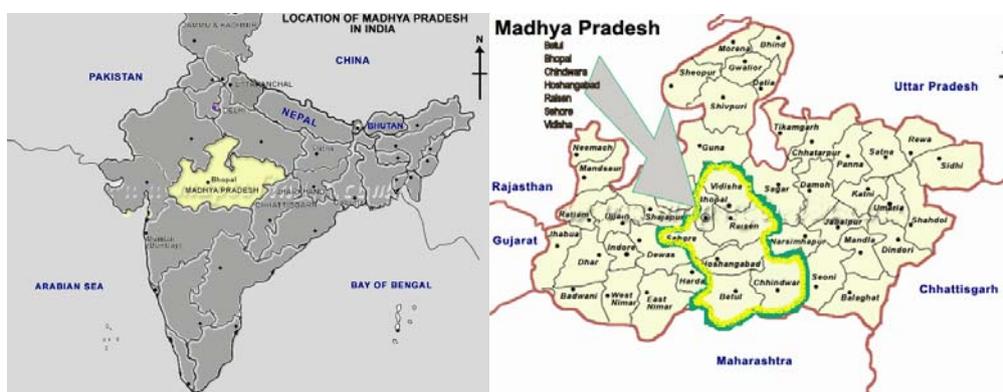
*The paper discusses the implications of this information gathering activity and of the content being passed into other domains for further processing and use. The discussion also models Developmental NGOs' institutional growth which generally passes as 'capacities building' but ties in with the information generation activity; for instance, building better documentation capabilities apparently translating into transparency and credibility of the NGO, yet also leading to funding sources receiving concise workable information for use not limited to developmental initiatives. Among other controversial aspects around information ethics, it brings into question whether development is pursued as an end in itself or a means to achieve some other objective(s) which have their roots in the neo-liberal ideology, and reside elsewhere in the chain of powerful stakeholders in development.*

## Introduction

This paper is a critical perspective of the way in which International Development is strategised in contemporary times. The authors draw attention to certain aspects of international development process (more generally referred herein as 'development'), which promote a mentality that legitimises the processes and institutions involved, attempting to bring an ever increasing number of people into an integrated global economic system, and thereby strengthening a new emerging power structure. "Development, and specifically international development as defined since Truman, is merely a concerted programme to bring the entire planet into one clear, concerted, and unified road of progress: the road of liberal capitalism. Any hindrances to this are viewed as aberrations in the normal and natural course of things" (Murphy, 2001, p. 74). As we revisit the emergence of development thought, compare old and new paradigms of international development, examine the relationships between various actors, and bring into focus the 'commodification' of information, many questions are raised on the political economy of development itself, which necessitate a rethinking of the processes therein and the roles of major actors. The discussion draws on critical social science perspective, "*on forms of social life which subjugate people .... On such ways of thinking which support subjugation ...in the dominance of a way of thinking which makes such oppression seem unproblematic, inevitable, incidental, or even justified*" (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 138). At a more fundamental level, it is sought to highlight the ethical issues surrounding information collected on communities through developmental activities, while also attempting to establish a correspondence between *international funding for development* and the *information on communities* produced by Non-Governmental Development Organisations (NGOs, NGDOs)<sup>1</sup> at various stages in the process of 'development intervention'<sup>2</sup>.

## Research area, data & respondents

Fig 1 Map of the Region



Eight grassroots Non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) were contacted in seven adjacent districts of South-Central India, and data was collected through face-to-face, semi-structured

interviews organising field trips to the selected region (Fig 1), to gain an inner perspective on the relationships they have with their funding agencies ('partners'), and their target community(ies). A co-author of this paper, Munawwar Naqvi, is originally from this region. The major advantage of this to research was the researcher's familiarity with the Hindi language and its local dialects as also the local culture, alongside the researcher's previous experience working as a consultant with local NGOs and therefore being able to contextualise and interpret the frequent '*NGOspeak*' occurring in the data. A number of research questions were directed towards inquiring (a) how developmental information was gathered by the grassroots NGOs, (b) why it was important, especially how it related to their functionality, (c) how it was processed and used, (d) NGOs' awareness of information ethics, and how aware the target community was with respect to the processes employed for collecting information and its use, (e) who owned the 'information' so generated, and what they (NGOs) knew happened to this information once it passed into the donor domain etc.

### ***NGOs' Information Gathering – Summary of Data***

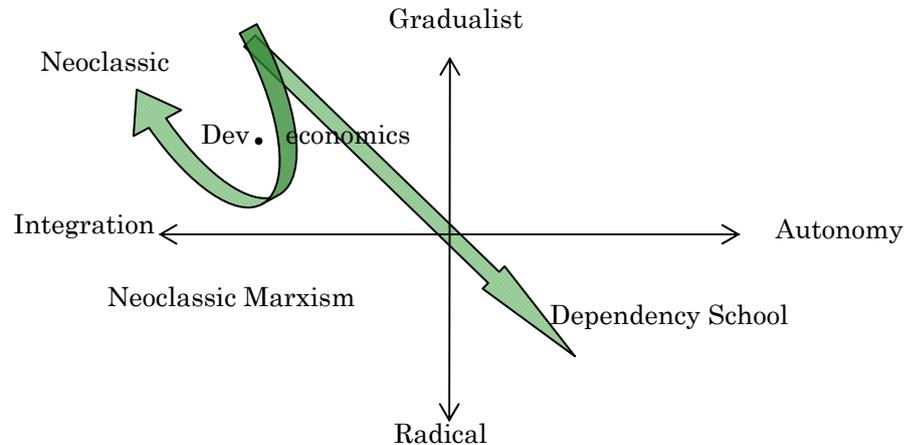
- All respondent NGOs collect information on their target communities usually through workers and field visits.
- Target communities were informed that the information collected by NGOs was for the purposes of measuring impact of the development project, and assessing if any other development need arose during the project duration, which could be worked on with another kind of funding.
- Respondent NGOs believed that the target communities were generally not sensitive to the nature of information and the frequent information gathering by the field workers passed as normal procedure.
- Since most communities were barely literate, the field workers asked questions and noted responses on prescribed forms, which was later collated at the NGOs offices.
- Respondents believed that the information was crucial for them to understand how their development project was proceeding, what strategies they needed to adopt to improve, and be able to update their Funding Agencies on the work to maintain the release of development funding.
- Community Information is passed on to Funding Agencies alongside reports on developmental interventions and impact, in the form of frequent reports, demanded by the latter.
- Different Funding Agencies provide different criteria, formats and templates for grassroots NGOs to gather specific types of information.
- Respondent NGOs did not vocalise any ethical issues associated with the information they collected, or with the processes involved in producing developmental information.
- Respondent NGOs were not aware of any ownership issues pertaining to the information they collected on their target communities. It was the first time that they were asked to think about it through the researcher's question.
- Respondents showed no awareness as to the information leaving the development domain, and being used in a 'market' context.

