



The Promise of Patronage: Adapting and Adopting Neoliberal Development

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Abstract: Much of the literature on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and development suggests that a top-down process is underway which leads to the dispersal of neoliberal ideals. Drawing on 2 years of ethnographic research in Rajasthan, India, this paper examines how a poverty alleviation project “fits” into competitive *and* co-operative socio-economic relations already operating on the ground. It argues that in contradiction to neoliberal notions of empowerment espoused by project policies, both NGOs and their constituents have an interest in establishing and maintaining patronage networks that stabilize relationships of dependency. The paper concludes that neoliberal development projects serve to enable patron–client relationships between NGOs and villagers, and enroll the state in the continuing provision of benefits beyond those planned by the project.

Keywords: NGOs, development, neoliberalism, empowerment, patron, client

Introduction

In the winter of 2007 I was in northern Rajasthan finishing up a 2-year study of a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that had become involved in a World Bank-sponsored, Government of Rajasthan (GOR)-run, poverty alleviation project called the District Poverty Initiative Project (DPIP).¹ Implementation decisions taken by the GOR, including onerous reporting procedures, made execution of the project difficult for NGO staff and occasionally put their credibility on the line. Both staff and villagers complained about the amount of paperwork, the tedious reporting required by the GOR, and the amount of time it consumed. As the project was wrapping up in late December and staff were in a frenzy of completing work before the deadline, we heard news that the DPIP was being expanded into the remaining 25 districts within the state. To my surprise, a senior fieldworker, Ashok, expressed interest and expectation that the NGO, Rural Power, would take part in the project in a nearby district. He indicated that staff were presently working as hard as they could in order to obtain a “no objection”² certificate that would ensure the NGO’s ability to take up DPIP in a new area. After all the trouble the GOR had put the NGO through, I did not expect that staff would be eager to work on DPIP again. Ashok went on to

explain: “For the benefit of rural people, DPIP is good. There is a lot of benefit. The public is getting all of an 80% subsidy.” Before DPIP, NGO staff labored for intangible benefits, eg health education, literacy, and migrant workers’ rights. After DPIP, Ashok was proud to bring something *material* to villages in the form of goats, buffaloes, fruit trees, and traditional rainwater harvesting structures.

In 2005 Rural Power was one of several NGOs that began implementing the DPIP, which is funded by the World Bank at a total cost of US \$124 million. The long-term goal of the project is to reduce poverty in the seven poorest districts of Rajasthan; Rural Power has worked in one of these seven districts since 1994. The job of Rural Power staff working on the poverty project is to form groups of villagers based on their interest in available, subsidized income-generating schemes (eg opening a small store, harvesting rainwater for plantation agriculture; dairying with goats and buffalo). Once the groups are formed, a process of collecting the groups’ financial contributions (a fraction of scheme costs), disbursement of funds, training, and reporting begins—all of which is facilitated by Rural Power employees. The GOR is the World Bank’s partner in the project and is responsible for its management.

World Bank documents (World Bank 1995) indicate that poverty alleviation can occur by strengthening the organizational and financial capacities of the poor so they can act for themselves. This language is echoed in the GOR’s DPIP documents: “the project will: expand the involvement of the poor in economic activity by improving their organization, skills, access to social and economic infrastructure, service, employment opportunities” (GOR 2000). Critics charge that neoliberal development, like DPIP, has not only failed to “develop” the world’s poor, it has wreaked havoc on institutions, identities, environments and cultures in the global South (Esteva 1987; Goldman 2005; Nandy 2007; Sachs 1997). Neoliberal approaches to development assume that poor countries can “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” if market forces are given free rein via a disciplined state (Moore and Schmitz 1995). Following Kamat (2002, 2004), I find that NGOs and the work of fieldworkers like Ashok are part of a process that is leading to a greater intensity and reach of neoliberal ideas among rural populations. However, the feelings of pride expressed by Ashok and material benefits *also* accompany the spread of neoliberal ideas in the global South. After years of having nothing but “service” to give, he enjoys going to meet people and being able to tell them that they can get as much as 70,000 rupees (US\$1750) from the project his NGO is facilitating. His words tell us that he is a willing promoter of poverty alleviation schemes such as the World Bank’s, and his view of DPIP as a “good project” is common among Rural Power fieldworkers. Besides wanting to keep their own jobs, fieldstaff support the project because it seems to be giving rural villagers a material advantage toward self-sufficient income

generation. To their credit, Bebbington (2000; see also Dolhinow 2005; Nederveen Pieterse 1998) remarks, neoliberal approaches highlight some very real problems faced by ordinary people. For an NGO like Rural Power that previously offered few material benefits, contradictions arise when it becomes a provider of goods and services on behalf of foreign donors and the state.

