Development paradigms and valuations of biodiversity in Bhutan and Nepal – a comparative essay

by Philipp P. Thapa

1. Introduction

In their study on the potential role of biodiversity in future development models, Kaphengst et al. (2014) ask what organisations of development cooperation could do to strengthen the effective consideration of non-economic values of biodiversity in development. In this context, Bhutan and Nepal make an interesting pair for a comparative case study. Both are small Himalayan countries that undertook development starting in the mid-20th century with a similar stock of biodiversity, culture, and economic potential. However, since that time they have taken quite different roads of development to current situations that differ not least in the degree that biodiversity has been conserved and how conservation is underpinned in law and official culture. The aim of this study is to outline the story of development and conservation in each country, identify key factors for their divergence, and draw tentative conclusions for development cooperation in general.

In its approach, this study is more argumentative than methodical; it is more an essay than a research paper, reflecting the sum of the author's views formed through various experiences, readings, and discussions over many years. There is therefore a certain disproportion between claims and support. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this study is justified by its potential to spark further ideas, research, and practical experimentation, widening the horizon of the debate.

The main part of the study begins by placing the two countries in their Himalayan and South Asian regional context (Section 2). Section 3 and 4 offer more in-depth information on Bhutan and Nepal, respectively. Section 5 discusses some of the most interesting differences and underlying factors in the development of both countries. Finally, Section 6 draws tentative conclusions on the role played by conceptions of development and biodiversity for actual development and recasts them as recommendations for development cooperation.

The comparative view of Bhutan and Nepal suggests that the integration of non-economic values of biodiversity into development policies is not primarily a matter of awareness, fine-tuning, or adoption of specific instruments. Rather, it draws attention to the fact that valuations of biodiversity are embedded in larger conceptual frameworks – worldviews, conceptions of the good life, and,

accordingly, paradigms of development. In Bhutan, non-economic ideas about the relationship between people and nature were able to shape policies more than in Nepal – although similar ideas were present there – because of the different degrees to which each country adopted the international paradigm of economic development, whose inherent logic tends to invalidate or crowd out non-economic considerations. In reverse, this suggests that organisations of development cooperation, if they want to make room for non-economic values of biodiversity, need to question and perhaps replace their overall development paradigm.

2. Two small sub-Himalayan countries

In the global imagination, both Nepal and Bhutan are or used to be associated with the fictional Shangri-La – a peaceful, remote country among the Himalayan peaks where people live happily by non-material values. Nepal has lost some of that nimbus since its Maoist rebellion, the shooting of its royal family, and the civil war made the global news in the 1990s and 2000s. Bhutan retains and to some extent cultivates the image of an earthly paradise, supported by the benign image of its monarchy and its sponsorship of the Gross National Happiness approach to development. But it goes without saying that none of the two countries ever was an earthly paradise, and for both of them, the lower altitude zones are far more important in terms of population and economy than the emblematic high mountains. Rather than begin with the notion of Shangri-La and subtract from the ideal to arrive finally at a realistic picture of Bhutan or Nepal, the countries are better approached through the regional context.

Bhutan and Nepal are both located along the Himalayan mountains, including mainly the lower mountains, hills, and some of the adjoining plains south of the main range, a location referred to as sub-Himalayan. Both countries are roughly rectangular in shape, bordering India on three sides and China's Tibetan Autonomous Region in the North. While not exceptionally small countries in the global comparison, Bhutan and Nepal, roughly as large as Switzerland and as Switzerland plus Austria, respectively, certainly appear diminutive next to India and China. Attributes like "landlocked" or "sandwiched between giants" are often used to describe their position.

Both countries are part of South Asia – which is usually taken to include the other countries of the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives) and Afghanistan – the world's poorest region after sub-Saharan Africa, and the most densely populated. South Asia is dominated economically and culturally by India, a very diverse country in itself. The influence of China on Nepal and Bhutan is small in comparison, and their once important social and economic ties to Tibet were largely severed by its annexation to China. Politically and economically, both countries are oriented towards India and the West.

The Himalayan region is both a boundary and a great transitional belt in terms of culture, ethnicity, and biodiversity. Accordingly, the population in both Bhutan and Nepal includes a variety of ethnic groups speaking different languages, in most cases affiliated to the Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman language groups. The ruling elites of both countries made an effort to institute their languages (Nepali and Dzongkha, respectively) and traditional dress as symbols and expressions of national identity. Whereas this policy persists in Bhutan, the many ethnic and regional emancipation movements in the newly republican Nepal are paving the way for a more pluralistically constituted society. Nepal ceased to be a Hindu kingdom in 2007, but Bhutan's 2008 constitution both reduced the monarchy to representational status and enshrined the monarch's personal union as the head of state and the guardian of the Buddhist faith.