## Development –old and new perspectives

However, before discussing issues with information generated by developmental activities, it may be worth to give a brief outline of the development of development strategies which underpin the way socio-economic development is structured and commonly practised today.

Historically, the issue of defining ‘development’ has not been easy. The term ‘development’ can be quite subjective as it implies different meanings in different contexts. Different disciplines have used the term ‘development’ in different ways, like even within the context of International Development itself we talk very distinctly of ‘human development’ and ‘economic development’. Hettne (1990) sums up this dilemma acknowledging the multidisciplinary of development. Theorising development has been a focus in many academic traditions and therefore a number of development strategies have been outlined within each of these traditions. Hettne traces the roots of development thinking asserting that “development theory grew out of a concern with so-called underdeveloped countries on the implicit assumption that the conditions in these countries were unsatisfactory and ought to be changed ...” (Hettne, 1990, p. 3), and brings into focus the *Eurocentrism* of development thinking. It may be said that what we are looking at as development is in fact a Eurocentric perspective of underdevelopment.

**Fig. 2 (Hettne 1990)**

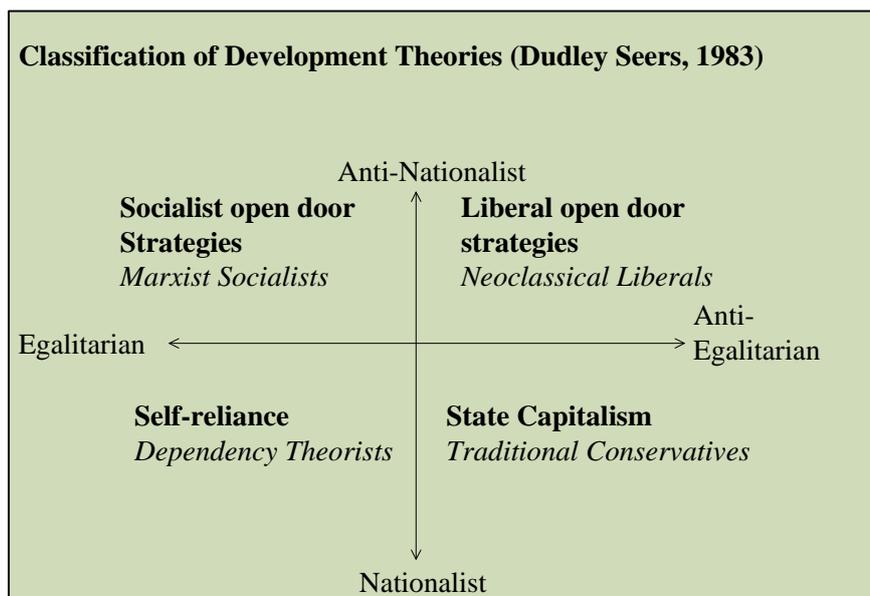


Development strategies have been classified by different authors in different ways. Hettne (1990, p. 146) has mapped the various traditions with integration v. autonomy as one axis and radical approach and gradualist approach on the other axis to trace the development of development strategies (Fig. 2). The integration vs. autonomy is the crucial dimension behind contemporary classifications of development strategies; it has been a key issue in development theory over the years, beginning with Friedrich List’s critique of British political economy—National v. cosmopolitan (List, 1841 cited in Hettne, 1990). The basic features of these traditions can be summarised as follows: *Dev. Economics*

—argues whether there is a contradiction between national and international development; *Dependency School* —carries the national political economic debate arguing ‘radical delinking’ from the world market; *Neoclassical Marxists* —insist in favour of rapid integration; and *Neoclassic theories* —find more relevance in globalisation, but can be contested looking at the rapidity of changes in the larger system.

Another way of differentiating different development strategies is given by Dudley Seers (1983). Whereas one axis is similar to Hettne’s continuum of autonomy v integration (only Seers has called it ‘nationalist v. antinationalist’), he stretches the other axis from Egalitarian on one extreme to Anti-egalitarian approaches on the other extreme (Fig. 2.1). The egalitarian approach emphasises more on redistribution than to growth and the anti-egalitarian approach assumes that inequality is an inevitable price to growth. The nationalists seek more autonomy at the nation state level while anti-nationalists view development with integration into the global system.

Fig 2.1 Seers’s Classification



These various traditions have contributed to a large body of literature on development thinking and across recent history nation states have adopted one or the other development thinking to varying degrees of success (or failures) with economic and human development. For example, the Marxist Socialist approach did not prove to be successful in respect of former communist USSR, neither did the Gandhian Socialism deliver the goods in case of post independent India, where self reliance was considered to be the antidote for underdevelopment. Looking at the pace at which globalisation is permeating the lives in general we can say that contemporary development thinking is very much in the *Neoclassical-liberal* territory—more towards anti-nationalist and anti-egalitarian views (Fig. 2.1).