Much of the literature on the NGO-ization of development suggests that a top-down process is underway which leads to the dispersal of certain neoliberal ideals in an NGO's project area (eg Kamat 2002). My intent is not to provide another case study to support the growing body of literature fleshing out this claim, or to refute this argument by showing grassroots "resistance". Instead, the contribution of this paper is to demonstrate ethnographically how the process of implementing DPIP further complicates existing social relations, as Rural Power fieldworkers and beneficiaries in villages both adopt and adapt elements of the DPIP approach to meet their needs. I suggest that the DPIP project "fits" into competitive *and* co-operative socio-economic relations already operating on the ground in rural northern Rajasthan. As Schroeder (1999), Watts (1983) and others indicate, projects insert themselves into pre-existing social relations and economic forms; history and geography influence project outcomes. I find that both capitalist and noncapitalist social relations and ideals continue to exist, and are encouraged to exist, as NGO employees elaborate on the NGO's unique role at the node between the state and constituents in villages.³

Specifically, I argue that Rural Power has developed its own patronage networks due to the onset of DPIP, and that the NGO's interest in establishing and maintaining these networks runs contrary to neoliberal notions of empowerment (eg independence and individualism) espoused by project designers (see Mosse 2001). On the one hand, NGOs promoting neoliberal development projects are promoting notions of competitive individualism that will lead to villagers' economic independence. On the other hand, these same NGOs are newly dependent on the state and they encourage their constituents to depend on the NGO for access to state resources that only the NGO can make available. Mosse (2004) posits that, in practice, development projects are shaped less by policy and formal goals than they are by the implementing organization's drive to maintain its own rules and hierarchy and to meet its targets. In the case of a project like DPIP, Rural Power advocates for self-reliance of constituents, while maintaining itself as the best source for access to project benefits. Neoliberal projects may advocate a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" approach, but enabling constituents to become self-sufficient runs contrary to an implementing organization's drive to sustain itself and constituents' desire to access benefits. As Mosse (2001:34) argues in the case of an Indian project undergirded by

ideals of individualized empowerment: “Why would the project want to rid itself of its best customers, and villagers take leave of a serviceable patron?” Neoliberal notions of empowerment may form the basis of project policies, but NGOs and the poor act in ways that sustain mutually dependent relationships.

The paper begins with a review of scholarship critical of NGOs and their changing roles in the recent past. I then briefly describe my methods, before setting out ethnographic data supporting my argument that NGOs and their constituents both adopt and adapt certain elements of neoliberal development. In the discussion section, I expand on the significance of villagers’ and fieldworkers’ words and practices for a more complex understanding of the current roles played by NGOs, villagers, and economic development projects in rural areas of the global South. The paper concludes by suggesting that, contrary to claims, neoliberal notions may not be spreading like wildfire wherever NGOs are implementing economic development projects because NGOs and their constituents have incentives to create and maintain patron–client relationships. These relationships also depend on enrolling the state in the continuing provision of benefits, in contrast to its expected withdrawal.

NGOs, Neoliberalism and Social Change

Within geography and development studies there is a growing conversation about NGOs and the roles that they play in pursuit of development, empowerment and participation. There is general agreement that funding to NGOs has increased in the recent past, leading to changes in organizational culture, working style, and the impacts of their work. Numerous scholars have noted such shifts as: NGOs moving toward closer relationships to governments (Miraftab 1997; White 1999); new forms of managerialism and professionalization (eg onerous reporting and auditing procedures; Kamat 2004; Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley 2002; Miraftab 1997; Nagar and Raju 2003); depoliticization and the erasure of grassroots politics in particular (Hammami 1995; Kamat 2002; Kapoor 2005); increase in service provision by NGOs in lieu of the state (Lang 2000; Moore 2001); and moves from client-driven concerns to donor-driven concerns (Kamat 2004; Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley 2002). Overall, this body of research is concerned with NGOs and their particular position at the nexus of the state, markets and civil society (Hammami 1995; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Kamat 2002; Uphoff 1996).