Nepal's and Bhutan's rich biodiversity, including many endemic species, is shaped both by their location in the transition zone of the Palaearctic and Indo-Malayan biogeographic regions and by their great span of elevation and rugged relief, offering many different climates, habitats, and niches. Degradation and loss of habitats due to human population growth and development activities are identified as the main threats to biodiversity in both countries, and both governments list similar individual factors including expansion of settlements and agriculture, building of new infrastructure (e.g. roads), pollution of waterbodies from both settlements and agriculture, increasing pressure on forest resources from subsistence uses, but also the spread of invasive species. However, whereas Bhutan has set aside nearly 40 percent of its total area as protected areas and considers them an effective ‘safe haven’ for most species, Nepal’s protected area system including conservation areas (similar to biosphere reserves) and buffer zones covers only 23 percent of the country’s total area, neglects the ecosystems of the Middle Mountains, and many officially protected areas have actually been under heavy pressure from land users and poachers (RGoB-MoA 2009: 22, 67; GoN-MoFSC 2014: v–iv, 7–9).

3. Bhutan

3.1. Bhutan's continuous, self-styled development

Bhutan's development since the early 20th century is characterised by remarkable political stability, continuity, and an intellectually independent leadership steeped both in tradition and Western education. Unified as a nation state by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, a lama from western Tibet, in the mid-17th century, Bhutan was originally set up as a religious state ruled by monks. Over the centuries, it variously experienced internal strife and civil war until monarchy was introduced with the coronation of the First King Ugyen Wangchuk in 1907, a man who had managed to re-unify the country starting from a situation when internal ‘political authority lay mostly in the hands of ruthless

magnates who wrested power through sheer force and military strength' (Phuntsho 2013: 515), leaving the religious hierarchs out of power.

Ura (2005: 4–5) identifies five phases of change in Bhutan since 1961, the date usually given for the country's entry into modernity and 'development' with its first five-year plan. In the first phase (1963–73), the policy focus was on road construction and building international relations. In the second phase (1973–83), state services expanded rapidly, leading to an increased need for state revenues. The third phase (1983–87) was shaped by projects that helped meet this need, such as the building of hydropower plants and the exploitation of mineral resources, ushering in rapid economic growth. Expansion of communication networks was the focus of the fourth phase (1988–98), crowned by the introduction of satellite television in 1999. The fifth phase (since 1998) is marked by devolution of power and democratisation, spelling the end of the 'vertical command structure' through which the kings directed Bhutan's development over the course of the 20th century with the result of remarkable '[c]ontinuity and cohesiveness in policies' undisturbed by the '[p]olicy drifts that could arise from party political cycles' (Ura 2005: 2). Ura sees the role of the monarchy as the most important of five causes of Bhutan's rapid development, the others being rich natural resources coupled with low population density, a well-functioning administration, long-term donor support, and the primacy attributed to Bhutanese culture in development policies.

3.2. Conceptual underpinnings: spiritual values and Gross National Happiness

Bhutan's dominant discourses on development and biodiversity are integrated under its own 'development philosophy' of Gross National Happiness (GNH) maximisation. While the term was coined by Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk in the late 1980s, its contents are based on traditional Bhutanese principles and ideas (RGoB-PC 1999b: 10), helping to translate them into the mainstream international development discourse. Gross National Happiness rests on four 'pillars' – economic, environmental, cultural, and governance-related.

Conservation of environment and biodiversity is not only part of the GNH concept, but also an obligation stipulated by the country's constitution (adopted in 2008). Among other details, Article 5 states that 'a minimum of sixty percent of Bhutan's total land shall be maintained under forest cover for all time'; a sensibility for aesthetic environmental values is reflected by the stipulation to prevent 'all forms of ecological degradation including noise, visual and physical pollution'. Even only these two constitutional demands taken together already suggest a vision of a green, peaceful country with a tranquil lifestyle, implying strong ethical judgements.

Given the metaphor of the integration of several pillars of development, Bhutan's approach to development can be seen as a localised version of the global sustainable development agenda. This is reflected in its Paro Resolution on Environment and Sustainable Development:

> This is the challenge of sustainable development: To raise the material well-being of all our citizens and *to meet their spiritual aspirations*, without impoverishing our children and grandchildren. The key is to find a development path that will allow the country to meet the pressing needs of the people, particularly in terms of food, health care and education, without undermining the resource base of the economy. New industries, new agricultural markets and new forestry products need to be carefully developed with respect to their broader environmental ramifications. (cited in RGoB-NES 1998: 21, italics added)