## Development Paradigms –crossroads or convergence?

### ***Modernity***

In the 1950s and 60s –with the dominance of Keynesian economics –underdevelopment was viewed simply as a result of shortcomings in the industrialisation process, and it was thought that direct investments in the poor countries to establish large industries would be the best way to their economic health. This is what is generally termed the ‘modernity’ paradigm and Walt Rostow’s *five-stage* economic model became the forerunner of this thinking. Rostow (1960) conceived these five stages as: (1) the traditional society<sup>3</sup> (2) the pre-takeoff society (3) takeoff (4) the road to maturity, and (5) the mass consumption society

As an economist, Rostow stressed that the most crucial stage is the ‘takeoff’ where after developing a new mentality (and class) in the second stage the society gains the capital ground—the share of net investment and saving in national income rises from five percent to ten percent or more—and enters industrialisation. “The neo-classical and Keynesian strategy involved modelling an idealised world independent and detached from processes” (Heron, 2009 p. 100), and that “structural change was interpreted statistically, through analysis of industry and regional economic structures” (*ibid.*), not allowing for unevenness nor exploring the processes generating unevenness. This model may not fit the developing societies of today because external developmental interventions may speed up, or altogether skip, certain stages of the process (Gerschenkron, 1962). For instance, the traditional (modernity theory) ideal of industrialisation is not so much desired in today’s developmental thought as the ideals of self-sufficiency and preservation. Thus, before the capital grown in the third stage (take-off) turns endogenous, the society becomes mass consumers to the benefit of global economic power. It may be noted from Rostow’s model that from whichever stage a society may enter the development race, it ends up as a mass consumption society.

### ***Another Development***

In the 1970s, a major shift in the development thinking came about which is now identified as the evolution of the concept of ‘Another Development’<sup>4</sup>. Although the cultivation of a mass consumption society is common to both, the approaches are quite different. To summarise, the proponents of ‘participatory approach’ generally argue that, (a) People are getting what they ‘democratically’ want, nothing is being imposed or dumped on them, nor are they forced follow a development path charted out for them by external *intervenors* (b) They can choose to keep the values/ attributes of a traditional society, and (c) It is a natural upliftment through mobilisation of a society’s own resources (with some intervention of course)—both human and other. However, the system is not *endogenous*, much as the development NGOs may want to argue it as such. This is true also for the fact that whereas it is assumed that values and attributes of a traditional society may be preserved, in practice the communities are forced to give way to the new economic reality created around them.

An interesting observation is that while 'modernity' assumes that mass consumption enters the scene as a stage—the final stage in the development process (Rostow, 1960), under 'another development' mass consumption enters as a rationality in the early stages for further development—in a way the society gradually becomes consumerist *while* the development process is on. This actually aggravates the situation in the Third World countries because most of the wealth created by mobilisation of a society's resources escapes against both—consumer buying from rapidly penetrating global giant corporates and the ever growing debt from the development strategies of 'modernity' era. The latter, has given way to Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the International Monetary Fund under which the inability to cope with the World Bank (WB) loan repayments forces the nation states to restructure their economy in a way that facilitates international trade. "SAPs were the operational methodology that in practice, implemented neo-liberalism in poor nations" (Leal, 2010, p. 90). This has strengthened the World Trade Organisation (WTO, formerly known as GATT) and in turn increased the corporate penetration of the developing countries. There is a strong argument from some economists "that Third World countries undergoing structural adjustment suffer from an increase of impoverishment (Fergeany, 1998, cited in Abaza, 2001, p. 106)", and that "Recent reports are alarming, as the triumph of neo liberalism takes place at the expense of the poor." (*Ibid.*).

Hettne (1990) has also questioned the concept of 'Another Development' and the sudden interest shown in it by the Developed nations and International organisations. This Another Development was then viewed as *alternative development thinking* and was characterised by its being need oriented, endogenous, self-reliant, ecologically sound, and based on structural transformation<sup>5</sup> (Nerfin 1977). Hettne refers to this sudden interest as a paradox, and questions why the concepts of Another Development, implying small scale solutions, ecological concerns, popular participation and the establishment of community etc., have met with relatively more enthusiasm in the rich countries, while they, to a large extent, are being rejected in the poor (Hettne, 1990). He has suggested a possible explanation that small is convenient because it is devoid of power, and that the masses of the Third World were deemed in general, to remain at a peculiar economically underprivileged level and never to reach the material standard of the West and the Third World elites (Hettne, 1990). In other words, the sudden interest in Another Development was to encourage a system that kept the Third World masses as growing 'markets' and would not allow them to be players in or challengers to the market—at least in a short to medium term. Another possible explanation, which is strengthened by author's experience in the development field, may be that the elites in the Third World draw their economic strength from the disparity within and would therefore not appreciate the development of layers at or nearer the grassroots level. On the other hand, corporate politics entering international development arena cannot be ignored—perhaps, it is deemed best to retreat a step, to observe and customise, and then to penetrate with consumer goods rather than push technology (actively, as in modernity) down a society's throat and expect them to go through the 'industrialisation' route.

In the wake of data collected in this ongoing research, some elements of Fig.4 are open to question. For example, whether (a) the destruction of environment has been any less in the new paradigm, and (b) the human resources mobilised by developmental activities of NGOs was not preparing grounds

for local labour for the subsequent exploitation of natural resources in a specific region –which eventually translates into good public relations and good economics for corporate initiated projects undertaken in region. This can also be viewed within the recent focus on creation and management of social capital for example, “ Social Capital can make positive contributions to the local economies by improving performance of both profit maximising firms and social economy organisations. Therefore, economic and community development officials are challenged to find ways to create, preserve, and use social capital” (Carrol, & Blair 2009, p. 275).

## **‘Making up to’ the Corporates—the participatory way**

Another development has in fact eliminated the need for ‘industrialisation’ of the Third World, it stresses *ecologisation*<sup>6</sup>—which seemingly fits the tradition of most ‘cultures’ of the Third World. Is this new focus on preserving nature —highly vocalised by NGOs —a convenient device for the global business to minimise challenges to long-term market goals from any prospective local industry? This is again a question that seeks answer in the political economy of development. And if it is so, then the very organisations that are seen as part of the civil society and apparently acting for the common man have unfortunately succumbed to the corporate design, delivering themselves and the common man to the global power structure.