Closer connections between northern donor agencies and southern NGOs are seen by some scholars as devastating for the activist work of community based organizations (CBOs) and NGOs. Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley (2002:830), in their study of NGOs in Ghana,

India, England and Mexico charge that NGOs serve as “transmission channels” for changing fashions in donor funding and the new managerialism.⁴ Managerial techniques such as audits, report writing, and work tracking are exported to the global South through foreign policies and development aid. The result is governability, which seems to be the goal of donors, not poverty reduction as stated. Nor do NGOs have much time left for listening to and learning from their constituents given the demands placed on them by donors. For NGO workers, tracking the work, not achieving some kind of change on the ground appears to be their goal (Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley 2002:833). The new managerialism leads to NGOs feeling a responsibility to donors that they do not to clients; reporting takes precedence over good work in the field (Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley 2002). Similarly, MirafTAB (1997) finds that moves toward NGO professionalization (eg changes to salary structure, need for communication skills, efficiency demands, and increased monitoring (Kamat 2004) has led NGO workers to work *for* the poor in a consulting role, instead of *with* the poor as activists. Kapoor (2005:210) bluntly writes that transnational links between international NGOs, NGOs and local people jeopardize any prospects for people’s agency, activism, and capacity to assert themselves. The institutional arrangements made for them, he argues, “tame” the NGOs and CBOs contracted by international NGOs to work with the poor. In her research on *colonias* in the USA, Dolhinow (2005:567) suggests that NGOs must work hard to hold onto their social justice agendas because a “focus on basic needs and infrastructure makes it very easy for individually centered neoliberal solutions to take over”.

For many scholars, NGOs may have *had* a social agenda but as they take on work and projects that are not their own, they play a role in furthering neoliberal development agendas. Harvey (2007:2) summarizes neoliberalism as a political economic theory that posits that humans are best off when an institutional framework of private property rights, free markets, and free trade is created and preserved by the state and humans are free to exercise their “individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills”. Peck and Tickell (2002:381) outline neoliberal ideals as free trade, flexible labor, the extension of markets, and aggressive competition. In addition, they include downsizing the state, austerity measures, reform of public service, and active individualism. It is the ideals of individualism, entrepreneurialism, private property, extension of markets, and downsizing of the state that are especially relevant for any discussion of NGOs and neoliberal development ideals. Global policy institutions, like the World Bank, regulate NGOs in ways that interlink with neoliberal economic reforms (Kamat 2004); NGOs funded by state-based or state-financed donors face similar problems (Dolhinow 2005:559). As Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley (2002:833) argue, “The new managerialism promotes solving social exclusion by

bringing the excluded more into the global economy (as workers or self-employed). “Those NGOs connected to rural hinterlands can supply new “frontiers for resource extraction”, cheap labor pools, import markets and “aid in the privatization of all social relations” (Feldman 1997:50; see also Escobar 1992). NGOs that can provide training and support for small-scale production fill a niche when poor households are already feeling a need for skills and credit that will enable them to enter markets (Feldman 1997). In this context, empowerment is defined as the poor strengthening their *own* capacity toward livelihood security—what Kamat (2004) calls “neoliberal notions of empowerment”.

“Neoliberal notions of empowerment” eradicate social democratic ideals like “public welfare must prevail over private gain” by teaching individuals to strengthen themselves in order to access the market (Kamat 2004:170). Political questions about structural inequalities are also absent in neoliberal empowerment, as are questions about the role of the state in providing employment and social services (Kamat 2004). Within neoliberal notions of empowerment the individual is both the problem and solution to poverty; no longer is poverty a problem for the state, but rather, individuals are responsible for optimizing what resources they possess as individuals and what resources they can access (Kamat 2004). Entrepreneurialism is expected to carry the poor beyond poverty. As a critique of the dominant economic regime disappears, any understanding or striving for the collective good goes with it, Kamat claims. The World Bank’s ideas (eg found in the *World Bank Participation Sourcebook*, World Bank 1995), she asserts, turn people into clients who, as they become empowered, make demands of the government and private sector and are willing to pay when those demands are met. Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley (2002:835), following Desai and Imrie (1998), argue that managerialist approaches aim to turn the recipients of beneficence into active consumers for the specific product being delivered, thereby “shifting the emphasis from collective to individual choices”. The role for NGOs then is not the development of civil society as a process of bottom-up democracy building (Moore 2001), but the atomizing of civil society by pushing projects and discourses that celebrate individuals striving to meet individual needs.