Where the Brundtland report, in its well-known definition of sustainable development, uses the phrase 'to meet the needs and aspirations', the Paro Resolution specifies 'spiritual aspirations', emphasising non-material values in general, but also pointing to the specific Buddhist underpinnings of Bhutanese politics. This is in line with a traditional Bhutanese understanding of development as 'acquisition of knowledge' (RGoB-NES 1998: 19). With regard to environmental policy, the Buddhist idea of 'respect for all living beings' is relevant; also, in traditional Bhutanese (animistic) worldviews 'the mountains, rivers, streams, rocks and soils of Bhutan are believed to be the domain of spirits', which are harmed and killed by pollution and disturbance. '[C]oupled with the Buddhist tenet that the acts of this life will be rewarded or punished in the next', these ideas form a 'powerful motivational principle' for biodiversity conservation (RGoB-NES 1998: 19).

3.3. Vision

A central and remarkable Bhutanese policy document is *Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and Happiness* (RGoB-PC 1999b). It is a good example for the character and style of many such Bhutanese documents, which stand out for their independent and intelligent structure and careful, coherent argumentation; *Bhutan 2020* in particular reads like an exercise in applied ethics. The vision of a green and peaceful country suggested above is, however, not necessarily substantiated here, but also not excluded; in an outline of the target state of the nation in 2020, the goal of preserving 60 percent of forest cover is anticipated, and yak herding is singled out as an example for a type of activity that should continue to exist in the future, symbolising the ancient and sustainable relationship between humans and nature in Bhutan. Otherwise, the description of the 2020 target state emphasises that the conservation of biodiversity will not be static, but 'given a dynamic and development-oriented interpretation', meaning that biodiversity will also be seen as an economic 'development asset' for export, employment, technological progress, and eco-tourism (Bhutan 2020 II: 74). On the other hand, the same document earlier warns that

> [t]he further erosion of our traditional perception and understanding of our place in natural systems carries potentially disturbing consequences for the environment. It may be a shorter step than we might care to imagine from seeing ourselves as part of a living world to seeing it as a source of wealth and as a resource base to be exploited for immediate gain – a

> step that would undermine the whole ethos and ethics of conservation. We must be ever-conscious of this danger. It can only be addressed by deliberate efforts to keep alive traditional attitudes and values. This establishes a clear link between environmental conservation and the conservation of our cultural heritage. (RGoB-PC 1999b: 62)

The conservation of Bhutanese culture and identity is, in turn, seen as central to the survival of the country as an independent nation state, as is socioeconomic (and thus cultural) development and change in response to international influences (RGoB-PC 1999b: 8). This tension between conservation and development is perhaps the central problem of Bhutan's development discourse, the flipside of its 'holistic' approach. 'Holistic' means that all policy fields are treated as interdependent and any activity is scrutinised for its consequences on all 'pillars' of development – as in the link between environmental conservation and conservation of cultural heritage in the above quote.

In line with this principle, Bhutan's determined use of concrete future visions in policy-making is typically accompanied with a stress on the continuity of the country's development from the historical past (cf. Phuntsho 2013: 583). Official Bhutan cultivates a positive national narrative that embodies and contextualises the values that underlie its development discourse. This narrative emphasises Bhutan's distinctness both within the South Asian region and Tibetan history, creating a sense both of unity and of entitlement to do things in one's own way.

3.4. Change and dissent

While government publications emphasise traditional principles, Bhutanese society is undergoing rapid change. As historian Karma Phuntsho notes, after the animistic and Buddhist phases, Bhutanese today have entered the third phase of their intercourse with nature. The new secular scientific worldview promoted by modern education

> […] removes the non-human players in nature and gives people centrestage to deal with nature. This worldview, accompanied by the insidious growth of materialism and consumerist lifestyle, has led to some unrestrained exploitation of nature. To combat this problem which originated in the Western secular worldview, the Bhutanese today turn to Western solutions. Nature conservation is now mainly sought through the Western environmentalist discourse, by promoting environmental education, legislation and establishments of protected areas. […] But will people fear the human state as much as the non-human spirits? (Phuntsho 2013: 590–1)

The outlook of Bhutan's young generation was formed by a largely English-language education system, access to international electronic media, and the presence of foreign visitors upscaled from a

few thousand to currently above 100,000 per year (Tourism Council of Bhutan 2014: 14), all introduced since about the turn of the millennium. They resemble young people all over South Asia in their aspirations to qualified jobs and material wealth and regard the official philosophy and narrative with increasing scepticism – as in this comment contradicting an article in the national newspaper, *Kuensel*, that argues that Bhutan should refrain from joining the World Trade Organisation:

> Not everyone can meditate and become free from worldly sufferings. THIS IS THE REALITY AND WE SHOULD WORK HARD TO FACE IT!! (Comment by user 'kento' dated 7 April 2014, http://www.kuenselonline.com/what-wto-membership-would-entail/)

In the same vein, Phuntsho (2013) summarises popular criticism of the Gross National Happiness approach to the effect that 'there is now a danger of missing the trees for the forest':

> [M]any […] argue that for a developing country like Bhutan the government's priority must be in improving the basic conditions for happiness rather than excessively talking about happiness itself […] GNH dangerously veers to the point of being an ideological distraction from the real issues and problems. […] Many of its critics note that happiness may be best left to the individuals and that the state should focus on improving the basic needs of the people. […] There is a perception among some quarters that GNH is merely an intellectual occupation for the elites, who enjoy all the benefits in life, and that it is a catchy branding for promoting Bhutan to the outside world while the ordinary and poor citizens struggle for their daily needs. […] GNH is also being increasingly bandied by the dissatisfied citizens to verbally bash the government and leaders for any failure. If it is an ideal the leaders have chosen for the country, they are now being earnestly expected to live up to it, however lofty it may be. (Phuntsho 2013: 598)

Bhutan's leaders have consciously pursued an alternative development route based on what they project as original Bhutanese spiritual values, now framed in the 'philosophy' of Gross National Happiness and the initiative towards a global New Development Paradigm (NDP Steering Committee and Secretariat 2013). They have not created Shangri-La, and many of their social policies can be questioned from a human rights perspective, especially the expatriation of ethnic Nepali Bhutanese around 1990 (for details, see Hutt 2003). However, on balance Bhutan demonstrated that if drivers such as population growth and density remain within limits, human development that places non-economic values and conservation of biodiversity and culture at the centre is not an unattainable ideal and does not exclude the realisation of benign economic progress.

4. Nepal

4.1. Becoming a developing country

It is quite possible to read Nepal's entire history as a succession of failing rulers, government coups, exploitation and suppression of the common people, uprisings, and aborted attempts at democracy (cf. Thapa 2005). As a nation state, Nepal is successor to the hill Kingdom of Gorkha which in the late 18th century, under King Prithvi Narayan Shah, conquered a number of similar petty states in its neighbourhood and made Kathmandu, an ancient centre of civilisation in the Himalayan region, its capital. The Gorkhali elite were Hindus speaking a Indo-Aryan language, and the Shah dynasty traced its descent back to the medieval Rajput kings of Northern India. In the mid-19th century, actual rule of the country passed from the Shah family to the Rana family through a hereditary primeministership.

Founded at the same time that the British were taking control of South Asia through the East India Company, the Kingdom of Gorkha (later Nepal) fought a war with the British in 1814–16, losing one-third of its territory, some of which the British gave back in 1816 (Treaty of Sagauli) and more in 1860, after Nepal had helped to suppress the Indian Rebellion of 1857. While Nepal never officially came under the British Raj (direct colonial rule in South Asia) declared in 1858, its actual position resembled that of the Indian 'princely states' under British suzerainty. Apart from national-level politics, there were even then strong economic and cultural ties through e.g. the seasonal migration of workers from Nepal's hills and mountains to the cities of northern India and the shared Hindu tradition. Nepal's rulers styled themselves as guardians of Hinduism, projecting the king as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and using the law to enforce Hindu religious rules including the caste system. For the Ranas, the state was mainly an instrument for personal enrichment, but in their final years, even they began to acknowledge an obligation to raise the living standard of the common people (Whelpton 2005: 122).

The year 1951 marks the end of Rana rule in Nepal, and the start of a half-century of development shaped by the monarchy, the political parties, and international partners. The coup that removed the Rana family from power was planned and conducted by a group of mostly Indian-educated men around Bisheswhar Prasad ('B.P.') Koirala in collaboration with King Mahendra and the Indian government.

Under King Mahendra, the government committed to economic transformation, symbolised by the establishment of the National Planning Commission in 1955, which issued the first five-year plan a

year later. The priority in the early years was the building of infrastructure, particularly roads, but attention was also given to increasing agricultural productivity in the tarai, and later to promoting industry. After King Birendra succeeded his father in 1972, the government began to take care of agriculture in the hills, resource conservation, regional planning, and decentralisation. The New Education System Plan integrated most schools and colleges in a government-controlled national structure and also made an attempt to reorientate education towards vocational training rather than preparation for administrative jobs. It also required master's-level students to spend one academic year working in a village under the National Development Service scheme. However, this reform failed due to the widespread resistance of students who wanted an education that would qualify them for white-collar jobs (Whelpton 2005: 126–127, 167).