The new economic system is in effect a reinvention of capitalism in the latter part of the 20th century with its unprecedented permeation into the lives of people. The legitimacy extended to every aspect of the system is of great consequence as it minimises questioning of *status quo*. “Production fills the surface of the Empire, it is a machine that is full of life, an intelligent life that by expressing itself in production and reproduction as well as in circulation (of labour, effects, and languages) stamps society with a new collective meaning and recognises virtue and civilisation in cooperation” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 365). The implication of this ‘cooperation’ is *subsumption* from Marxist perspective, whereas, in the community development terms it is interpreted as ‘participation’ and ‘integration’ into the global system.

The development activities at the ground level are themselves strengthening the global power structure whose ultimate aim is to create consumers. “It (the penetration of capitalism) is a process that has two basic dimensions: as new peoples are brought under the wage relationship, new products, services and productive processes facilitate the self expansion of capital growing segments of social life” (Schiller, 1988).

## **Contemporary Development Processes**

Most of the contemporary development activity falls very much within what was historically referred to as ‘another development’ paradigm and of late participatory development, although variations exist depending upon such factors as development components, the social level at which development intervention is sought, who funds the projects, and who acts as intermediary between the communities (also called beneficiaries) and the donors. Our major concern here is the development

intervention at the grassroots levels of the third world, where generally the components are health, education, poverty reduction by mobilisation of community resources, etc. Poverty reduction or economic development takes the priority both in the literature of international development and in practice. "During the 1990s poverty reduction has become firmly established on the international agenda..." (White, 1999, p. 503). This means that there is an enormous intervention activity at the lowest levels of societies of the Third World. In the last three decades, the world has seen an increase in funds being channelised into development activities around the globe, especially in the Third World countries. These development funds (aid) could not have either been generated or moved towards the targeted beneficiaries without a system in place.

## **Institutions, their Relationships and Information Processes**

Identifying the cluster of motives behind the giving of aid, Riddell (2007) lists "*emergency needs, achievement of recipients' developmental objectives, show of solidarity, furthering of aid providers' political and strategic interests, promoting donor-country commercial interests, and historical ties*" (p. 91-92), among others, The latter two listed above are of special relevance to the subject of this paper as they come out strongly in the context of the need to specifically monitor the outcomes like that of any other investment in economic terms. International Aid generally passes through one of the following routes:

- Developed countries to International Development Funding Agencies<sup>7</sup> to regional/ national NGOs to Field NGOs to beneficiaries
- International Organisations (Such as UN and its Agencies) and Bretton Woods Institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) to national NGOs to Field NGOs (directly, or through International Development Funding Agencies) to beneficiaries
- Corporate donors to International Development Funding Agencies to regional/ national NGOs to Field NGOs to beneficiaries, as well as corporate donors locally funding developmental projects, which is usually appears in the development discourse as 'corporate social responsibility'.

Whichever way the aid is propelled there is one or more 'agency' between the actual donor/principal<sup>8</sup> and the receiver/beneficiary<sup>9</sup>. These agencies can be from the Field NGOs, regional/ national level NGOs, to international aid disbursement agencies.

The involvement of 'agency' apparently is an economic necessity, looking at the geographical and cultural differences between the donors and the ultimate beneficiaries. "In many agency relationships, the cost to the principal of not using an agent will be higher than if one is used. "Costs" often generate "revenues" and the revenue gained by using agents will normally exceed the costs, to the extent that profits accrue. This might be termed as the opportunity cost of not using an agent" (Woolf, 1994, p. 16) Only that, the agency in this case has fulfilled not just an economic need but *other political needs* as well in the form of conforming to the donor expectations of adopting certain organisational structures,

subscribing to human resources development and documentation training, and fulfilling information demands put forward by donors. Although agency theory can be applied throughout in the context of international aid some giant international funding organisations such as Actionaid International insist on addressing their funded organisations as ‘partners’<sup>10</sup>, thus avoiding the reality of an unequal, subordinate relationship. Such donors appear to be using the ‘helper-doer’ model in their dealings with the field NGOs, but this approach is also not without paradoxes<sup>11</sup>.

As for ‘partnership’ there is a strong criticism of the employed euphemism on the grounds that barrier to partnership exist due to donor’s preference for contracting, cut-back in their staff, and reporting requirements that shift NGOs’ accountability away from the intended beneficiaries. “Again and again, Southern NGOs observe that there is seldom an ethos of mutuality and reciprocity within Northern NGOs –differences in resources almost inevitably lead to donor-recipient, parent-child ground rules.” (Fowler, 1998, p. 108)

In respect of which aid resources match the best practices in participatory development, Fowler (1998) asserts that “the greater the constraints on best practice, the lower the development quality” (p. 129). He also lists the factors which contribute to the quality of aid funds for NGOs, which include among others the conditions imposed by and expectations of the giver, method of allocation, administrative burden, predictability, reliability, continuity and timeliness in disbursement. When a project proposal comes for approval to a funding agency, a grassroots NGO’s proposed strategy, its way of working and its structure is under scrutiny. If the proposal itself or NGO’s capacity is considered inadequate, the organisation will expect the development (funding) agency for advice on how to improve it. In a consultative role, the funding agency may be able to advise, but since they also have the power over the money when to release or withhold, the grassroots organisation may take the advice as conditions which must be met in order to qualify for the development funds (Borren, 2001). Respondent NGOs to this research stressed that the release of funds by the funding agencies was mostly tied with the timely reports sent by the NGOs; more often they saw it as conditionality.

## **Donor Information Demands**

Davies (1997) compares how various donor organizations/agencies depending on their organisational size and structure seek information from Field NGOs (again, depending on their size) and how this demand for information helps the NGOs’ institutional development<sup>12</sup>. Naqvi and Papoutsaki (2011) have mapped the major regional and international stakeholders in development and the flow of structural constraints down towards the grassroots NGOs. Some of Davies’s observations, especially those with regards to donor information demands and conformity are relevant here: “In the field of development aid the concept of institutional development is obviously dangerous. There is a risk that various organizations which are meant to be intermediaries and means to an end will be treated as ends in themselves, and those whose welfare is supposed to be of final concern, the poorest, will be forgotten and recede into the background.” (Davies, 1997, p. 613).