The findings of these scholars on the role of NGOs in atomizing society and promoting neoliberal development’s hegemony is daunting; my own research supports these trends. But there are also indications that *alternative* ideas and practices accompany the work of NGOs. As Bebbington (2004:280) suggests to those who critique participatory approaches: when indulging in negativity by arguing that NGOs intend or produce neoliberal outcomes, one runs the risk of stabilizing neoliberalism and the power of global financial institutions that promote it. In the early stages of writing this paper, I was steering my argument

in that direction. However, the interaction with Ashok at the end of Rural Power's DPIP project convinced me that to write yet another paper bolstering a purely "development projects further neoliberal hegemony" story was to miss coming to grips analytically with the appeal of these projects locally for NGOs and constituents and the resilience of co-operative ideals within NGOs and in the communities where they work. A "smothering blanket" critique of neoliberal development fails to make room for the agency of local actors—both fieldworkers and village "beneficiaries". However, "celebrating the grassroots" may be a desperate, misguided attempt to find something that is not there. Development geographers have shown that between these extremes, local people negotiate and complicate northern definitions of development. While this paper is not going to settle the debate in development studies over structure v. agency, it does aim to show that studying local context, individual actors, and organizations can add complexity to our understanding of how neoliberal development projects are adopted and adapted by both NGOs and their clients, and with what results.

Geographers have looked in many directions in their search for subversive responses to donor-driven development. Some have taken a discursive approach, indicating that the language of development can be used to serve local interests (Mosse 2001; O'Reilly 2007). NGOs have been shown to seek actively subversive spaces (Kesby 2005; Nagar 2000) and alternative spatial arrangements (Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley 2004; Yacobi 2007). Briggs and Sharp (2004) suggest that indigenous knowledges, understood as inseparable from the conditions in which they emerge, have much to offer about how people survive as their political, economic, and social circumstances change. The work of these authors demonstrates how development discourses, project resources, and training may be newly deployed by development actors in ways that disrupt dominant understandings. How these same development terms are framed by research scholars also opens new paths to understanding analytically what is happening on the ground. In addition to discursive reframing, there is a need to contextualize the structural and material conditions within which development interventions occur (Bebbington 2004:280–281). Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington (2007) suggest that big "D" development must be socially contextualized within "already existing capitalisms" (ie little "d" development). Bebbington (2004:280) distinguishes between "development as process of structural change in society" (little "d" development) and "development as deliberate intervention" (big "D" Development). The distinction gives a frame around the socio-economic context into which NGO interventions insert themselves and the possibilities for responses to interventions. In order to search for transformative possibilities, Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington

(2007:1714) conclude that any search for alternatives to development by NGOs must include a realignment of “underlying processes of little ‘d’ development toward forms of economies, societies, and politics capable of realizing” social justice goals. For example, putting a different spin on Feldman’s suggestion that NGOs have a niche to fill as “trainers”, Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington (2007) suggest that NGOs can assist local groups to broaden their understanding of socio-economic processes because of NGOs’ position amidst aid flows and the educations of their staff.

Attention to context is critical for studies of NGO-implemented development interventions because NGOs are frequently already embedded in local socio-economic and political relations. This is, in part, some of their appeal to international donor agencies. I use ethnographic data in the empirical section below to illustrate how NGO fieldworkers and their constituents both adopt and adapt the DPIP schemes in context. My aim is to demonstrate how neoliberal notions of empowerment are complicated by economies and ideals in place before the arrival of DPIP. I discuss the meanings of fieldworkers’ and constituents’ practices in the following section. Before coming to that material, I provide a snapshot of Rural Power and the socio-economic conditions of the project area.

Methods

When I first visited Rural Power in 2005, it was a tightly knit group of nine employees who were working on issues of domestic violence, rights of migratory labor, and remedial girls’ education. Employees had an average of 6 years’ experience. Within a year, 24 employees had joined, and 12 had left—among them four most senior members. Most of the new employees had no development fieldwork experience at all; however, lack of experience was not seen as a serious detriment by NGO leadership. NGO employees—new and old—maintained that the work of development can be learned by doing the job. The scope of DPIP required that employee ranks and number of villages expand, from 18 to 90. The fieldworker-to-village ratio went from one staff member for every two villages to about one staff member for every four villages.

I began observing interactions between Rural Power fieldworkers and villagers in the project area in December 2005. Between December 2005 and January 2008, I formally interviewed 32 staff members. New employees were initially interviewed in a short form about their previous NGO experiences, and then re-interviewed 6 months later about their work with Rural Power and their ideas about development. I asked all fieldworkers what they knew about development before joining, how they understood the goals of the NGO and their specific project, and what they understood as villagers’ ideas about their work and its success. I asked similar questions in formal interviews (22) and focus groups

(8) with villagers. Interviews with villagers were generally difficult because often upon first meeting us (my research assistants, Monika and Richa, and me) people expected that we were there “checking” the work. Many people asked if we wanted to see their groups’ registers, within which was recorded the work that they had done, payments given and received etc. This point is a methodological one indicating the difficulty of data collection for the research. When an interviewee gave rehearsed and/or exaggeratedly positive answers, such material was noted as “donor answers” and not used in the writing of this paper. The difficulties with data collection also demonstrate the pervasiveness of bureaucratic procedure and paperwork requirements of the DPIP project with which villagers are familiar.