Foreign aid has played an important role in Nepal's development during the entire post-1950 era. In 1951, Nepal signed an aid agreement with the United States, which at the time were aiming to strengthen developing countries against communist influence under a programme modelled on the Marshall plan that had recently helped rebuild the economies of the Western European countries after the Second World War. Nepal's first industrial estate was established at Balaju in Kathmandu with American assistance in 1959. The American attempt to boost agricultural productivity came up against the traditional way of life, especially an land-tenure system with disincentives for increasing productivity, and aid in the agricultural sector was drastically cut back when respective reform did not come. India's development aid to Nepal began in 1952 and focused on the construction of roads, dams and hydropower plants, as well as village development. The Soviet Union became involved in 1959 and assisted e.g. in establishing government-run factories, but in later decades reduced their involvement because they relied on a close security relationship with India to contain US influence in the region. China, on the other hand, offered relatively little aid so as to avoid provoking India; in addition to cash aid, it helped establish more factories and constructed a highway from Kathmandu to the Tibetan border as well as a rather more vital one to Pokhara, the urban centre of Nepal's western region. Smaller countries like Switzerland, Japan, or the Federal Republic of Germany became increasingly involved from the 1970s onwards and are best remembered for particular contributions to infrastructure (Whelpton 2005: .

In line with international usage, development success was measured as GDP growth, and the country generally failed to meet the growth targets of the five-year plans. GDP grew at an annual rate of 2.5 percent in the 1960s and 2.1 percent in the 1970s, increasing to over 4 percent in 1980–5 – accompanied by a trade-balance crisis that forced Nepal to obtain a structural adjustment loan from the World Bank in the mid-1980s. It came with conditions to reduce the budget and trade deficits, but also to take action to alleviate poverty. This contributed to the adoption of a government programme for meeting 'basic needs', which added a new dimension to the official development paradigm that has remained central since.

Nature conservation in Nepal has also been largely shaped by aid and international initiatives, especially in the early stages. The beginnings of nature conservation as a specific political field of action in Nepal are linked with the royal habit of game hunting. The Ranas first introduced laws for the protection of 'royal game' species such as the rhinoceros, tiger, and leopard in the late 19th century, and 'rhino patrols' were created to prevent poaching. After the overthrow of the Ranas, a Wild Life Protection Act was passed under the rule of King Mahendra in 1958 (which temporarily included the yeti as a protected species), and the creation of nature reserves began with the establishment of Mahendra National Park north of today's Chitwan National Park in the tarai. An alleged dramatic decline of the rhinoceros population in Chitwan prompted a IUCN study which, though finding the population much larger than feared (approx. 300 animals), recommended a south extension of Mahendra National Park which eventually led to the creation of Chitwan National Park. In the process, more than 4,400 families were 'removed from the forest areas and rhinoceros sanctuary and resettled elsewhere' (Willan 1965: 8, cit. in Soliva 2002: 116).

Similarly, the inclusion of the Bengal Tiger on the list of threatened species prompted the engagement of WWF, through its project 'Operation Tiger', in South Asia including Nepal. At the end of the 1960s, and with the support of FAO, UNDP, and WWF, King Mahendra's government initiated a national-level nature conservation programme. From 1970 onwards, conservation policies were strongly influenced by wildlife biologist John Blower, who advised the government in the services of UNDP and FAO. Building on his experiences in East Africa, he favoured the Yellowstone model of conservation, or the creation of reserves without human habitation. The National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act of 1973 stipulated four categories of nature reserve in this sense, including national parks (Soliva 2002: 117–8).

The additional category of conservation area, which allowed for integrated conservation and development in inhabited areas, was introduced only in 1989, when the Annapurna Conservation Area Project began to set an internationally recognised example of participatory conservation. Since then, participatory conservation, which passes part of the management responsibility to local people through user groups and similar arrangements, has become the dominant paradigm in Nepal – as in many other parts of the world. In this respect, too, Nepal is in line with international trends.

4.2. Conceptual underpinnings: the economic development paradigm and traditional values

Nepal's development discourse on the national political level is dominated by the international languages of economic progress, human rights, and political liberation, including communist rhetorics. Criticism of development policies and actions tends to focus on the country's failure to eradicate poverty, ensure social inclusion of various marginalised groups, or set up a working (democratic) system of government. At least on the level of national politics, there is little or no

dissent that these goals should be realised through continuing economic growth, and that the lifestyle norm is essentially modern urban life with full access to basic services, higher education, white-collar jobs, and global consumer goods.