Davies (1997) presents the argument that institutionalisation of development could not have been possible unless there was something of value seen in it by donors or their principals. He identified that 'type of information demand' on NGOs would be a determinant of how important these organizations were. "A range of positions can be identified, from laissez-faire (NGO should be trusted to do what they will do and not be harassed by donors), to 'hard-line' (funded NGOs have signed a contract and therefore have an obligation to produce the goods i.e., information)" (Davies, 1997, p. 616).

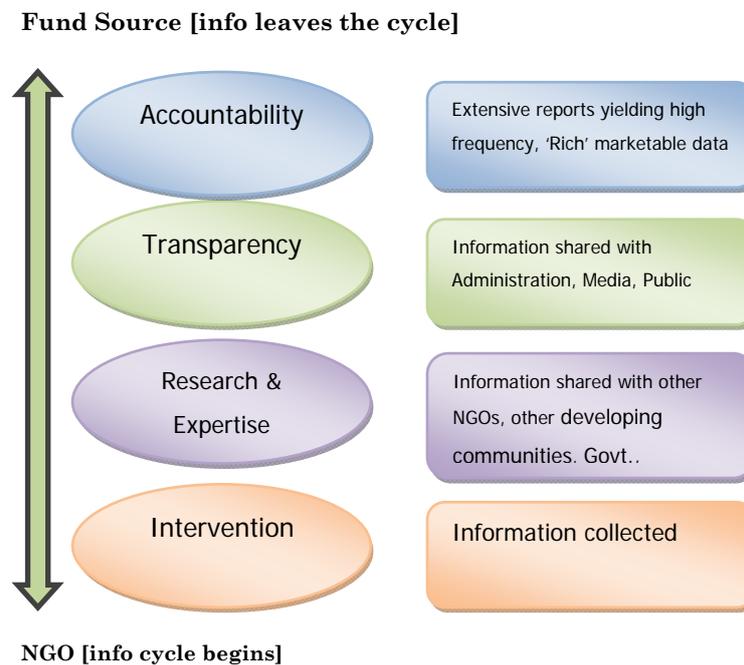
## **Instrumental Rationality**

In order to meet the information demands of donors, majority of the funded Non-governmental development organisations have had to restructure themselves to the model of their donors, which is by and large the corporate model, and in the economic world is considered the most effective one. The instrumental rationality of the corporate model has penetrated all institutions—local and global—including religious organisations, international organisations and other funding intermediaries, and NGOs working at the community level. Whereas, the corporate model can be argued the most effective functional system evolved till date, when used in the development field it has precipitated information 'excesses'—perennial information generation that gives power to institutions of the developed world over underdeveloped world can be viewed as wholly supportive of profiteering even to the brink of criminality. This information can be '*de-contextualised*' and '*reused*', with the latest information technologies for continuous updating facility, faster processing and delivery to corporate knowledge bases. In Marketing Management courses at the university, they teach that a much cheaper way (in comparison to other direct methods of market research) of getting market information is to gather demographic information from statistical departments or other information processing agencies. And why would well trained marketers not opt for more exhaustive information on community dynamics against the dry statistical data produced by government departments? (See Fig. 3 for the types of information generated by NGOs at various levels of their interaction).

## **Other Communication intensive activities—Accountability, Transparency and Resource Sharing**

The information developer role of the NGOs is clearly acknowledged in the International forums. For instance, in the *Guidelines for Association between the United Nations and Non-Governmental Organisations* (UN, 2000), the UN declares the nature of relationship as: "NGOs are a valuable resource for the various entities of the UN. NGOs provide expert analysis in the field; serve as early warning agents and help monitor and implement international agreements. NGOs also help raise public awareness of issues, play a major role in advancing UN goals and objectives and contribute essential information at UN Sponsored events. NGOs advocate many of the same causes of concern to the United Nations and share many interests; there is the opportunity for them to work together in several ways."

Fig. 3 The Information 'Mill'