The seven districts of the DPIP area were chosen based on a number of indicators.⁵ Knowing that the poorest districts were selected gives us general knowledge that poor families faced considerable hardship, but DPIP selection indicators do not capture the ways in which families were already trying to get along. Members of households engaged in unskilled daily wage labor outside the home (eg drought relief through the GOR, agricultural work, construction work), did piecework at home (eg tire recycling, tie dye preparation, lentil wafer (*paapad*) making, sewing), outmigrated to cities for work, collected widow’s pensions from the GOR, and sold dairy products. It was not accidental that overlap between DPIP activities and pre-existing income generation occurred; some DPIP schemes were intended to mimic activities that were already generating income in the area. Through the following quotes, villagers and fieldworkers express current conditions and their need for DPIP. In a focus group of women participating in tie-dye income generation:

Kathleen: What will you get from the project?

Puja: They tell us we will get 100 meters of cloth and a table.

Prem: (interrupting): But you haven’t got anything yet!

Kathleen: What did [the fieldworker] say you could earn?

Puja: You can get 100 rupees a month.

Kathleen: Do you have time to do it?

Puja: Yes, if we don’t have time to work we will starve. We don’t have time but we have to do it.

These same women told me that they also made lentil wafers and one revealed that her son had just recently gone to Mumbai to find work. Fieldworkers also expressed a need to work. For Urmila, a woman in her thirties: “I got married at an early age. After six years of marriage my husband died. My son was only one and a half years old. So I decided to earn; I wanted to stand on my feet. So I joined Rural Power.” A male fieldworker told me that before joining the NGO, he had been working as a door-to-door cloth seller from the back of his bicycle. Many others

were recently out of school and in need of local, unskilled employment. NGO work is neither steady nor well paying, but organizations are frequently short-staffed and looking for workers. Both NGO staff and villagers reported ongoing dialogues in villages about job availability, qualifications, and salary. The arrival of DPIP meant Rural Power needed more employees, and 24 people were eventually hired.

Independence and Co-dependence in Practice

The work of Kapoor (2005:213) describes small NGOs changing through their relationship to international NGOs. His description is useful because it almost perfectly describes the organization that Rural Power was before the arrival of DPIP. Kapoor characterizes the “before” organizations as formed of few, dedicated staff from the vicinity where the NGO is working, that often have low education levels and identify with whom they work and their problems, often because those problems are their own as well. Without much in the way of support, these fieldstaff build relationships in a small number of villages seeking to offer villagers access to government resources, support in asserting their rights, and education. Their main goal is to galvanize communities to work on their problems (Kapoor 2005:213). They engage in contract work with international NGOs and bigger NGOs in order to make ends meet, but find themselves losing credibility with their constituency because of constraints put on their work by the larger NGOs. This in turn demoralizes fieldworkers. The result, Kapoor claims, is that those closest to the poor become marginalized because they are doing the work of “developers” not that of the “people” (see also MirafTAB 1997).

My own research indicates that Rural Power fieldstaff are not marginalized and demoralized as Kapoor (2005) suggests occurs when NGOs engage in internationally funded projects—on the contrary, they revel in the attention they now receive. Previously, Rural Power fieldworkers talked to villagers about the importance of vaccinations, formed women’s savings groups, or facilitated meetings between GOR officials and villagers so that government benefits could be accessed. Fieldstaff worked hard, but could offer little that directly helped their constituents make a living. Villagers reported in interviews that there was mild interest in, and occasionally derision for, the work fieldworkers were doing years earlier. For example, a women’s group organized in 2000 to work on mother–child health in one village refused the fieldworker’s plans for their time, saying if they were not going to be paid, they were not going to do the requested work. Now, Ashok says:

And now, in any village, as we are moving about, people say, “The buffalo people have come. They give away buffaloes. Brother, will you give us buffaloes?” Now women, girls, children—everyone talks to us.

Previously they used to say, “They will go in so and so’s house for

a meeting. No meaning for us.” Now people stop me and ask, “Stop. Is there anything for us?” Before that, no one cared. No one stopped us whether we went to a BPL’s [a family whose income is below the poverty line⁶] house or for group meetings.