Similarly, in conservation, government and non-government organisations alike use the international language of nature conservation. A special Nepali flavour is added by national self-identification with the himal (the high mountains, among them Mt. Everest, the world's highest mountain) and all kinds of natural treasures, at least in part a result of the national identity campaigning of the panchayat era of 'guided democracy' (1960–90). This national identification with the country's biodiversity is certainly compatible with religious and ethnicity-based values. Religions have sacred plants and animals and holy sites, and ethnic identities in Nepal are often tied to particular regions with their ecological characteristics – for instance, people may see themselves as mountain, hill, or plains people. But in official politics, there is no immediate shared ethical basis to link this general appreciation of the country's biodiversity to economic development, other than economic valuation.

However, as elsewhere, the appreciation of biodiversity within and among specific communities, cultures, or religions does go beyond economic value (cf. Soliva 2002: 105ff.). Hindus, for example, regard certain trees and places as sacred, and sacred forests, where use is restricted based on essentially animistic beliefs, are also quite common. Animists believe that spirits live everywhere, and that in harming trees, places, or wild animals, we act against such spirits. Buddhism generally teaches respect and care for all living beings and is, like Hinduism, often fused with Bon animism, especially in Nepal's 'Tibetan' cultures, e.g. of the Khumbu Sherpa or the people of Upper Mustang. Summarily, these beliefs, and the value systems and worldviews they form part of, are perhaps best understood as expressions of traditional, rural ways of life. In Hinduism, in particular, rural life is central for religious symbolism (just think of the holy cow), social hierarchy and organisation (a caste system based on village professions), and ideas about the shape of the good life. In all these worldviews, a distinction between humans and 'nature', in the fundamental sense of Western thought, makes no sense or is of little importance. Rather, all of them imagine humans as members of a great community of beings, who can turn into each other by transmigration of spirit, although with differences especially regarding the idea of hierarchy, which is central and elaborate in Hinduism, but perhaps less so in Buddhism and the other religions.

However, even a high cultural or religious status of parts of 'nature' does not necessarily imply a general ethics of conservation, and even less so actual action. While a sacred spot may be spared, the forest around it is cut down; while villagers cherish and protect their holy tree, they may be relentless in killing the wild boars or the leopards that threaten their crops, livestock, and children.

4.3. Local dissent

In the case of Nepal, conflicts regarding development and conservation policies typically arise out of the fear of regions and communities to be 'left behind' in development, symbolised by infrastructure like roads and electricity supply, a fear fuelled by the long history of centralism, with relatively unchecked urban development occurring in Kathmandu while large rural tracts of the country, especially the Far West, received little attention. This dissatisfaction was a central factor for the success of the Maoist movement beginning in the mid-1990s, as people were realising that the new democratic system made less difference to their material well-being than they had hoped.

However, while theoretically nobody disagrees on the goal that everybody's basic needs should be met everywhere in the country, so that the poor situation in some regions has been 'only' a practical failure, value judgements have clashed when it comes to conservation. In cases like the movement of fishing communities against forced resettlement from the lowland Chitwan National Park, local people have argued that their lifestyle is sustainable and compatible with the given goals of conservation (cf. Jana 2007); in cases like the mountainous Mustang and Manang districts in the Annapurna Conservation Area, the locals have successfully fought against the vision of many conservationists and for the construction of access roads into formerly remote, environmentally fragile mountain valleys, enabling a more urban lifestyle. Significantly for the comparison with Bhutan, residents of the Tibetan cultural enclave Upper Mustang, where tourist numbers were at the time restricted in a similar way as in Bhutan, complained about having to live in a 'museum' (Lama Ngawang Kunga, pers. comm. in 2000).

In the comparison with Bhutan, Nepal thus represents the more typical, politically instable, donor-dependent developing country whose policies have been largely shaped by changing international development agendas.

5. Discussion: factors and alternatives in development and conservation

To contrast the development histories of Bhutan and Nepal, three important factors can be singled out for illustration purposes: the degree of political stability and continuity, the domestic control of aid and other external influences, and population growth.

> Bhutan's transformation from a medieval polity to a twenty-first century democracy was, on the whole, a steady process. It neither caused any serious disruption to the continuity of life in the country nor led to any radical shift in the power paradigm. (Phuntsho 2013: 583)

While Bhutan entered a lasting phase of peace and stability with the introduction of monarchy in 1907, adopting modernisation through a top-down reform process in relative isolation, Nepal's politics has been marked by a succession of coups, revolutions, and rebellions within the power elite and from the general population. The panchayat regime of 'guided democracy' between 1960 and 1990 provided only a façade of stability, behind which there was felt an increasing pressure from underground political parties and the growing number of poor and discontent people. Regarding the period since 1990, one could argue that the country has been operating in a permanent, though varying, state of crisis, transition, and uncertainty: a long decade of rapidly collapsing coalition governments was followed by the Palace Massacre in 2001, in which popular King Birendra and most of the royal family were killed. Thereafter, the government under new King Gyanendra fully engaged in the civil war, followed by the suspension of parliament and the government takeover by Gyanendra in 2005, popular upheavals in 2006, abolition of monarchy in 2008, and the as yet uncompleted process of writing the new constitution for a Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal.