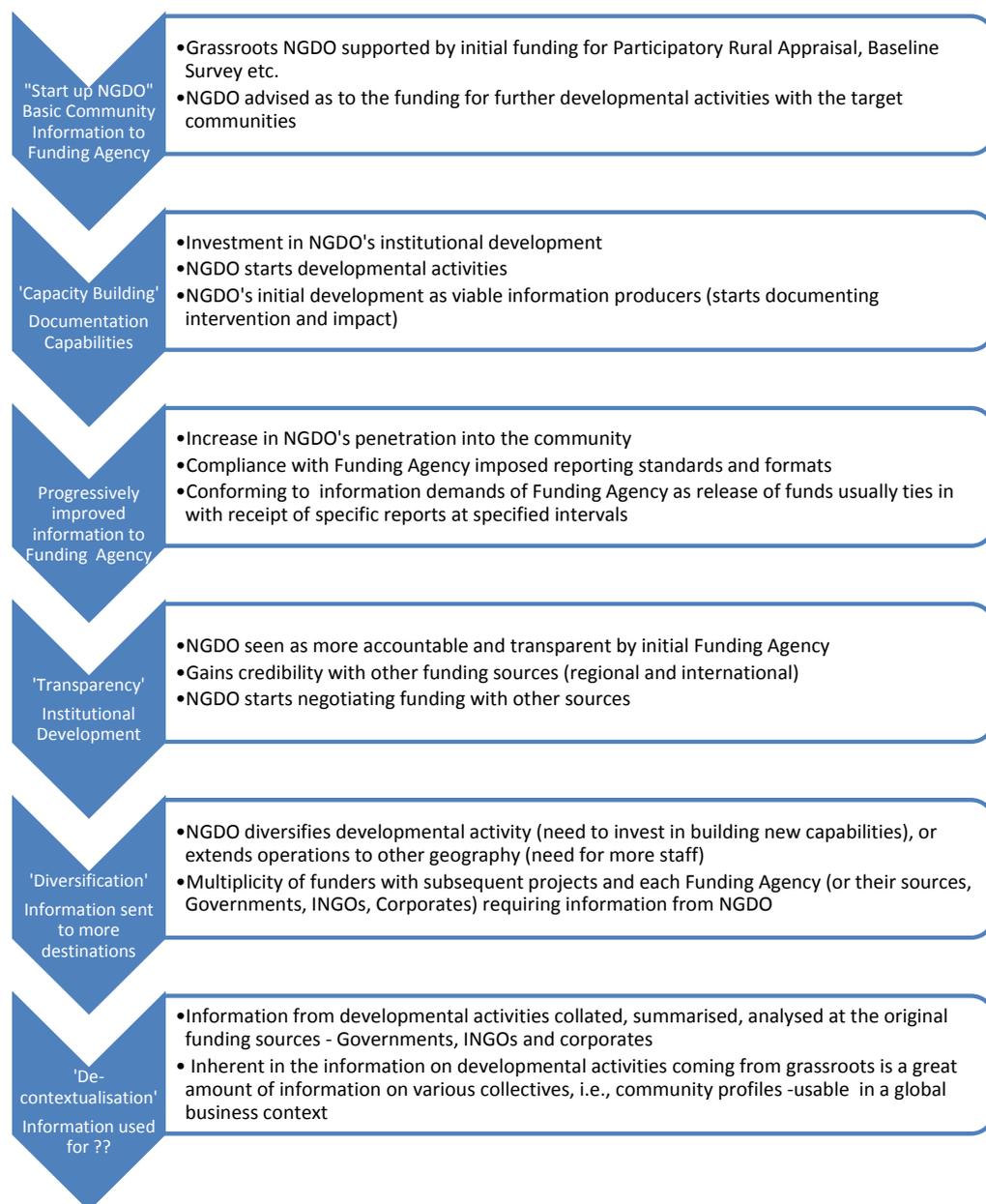
Ball and Dunn (2000), in the context of good practices, advised intensive communication in three areas of NGO functioning, viz, sharing of research and expertise with other organisations, transparency with public and authorities, accountability to funders/ sponsors. Analysing these three typical activities of NGO's, which generate three different genres of information (Fig. 3) we find that, (a) Research is a *professional need*. NGO's research extensively the communities where a developmental 'intervention' is presumed or assessed. This translates into 'knowledge base' (learning—if we use NGO terminology), and becomes a basis for NGO networking and offering expertise to other organisations; (b) Transparency is a *democratic need*. NGOs need to disclose to local/national authorities, the public, the media and their sponsors/ funders an account of their activities (area, population, components etc.), successes of intervention and use of funds. This translates largely into statistical data and is open to interpretation by various parties as per their concerns; and (c) Accountability is an *ethical need*. NGOs are directly accountable to their sponsors/funding agencies for the appropriation of funds budgeting, utilisation, outcomes, etc. This develops into processed information on social, cultural, economic, political landscapes of the 'intervened' human settlements. Presently, there could be only fewer, more communication intensive (highly interactive) and *inconspicuous*, socio-economic activities that yield better research on futuristic (very immediate future in today's world) markets of technology transfer, cheap labour, and anything in between. It seems very logical that these information intensive activities are inevitable if an NGO must work with a community, within a national system, and with the much needed financial resources for development (Ball and Dunn, 2000). What happens when the information reaches the donor organisations—which are urged to 'share' resources? Moreover, the donor organisations are also

'agency'; they too have an accountability to their principals who could be Corporates, Governments, UN or its agencies, WB/IMF or their agencies, or they may be accountable to a number of them at any given time (Fig. 4).

## Value of Development Information

From the perspective of information processes involved in the alternative paradigm, in one stroke (i.e., funding a project at grassroots level) the donor parties can be informed on the dynamics of various societal levels within a region or a country. Why is this information so important?

**Fig 4. NGOs institutional development vis-à-vis movement of community information towards powerful stakeholders in development.**



The authors believe that this in-depth knowledge of consumer dynamics and the marketability of this knowledge, may qualify as the 'incentive' to the agencies involved with planning development interventions the Third World. Applying the same logic to the other end, it may be said that funding of the 'development project' is the 'incentive' to a community and/ or the ground level NGO to produce quality information for the international agencies. Similar to the cooperation between UN and NGOs, the *Guidelines for Cooperation between the United Nations and the Business Community* (2000) clearly states that "A number of UN organisations have a successful history of cooperating with business. Recent political and economic changes have fostered and intensified the search for collaborative arrangements." Whereas, the document mentions that, cooperation with business can take many forms, such as advocacy, fundraising, policy, humanitarian assistance and development cooperation (UN, 2000), these terms are used broadly and the set does not include the *reciprocity* that the cooperating business would seek from the United Nations, or other INGOs for that matter. Moreover, the same UN document states that 'cooperation is often-situation specific' hence 'each UN organisation must develop its own capacities and clear lines of responsibility to devise, implement and evaluate 'cooperative arrangements with business'(Ibid.). On the other hand, Henderson (2001) warns of the dangers of unchecked cooperation between international NGOs and the corporate in that cooperation can quickly turn into *co-optation* with the resources at the disposal of the corporates. "Constructive engagement can easily slide into complacency on the one hand, with the risk of charges of collusion leading to international dissent on the other" (Henderson, 2001, p. 124).