Ashok is delighted to provide material benefits, and villagers’ enthusiasm convinces him that Rural Power’s efforts are useful and beneficial. Rural Power employees and poor villagers have embraced the project goal of distributing tangible benefits. Villagers ask fieldworkers if they are giving away anything for them. Unlike previously, expectations have been raised that fieldworkers may be distributing something worth having. Notions of individual empowerment are disrupted when villagers expect and wait for NGO fieldworkers to meet their needs.

DPIP also upsets neoliberal notions of empowerment, particularly individual responsibility, when project activities take villagers away from their work. We can take women’s earlier requests to be paid as an expression of their need for cash income. In response to that need, men and women began engaging in income generation on their own in the ways identified above. Therefore, when DPIP got implemented, the work of Rural Power employees interrupted the earning opportunities of those already engaged in income generation. For a Jat woman who earned money as a seamstress, the bureaucratic requirement of multiple meetings was a burden:

Rural Power employees are trying to raise us [economically] but by their way of working we are going down. For example, just now I went to the district headquarters for 2 days from my village. So 2 days work went undone. And I spent money on transportation. So instead of earning, I was sitting in a meeting. And I still don’t know when I will get any benefit! (Bimla).

Bimla is the president of a DPIP self-help group formed to access a 70,000 rupee subsidy (US\$1750) for a rainwater harvesting tank and drip-irrigated garden. She has no children and her husband is a truck driver, so when she is out of the house, there is no one to do the housework or maintain her business. She complains that the requirement that she travel and sit in a meeting for group presidents is a considerable burden. Travel for women in development projects, including this one, is often couched in the language of empowerment (O’Reilly 2006). But women presidents often said that the travel the DPIP demanded was a personal and financial hardship. Fieldstaff countered that the travel demands they make on villagers were not by choice, but requirements of the project, and therefore, not their fault. Another man in Bimla’s group said that he had left his job in a neighboring state in order to supervise the building of the rainwater harvesting tank, but as the materials had yet to arrive, he was sitting idle at home.

For households like Bimla's that were already generating an income, the neoliberal logic informing DPIIP entrepreneurial schemes was easily adopted. However, participation in DPIIP schemes also involved a commitment of time and energy that interfered with villagers' independence. Villagers continued to participate in the scheme because they had already given a financial contribution, expected significant benefits from DPIIP schemes, or anticipated additional benefits (eg employment, connections to state resources in the form of entitlements or spontaneous benefits given to assist DPIIP's success) from Rural Power. For its part, Rural Power needed the co-operation of clients in order to fulfill its targets. Fieldworkers managed villagers' continuing co-operation by acting on behalf of villagers as intermediaries with the state in order to access entitlements,⁷ and as patrons, delivering otherwise unattainable benefits to village clients. NGOs represent linkages to people, power, and resources that villagers would not ordinarily have access to, and villagers know this. Weisgrau (1997:92) and Chowdhury (1989:26, cited in Weisgrau) both find that NGOs in South Asia tend to establish relationships with their constituents that resemble traditional patron-client relationships, ie patrons and clients are in a hierarchical but immediate, personal relationship. After a personal petition is made by a client, the patron then responds directly indicating whether or not help is forthcoming (Weisgrau 1997:198–199). Weisgrau and Chowdhury argue that these NGO patron-village client relationships foster a new kind of dependence, with NGOs placed in a patron role that belongs to the government by villagers who find NGO staff more sympathetic and accessible compared with government officials. NGOs, in turn, rely on villagers' participation for project success.

Neoliberal notions of empowerment call for decreasing dependence of citizens on their governments. This occurs when NGOs take on the listening and acting roles of patrons, in lieu of villagers petitioning government bureaucrats. However, villagers' and fieldworkers' client-patron relationship was bolstered by their assumptions that the GOR had an important role to play in alleviating their distress. In the summer of 2007 Rajasthan was experiencing a drought, and many families that had gotten goats and buffaloes for dairying were financially pinched trying to feed animals that they had expected they could graze freely. As two village men in a focus group explained:

Because of the drought, there is no fodder for buffaloes. The government is trying to kill poor people, because we don't even have fodder for them. The government gives us four to five buffaloes, but how can we take care of them? (Durgdas).

They have provided buffaloes, but they should provide follow up for us. They should do something for us. Annually, they should do something to help us take care of them (Manohar).

Durgdas is exaggerating when he claims that the GOR is trying to kill poor people, but his point is clear: the GOR has given animals to the poor, but the poor are too poor to feed them. He questions how such a move is poverty alleviation, when in reality the animals are causing a drain on household finances, instead of contributing to them. Manohar expects that the GOR should do something more, and do it annually—after all, it was the GOR who gave the animals to the poor in the first place, so the GOR has a responsibility to make sure that those who received them can feed them. Poor households readily adopted goats and buffaloes and the idea that they could make money through animal husbandry. However, an idea that the state would leave the responsibility of feeding the animals up to poor families, especially after giving them to families in the first place, was not adopted.