Not only has Bhutan's development been guided by a handful of successive kings while Nepal's, in the same period, was handled by dozens of typically short-lived governments, making for a great difference in continuity and foresight; the virtual absence of pressure towards democracy also meant that Bhutan's development was less subject to a popular imagination caught by ideas of Western affluence and consumerism, and the government, in turn, did its best to 'protect' the people from such ideas by restricting their access to global media. This situation, however, has begun to change (see above).

Another important factor is the control of foreign influence and the upholding of traditional values. Bhutan has strictly controlled foreign influences, attributing primacy to the continuity and integrity of its culture. As such attempts at purity and unification tend to, this strategy has also contributed to the groundwork for the expulsion of ethnically Nepali Bhutanese citizens around 1990. Questions can also be asked about the legitimacy of isolating most of the population from access to global media and discourses. But this strategy has allowed Bhutan to shape its development according to its own values, helped by the elite's practiced ability to clearly formulate these values. As a former theocracy, Bhutan in this respect clearly has an unusual advantage over most other countries today. Nepal, in contrast, found itself in a situation of regime change and political as well as ethical uncertainty, swept along by the independence and subsequent democratisation of India, at the same time that it set out for development. The strongly hierarchical Hinduism propagated by the Nepali elite of the time perhaps was also not as conducive to sustainable policies as was the Buddhism dominant in Bhutan.

Lastly, and importantly, Bhutan and Nepal have fared quite differently with regard to driving factors of biodiversity loss, especially population growth. With a similar population growth as Nepal, Bhutan would not have been able to take the course it did. Beginning with the clearing of and large-scale migration into the tarai lowlands in the 1950s and 1960s following the eradication of malaria, Nepal's environmental situation has been closely determined by population growth and the

expansion of agriculture, settlements, and infrastructure. Population growth accelerated early after 1950 as health care improved, and soon overtook the rises in agricultural productivity and GDP. From the 1960s onwards, deforestation in the Himalayas was much discussed as increasing erosion and thus the risk of flooding in the Ganga plain. While forests in the hills certainly thinned, the loss was most dramatic in the tarai, where 25 percent of forest cover disappeared in just fourteen years from 1964–5. However, catastrophic projections of total forest loss in the Nepal Himalayas by the year 2000, which were discussed in the 1970s, proved mistaken (Whelpton 2005: 122–3). The debate certainly contributed to the introduction of community forestry in the mid-1970s.

In Bhutan, in contrast, although its total population also more than tripled between 1950 and 2010, population density has always been quite low – 4 persons per square kilometre in 1950 and 14 in 2010, compared to Nepal's 58 in 1950 and 191 in 2010 (UN-DESA 2012). While, in Nepal, successes in increasing agricultural productivity, building infrastructure, and generally raising the living standard and creating opportunities for people tended to be more or less immediately levelled by the growth of the number of people without land or jobs, Bhutan's low population density meant that slow, step-by-step development measures still built up to significant improvements (Ura 2005: 2–3). At the same time, low population density also meant that the social structure and traditional ways of life in rural areas were not disrupted as they were in many regions of Nepal when, due to lack of land, young people found themselves unable to make a livelihood in the traditional, agrarian way.

Political stability and continuity, the leadership's controlled, intelligent use of foreign aid coupled with the maintenance of domestic cultural heritage, and low population growth during most of the 20th century enabled Bhutan to unfold a distinct, biodiversity-friendly development course. The same factors in reverse can be seen as part of the causes of Nepal's failed and environmentally destructive development. This is far from an exhaustive analysis of either country's development; but since each of the three factors are to some degree accessible to development cooperation, this simplified picture should suffice to inspire ideas for adjusting development as a whole to be more considerate of the non-economic values of biodiversity.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Through a comparison of the development of Bhutan and Nepal, this essay offers an illustrative approach to Kaphengst et al.'s (2014) question what organisations of development cooperation could do to strengthen the consideration of non-economic values across all policy sectors. As a general answer based on the example of Bhutan, it is suggested that development cooperation should be consistently shaped by a holistic understanding of development and a set of well-considered values, and that to this end development agencies should begin by adjusting their structures and

work style, rather than look for special activities under existing frameworks. The following tentative recommendations attempt to outline this structural adjustment using Nepal as an example.