To fit into economic feasibility, business cooperation with International organizations must be reciprocated with a return of an equal (if not more) value. This cooperation is not charity and does not appear to be solely for the purpose of public relations exercise. Davies (1997) has raised this argument in the context of institutional development of NGOs: "..... whether the transaction that takes place when a donor funds an NGO is seen as a gift or a commercial exchange. If it is a gift then any information in return may also have to be seen as a gift, not expected but gratefully received, perhaps *—certainly, not demanded*. If it is a commercial relationship then what is received in turn? It is not a physical product but information—information of the developments that took place as a result of using granted resources." (Davies, 1997, p. 617)

The authors view that this is an investment for goods of better value. Does access to broad based quality information on future markets (For example, see Appendix i), marketability, redistribution, and resale value of such information *not* qualify it as profitable investment? Reports such as these collected and collated from the region have the potential to inform the corporates whether to invest in soil fertilisers, or animal feed in a particular region. An example of corporate manufactured herbal products introduced into the local markets in India is given by Naqvi (2004), specifically mentioning 'Colgate Neem'—a toothpaste which became quite popular in India given the historical association of neem in India with prevention and cure of diseases. The idea of 'free market' economy is more tilted to benefit larger businesses than being supportive of creating access for local products to mainstream markets. Moreover, even NGDOs' reports of the local farmers' inability to cope with loans and/or government liabilities with respect to their tilled land allocation may present 'positive' scenarios for

loan re-structuring or perhaps for outright corporate purchases of farmlands, as has already been witnessed in the last 15 years in India.

Let us assume that the information generated by NGOs in the development is not of much consequence economically. Then the project documentation on the part of NGOs would be much neater and economical—budget plan and resources used. Why do the donors need all the details of community dynamics against each project component (see Appendix i) and with such frequency as quarterly, biennially, and yearly. It can be argued that this stress on documentation and considerable expenditure on documentation workshops for NGOs, is a consequence of the realisation that there is considerable information potential in the participatory development process and it must be tapped to its full extent. As the project moves towards maturity these demands consume more and more of NGOs resources, which come from donors. Field NGOs in Central India have personally been observed to be pre-occupied more with the details and formats of reporting rather than being active in the field. The donor, then, is not so much concerned with the aid reaching the beneficiaries but more with the information coming from the funded NGO. This indicates that there is a realisation of *opportunity cost* at the donors' end if the full information potential is not realised while the development 'intervention' is underway.

Bates (1988) offers an economist's perspective on information calling it a 'peculiar commodity' that resists both definition and measurement. He asserts that information is, even from the traditional economic perspective, a 'distinctive good' the value of which is determined by the expected returns from its use. Bates distinguishes between two types of value: the *intrinsic utility value*—derived by the consumer of the information good, and the *ancillary social value*—derived in the future use resulting from changes in the social and economic environment for the information good. In the case of information generated by NGOs it is difficult to say which is which. On the surface it might appear that there is not much intrinsic utility value of the information generated under the 'accountability' umbrella of external funding for development interventions. Those involved in the development activity would look at the social value of this information as superseding the former as this (they assert) helps in identifying/ understanding the problems of the Third World. The information, from NGOs' perspective (data), is a 'resource' for developmental processes, and separated from market dynamics—a view that is difficult to accommodate in the *information age*.

## Information Ethics

Ethics of information is largely being treated from the computing and information technologies perspective as in Mingers & Walsham (2010), as also information science as in Britz, Onyancha & Ocholla (2010). Most such treatments read as 'de-linked' from the human side of it. There is acknowledgement of the need for *ethical pluralism*<sup>13</sup>, however, specific discussions limit to meeting the challenges of connectivity of billions of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ess, 2009). UNESCO patronises efforts presumably being made to formulate a code of global information ethics (Britz and Capurro, 2010). Although ethical dimensions of the global information society has been on its agenda since the late 90s, the issues worked on and debated under the auspices of UNESCO are dominated

by the societal implications of digital age technologies, and in a peculiar way signal a resignation to technological determinism, where one might think that that was going to be the trend and that humans had to fit in within it.

Many further questions arise within this research on the ethical and legal dimensions of the community/group information. This research finds that information on developmental activities is inherent with significant amount of information on target communities, however, the same communities are unaware of the potential uses of information, and are not apprised by the NGOs in this respect. NGOs themselves are not aware except for the fact that their reports do not/should not contain personal information on individuals. This leads to another aspect that although the constituent unit of a community is the individual, who is protected by privacy laws etc. the collective comprised of such individuals is *not*, and therefore information on group/community can be –without needing an *informed consent* of the subject community— accessed, exchanged, circulated, processed for various objectives and owned by various for-profit and not-for profit organisations, of any denomination from local to global. It appears that both *ethics* and *law* shy away from this aspect.

There are other more direct questions with respect to information leaving the local development NGOs. What happens to all the information at the INGO level (assuming nothing escapes the development cycle before that level)? If it is in the public domain, how much of it is so? Who decides what should be kept and what needs to be discarded? How is the unused information treated? Who owns it, and if they do (own) what kind of (buying and selling) rights do they have with respect to this commodity?

## Conclusion

With the *commodification* of all human activity in the current global economic system, it can be asserted that the value of information generated by NGOs has become less as 'resource' and more as 'commodity'; and there are prospective, immediate consumers for this commodity in the international market who will endeavour to keep the development funding system functional and to fine-tune it to achieve the best quality information product more economically.

In most literature of information in the international development context, it is mapped from the Developed countries to the Third World and it is scarce to find analysis of the *reverse flows* of information. From the Third World perspective usually the questions of *access to information* are raised (Schiller & Schiller, 1988, Dosa, 1997 Babe, 1995). This may be partly owing to the fact that historically the nature of information flowing in the reverse direction was crude and unstructured. However, in the light of corporatisation of NGO structures (making them more *efficient*), the information 'product' leaving Third World borders is not raw but fairly processed and qualifies as an economic good by Bates's (1988) economic definition of information.

This, 'contra-information flow in the global economy' is critical in the political economy of information. It has been treated as 'beneficial' in the drive to reduce world poverty and is considered to have

enabled United Nations and/or its agencies achieve their goals. However, as discussed in this paper, it appears that contra-information flows emerging from the development field have strengthened the global power structure more than helping 'empowerment' at the grassroots level.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> NGO: Non-governmental non-profitable organizations, NGDO: Non-governmental non-profitable organizations, involved in development at various national and international levels.