Women also spoke to me about the difficulty of keeping small livestock because without rain, their food had to be purchased:

At this time is it very expensive to keep goats, but when there are good rains, then goats can be like gold coins (Preeti).

Preeti recognizes the potential income that goats may bring, but she worries about the cost of maintaining them presently. Fieldworkers too recognized that the drought was making things difficult:

Buffalo health is difficult because drought has happened and families cannot sell buffalo—they have to feed it. We talked to DPIP officers about this and they ordered the banks to give loans for fodder.

Both villagers and fieldworkers expected that the GOR would step in and do something. Neither fieldworkers nor constituents allowed for a withdrawal of the state in this case; poverty remained a problem for the state. The GOR obliged by allowing government banks to give small loans to people so they could buy fodder, a move beyond typical state entitlement systems of providing fodder at cost during drought. Thus, neoliberal notions of empowerment informing the project were adapted to keep livestock viable as potential income generators. Such state actions brought goodwill and legitimacy to the NGO, and served to alter the relationship between Rural Power fieldworkers and their constituents as fieldworkers proved they could provide resources beyond those within DPIP and in addition to regular state entitlements. Instead of the state withdrawing and turning the provision of development services and welfare over to NGOs, the state continues to offer support to the poor, but does so through NGOs that use their position to establish patron–client relationships and thus the future viability of the organization.

Similar to the findings of Mosse (2004), villagers may enter into relationships with project staff as “participants”, only to seek later a different relationship status that will enable them to access subsidies,

secure patron–client relationships, or locate waged employment with the NGO. As one Rajput village man said in the summer of 2007:

The government gives the [World Bank] money to others, then Rural Power gets some, but it doesn't reach the root [village] level. Rural Power has individual workers. They should put them in individual villages so they can make sure that the benefits reach the root level. Imagine, someone has 10,000 rupees but he is running around putting it here and there, so in the end there is nothing to show for it. Rural Power is working like that—they are just running around (Mohan, male villager).

In this quote, Mohan offers a suggestion about how Rural Power should be working, compared to the way that they are working now. The village he lives in is a new one for Rural Power. He has not experienced first-hand how fieldworkers used to work before DPIIP, but he certainly expresses a desire to have more contact with fieldworkers. Rural Power is not investing time or money in any one place, he says, so he expects that there will be nothing to show for the World Bank's money. The fieldworkers' efforts are too scattered to make a difference. Mohan offers resistance to the distancing of the new managerialism accompanying DPIIP. He suggests that "fieldworkers in place" would really know what people needed and would make sure that the money spent would have a beneficial effect for the poorest at the "root level". Other villagers suggested that the fieldworkers should give out their cell phone numbers so that villagers could call them to arrange meetings, ask questions and so on. Another woman asked me for a fieldworker's address so that she could go and visit her at home. While there is evidence to indicate that the NGO has distanced itself from villagers, Mohan's words also give evidence of continuing expectations and perseverance on the part of villagers to achieve and maintain personal relationships with fieldworkers. Villagers seek an alteration in managerialist processes of distancing, realizing that Rural Power is a wealthy potential patron and employer.

As detailed above, layers of complexity and contradiction inhere within project processes. Neoliberal notions of empowerment in the form of independent entrepreneurialism are adopted by poor villagers who already feel the pressure of a market economy, and who desire a cash income and access to subsidies for the purpose of income generation. In this case, fieldworkers are not so different from their constituents—they adopt elements of the project that seem to offer themselves and poor villagers an opportunity for economic independence. They take a job with the NGO to support themselves and their families; the work fits their social justice goals. Simultaneously, elements of DPIIP are adapted by villagers who would prefer to be clients than participants and who refuse to give up their expectations that the state provide for the poorest

of the poor. Fieldworkers too subvert the project's neoliberal goals—when they cast themselves in the role of patrons, facilitating flows of additional benefits from the state to their village clients and themselves, and creating patron–client relationships of dependency.