1. *Openly and consistently base development cooperation on values.* To speak of development cooperation as 'technical assistance' understates its unavoidable ethical and political dimensions. Every action implies values, and development agencies do already pursue strategies clearly based on values contained e.g. in human rights or political and economic models. To give more consideration to the non-economic values of biodiversity for human wellbeing requires questioning and adjusting some of the current political and economic models and the overall value framework, which in turn must first be made explicit. Values should be openly discussed with Nepali partners, and Nepal should be encouraged to develop policies consistently from values. A good example of this approach is the document *Bhutan 2020* (RGoB-PC 1999a). Importantly, values are not only expressed through explicit statement but perhaps even more forcefully through live examples. Development agencies should therefore strive for consistency between their messages and their own behaviour (see below).
2. *Work from a holistic and concrete yet adaptable long-term vision of development.* As important as having a transparent value framework is to formulate concrete future visions of the country, region, or community, respectively. (Again, *Bhutan 2020* (RGoB-PC 1999a) is a good national-level example.) These visions should be holistic in the sense that they carefully consider the interactions between different 'sectors', or rather treat development as an integrated process in which sectors cannot be separated. This approach facilitates focusing on the fundamental drivers of biodiversity loss rather than just fighting the symptoms (see below). Formulating concrete long-term visions of development also helps to test and balance the underlying value framework, e.g. highlighting values whose realisation above a certain point can lead to conflicts.
3. *Focus on the drivers of biodiversity loss.* It is possible to contribute to biodiversity conservation without even mentioning it; vice versa, raising awareness for the importance of biodiversity will achieve little if the structural drivers of biodiversity loss, such as population growth and infrastructure expansion, remain unchecked. Development agencies should therefore focus on reducing the pressure from such drivers, through work that on the surface may seem quite unrelated to environmental concerns.
4. *Make long-term commitments. Sustainability requires long-term policies.* Nepal suffers from short-lived governments and general political uncertainty and instability. Reliable long-term support from development agencies is therefore invaluable for those interested in realising long-term policies and visions. Also, in line with the recommendation that development agencies should exemplify the values they uphold, they should commit to cooperation over decades rather than years. This in turn requires changes in the financing mechanisms of the

development agencies and perhaps in related political decision-making in the donor countries.

5. *Compartmentalise cooperation by geographical area rather than by sector or topic.* Long-term cooperation based on holistic visions of development is best organised by area, because development visions pertain to the future state of certain areas, especially with regard to landscape, natural resources, and biodiversity. Development agencies should therefore aim to become partners for the integrated development of entire communities, districts, or states (when the latter have been constituted in the new federal Nepal), rather than provide 'technical assistance' for just a single sector or topic. Donor competition should be avoided, so that while technical expertise may be acquired from various specialised agencies, such coordination is channelled through the main partner or donor council who continuously assist e.g. the district administration or state government.
6. *Make planning criteria reflect your value set.* The non-economic values of biodiversity should also be reflected in the criteria used for planning and evaluating specific projects. For instance, making the beauty of the environment an important planning criterion could make an appreciable difference to the way access to services is realised, because this criterion would typically speak against the construction of roads and other crude infrastructure through relatively unspoilt landscapes. It might also lead to a preference for traditional ways of building that blend in with their surroundings, especially when adding new buildings (meeting houses, offices, storerooms, etc.) to existing settlements. Similarly, if the values of living close to nature receive greater weight, planning might consider traditional agrarian lifestyles as rich and worthy of support and continuance, rather than primarily as deficient in comparison to urban and industrial lifestyles.
7. *Consider doing nothing.* After decades of intensive aid to Nepal, infamously even many of the targeted problems persist, while aid itself has arguably created systemic problems and the quest for 'development' on the whole has contributed to environmental destruction. On the other hand, the conservation of biodiversity in Bhutan can be seen largely as a result of the decision not to pursue certain forms of development, or only slowly and carefully. An increased appreciation for human wellbeing beyond material indicators and the central role that biodiversity plays for it could therefore mean that development agencies decide to assist in maintaining functioning traditional economic systems and ways of life rather than working to replace them with presumed standard models. This may not exactly mean to do nothing, but certainly not to do certain things.

Many Westerners are fascinated by Bhutan and Nepal, and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness approach is rightfully drawing attention around the globe (cf. NDP Steering Committee and Secretariat 2013; Ura & Galay 2004). It is one of the old, more idealistic goals of German development cooperation not only to transfer technical knowledge from Germany to its partner countries, but also to enable mutual cultural learning. Examples like Bhutan show that development intelligently based

on indigenous traditions and values can be better suited to meet the goals of biodiversity conservation and sustainability than the still-dominant narrowly economic development paradigms of the West. It could also imply that current donor countries like Germany should consider the idea of re-learning development from developing countries, and that the organisations of development cooperation have a central messenger role to play in this process.

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