<sup>2</sup> Development Intervention: From NGO terminology-when a community is helped with some external resources i.e., funds or service.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional society was thought to be one that had not entered the industrial age as most Western 'modern' societies.

<sup>4</sup> Alternative development, Another development, Participatory approach, and grassroots approach are used interchangeably.

<sup>5</sup> Largely interpreted as the changes in a country's economic system to facilitate integration into the world economy.

<sup>6</sup> Ecologisation: A word coined to explain the shift in development strategies from industrialisation to preservation of nature and natural resources and/or monitoring biodiversity

<sup>7</sup> Funding Agencies: Mostly International Organisations who disseminate funds to NGOs/ collect/negotiate funds from principal donors and monitor NGO activities and development projects.

<sup>8</sup> Donor: Developed Countries, International Organisations, Bretton Woods Institutions, Corporates, or Agents (Funding Agencies) acting for one or many of them.

<sup>9</sup> Beneficiaries/ Receivers: Communities that are helped through the use of aid; also target community, or just community. Developing community, Intervened community, beneficiaries are more or less synonymous in NGO terminology

<sup>10</sup> Funded organisations, partner organisations, field NGOs

<sup>11</sup> The Helper-Doer Relationship: The focus is on the relationships where some party A tries to induce a change in the behaviour or beliefs of another party B. (We may call the first party principal or helper and the second party the agent or doer. Then the Theory Y and indirect approaches fall in line as ways for "helpers" to help others ("doers") to help themselves to "do" something, while the theory X and direct approach are ways of influencing others to do something, but not ways of helping others to become more autonomous. Theory X does not take the autonomy of the agents or doers as a constraint, not to mention as a goal.

The task is not to "help others"; it is quite a different task of "helping others help themselves." The notion of autonomy-compatible assistance has a whiff of paradox since it is an external intervention that somehow does not override or undercut the other person's internal locus of causality. For instance, if the helper has a significant impact, then to what extent are the others really "helping themselves" or if they are really helping themselves, then what is the role of would-be "helpers" Ellerman (2001)?

<sup>12</sup> Institutional development could be seen as an improvement in an organisation's responsiveness to the needs of its intended beneficiaries. In practice, this takes the form of:

- finer discriminations between beneficiaries' needs
- quicker response to those needs, and
- the ability to do both (i) and (ii) on a larger demographic scale.

Many organizations make strategic choices as to which of these forms of responsiveness they will emphasise most. Increased efficiency in resource use is one means whereby an organization could improve its responsiveness.

<sup>13</sup> Ethical pluralism -One that seeks to conjoin shared norms, values, and practices alongside the irreducible differences between ethical traditions and norms that define and demarcate diverse cultures.

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Reproduced here is an example of broad indicators based on which a field NGDO reports to a funding agency. This was sent to the author by the Head of the Organisation in response to research follow up questions by email. Organisation name has been substituted by 'XXXX':

The answer to query 3 [Broad reporting indicators of developmental activities] is a bit lengthy as it involves socio-economic, political and cultural aspects of the communities we are working with. I have tried here to give you the sector wise indicators, remember that these indicators have been drawn on the basis of the programmes XXXX is working, else, the indicators may vary according to the programme Components, Programme Size, Duration, Communities involved, Social, Political, Economic and Cultural fabric of the regions, Geography and Topography of the area, fiscal flow, and a lot more. For each type of funding, these are very specific and programme based indicators, if you give me another week to answer this query it would be justice with the whole issue. For the time being:

### **Community Organization Indicators:**

#### **Village organization:**

- Total GVS membership (men/women),
- No. of GVS with a stable managing committee,
- Consistency in composition of the committee
- No. and frequency of GVS meetings,
- No. and frequency of Management Committee Meetings
- No. of GVS with systematic recording of meeting proceedings
- No. of GVS-MCs with systematic recording of meeting proceedings

#### **GVS funds:**

- Amount mobilized as corpus fund,
- Members Savings,
- Other Contributions
- Utilization of GVS funds by type,
- investment of funds
- Repayment rates in case of loans,

#### **External Funds:**

- Amounts of funds mobilized under various government schemes by type,
- Amount of funds mobilized under various non-governmental / Panchayat interventions by type.

#### **Economic Programme [ Non-Farm and On Farm Sectors]**

- Extension programmes : No. covered, No. adopted
- Irrigation programme : Additional area covered under irrigation
- Land development : Area treated and improved, per acre productivity, cropping pattern
- Seed Bank Development : No. of Beneficiaries , Quantity stored, Quantity Sold, Gross Income, Profit, Repayment Rate
- Livestock development : Average income from livestock
- Marketing interventions : Quantity handled, Turnover, No. of beneficiaries, Incremental price realization and incremental net gains
- Plantation : Survival rate, Utilization pattern
- Credit programme : Coverage, Amount lent, Repayment rate, Revolving fund status / Management

Profitability of group enterprises and benefits accruing to individual beneficiaries in form of wages/profits  
 Average income per family in case of individual enterprise.  
 Gainful employment obtained by families  
 Marketing linkages developed for various products

**Health care :**

No. of people availing services of health workers, deliveries attended by health workers, prevalence of communicable diseases .

- Immunization : Coverage of children and pregnant women under complete immunization
- Drinking water :Prevalence of water borne diseases
- Government linkages Delivery of service government function areas

**Education:**

- Enrolment No. of children (girls/boys) enrolled in the formal system,  
 Achievement level of NFEC children in government school  
 Achievement levels, attendance, dropout rate.

With respect to reporting the pace and progress of the projects. XXXX has an arrangement of quarterly, Half Yearly and Annual Reviews. The representatives of the funding agencies are visiting their respective project areas to observe the pace of the expected outcomes and change. XXXX has endeavored to create a document which would instill learning for funding agencies, NGO Partners and the governments, thus, our reports include both, the achievements and the failures and the reasons of variance. All the reports are activity-wise. The success and failure are measured on the basis of indicators worked out with the community at the time planning the programme. The indicators are critically reviewed at every half yearly to measure the level of their applicability.