Adapting and Adopting Neoliberal Development

Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley (2002:833) critique NGOs saying: “The problem is that donor agencies and [NGOs] base less of their legitimacy on ‘listening’, ‘participation’, the ‘local’, and the ‘appropriate’, but employ techniques that tend to exclude these desirable goals.” In the case of Rural Power, its legitimacy in villages depends on being able to deliver material benefits and to follow through on promises of delivery, meetings, and loans. Rural Power's earlier strategy was one of “listening and the local”, but they could not respond to villagers' needs for association with markets and cash income. Villagers' remarks about how participating in DPIP has disrupted their previous income generation is proof that DPIP implementation was *already* late for these households. In some ways, before DPIP, the earlier work of Rural Power was not responsive to villagers' requests when its focus was on health, education and government benefits. Fieldworkers' frustration about their earlier work can be understood as a response to a desire of villagers (and fieldworkers themselves) to enter into markets and generate cash that pre-dates the project. Senior fieldworkers, like Ashok, felt pressure from villagers in the years before DPIP to provide economic benefits and linkages, but they were never in a position to do it. Now with DPIP, their drive to help the poor has been given some substance—their social justice politics have a material backing. Fieldworkers have framed DPIP in ways that fit the NGO's social justice goals, and this maneuver enables them paradoxically to promote individualized empowerment *and* to place themselves strategically as those able to generate and ensure flows of state benefits to village clients. This same framing of DPIP as rendering social justice also informed the inclusion of fieldworkers' households in DPIP schemes.

Within a context of a neoliberal, rapidly modernizing India, fieldworkers like Ashok and the villagers he works with realize what they are missing, and want to join. At the very least, they know what they may get from DPIP, and they want to be sure that they do. As Bebbington (2000) suggests, the existing context within which projects are implemented is significant for understanding how recipients may take advantage of projects in order to sustain themselves and their livelihoods. His argument can be extended to include the fact that development projects also sustain NGOs and provide a livelihood to NGO fieldworkers. At one point during an interview of a Rural Power fieldworker at his home, the man's mother complained that he does a lot

of work for other people but not for his own family. She said, “Others get benefit from DPIP but our house does not.” I remember thinking at the time that it seemed like a fair criticism; there was pressure on Rural Power fieldworkers to meet their DPIP targets, which meant that they often spent long hours away from home working to bring project benefits to others. It seemed reasonable to me that his mother would be upset that so many strangers were getting benefits, while their own family was not—even though her son was working hard. Her self-righteous indignation must have caught on inside Rural Power because by the project’s end, at least seven of the existing members’ households were receiving or participating in one kind of scheme or another within the DPIP.⁸ NGOs provide jobs to fieldworkers who are often as needy as those with whom they work. Once a part of NGOs, fieldworkers have access to project resources. In parallel with village clients, fieldworkers also become “clients” of NGOs that employ them. Despite the bureaucratic hassle of government paperwork, there is too much on offer for NGOs and their staff for them to consider opting out of such projects. Remembering that NGO fieldworkers possess their own indigenous knowledges (Briggs and Sharp 2004), it is easy to conceive of their acceptance of ongoing neoliberalization and their adaptations to it. Rural Power since its inception has had to work within existing political-economic constraints, and has adjusted in order to survive. Fieldworkers are aware that continuing DPIP work in another district keeps them employed and offers income-earning opportunities to their families.

Given that DPIP was meant to generate income, fieldworkers’ responses to interruptions in the pre-existing income-generating schemes of some villagers must be analyzed. Villagers remarked on these losses to me in their interviews and focus groups; they almost certainly complained to fieldworkers about them also. In some cases, like the man who gave up his job in a nearby state in order to return home to build a water harvesting tank, these losses were substantial. Fieldworkers rationalized their own demands on villagers by displacing them onto the GOR, claiming that the GOR required it, therefore there was nothing that they could do. Rural Power employees put their needs above those with whom they worked, and deflected criticism by blaming the GOR, scapegoating the faceless state in time-honored fashion. An argument that NGOs are working for donors not with clients sticks here (Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley 2002). The NGO wiggles out of blame by claiming fieldworkers are just following project policy, thereby legitimating the state’s power and leaving villagers with the losses the project caused them. A relationship of distance between fieldworkers and villagers arises when fieldworkers side with the state; however, the work of NGOs also serves to connect village populations to the state.

While fieldworkers occasionally side with the GOR, fieldworkers also blame the GOR for the demands they must make on villagers' time. The effect of this blame is to reinforce for villagers the connection they themselves have to the GOR through Rural Power. Instead of working to distance the state from its obligations to villagers, fieldworkers who blame the state end up reminding villagers of its continuing power over their lives. Nor do fieldworkers encourage villagers to scale back their expectations from the GOR. Meera, a woman fieldworker, emphasized, "Ultimately there must be linkages with Government because it is a big structure and system. So people should learn to know more about it." As Feldman (1997) suggests, Rural Power also played an alternative role to neoliberal notions of empowerment by educating villagers about government benefits and maintaining village-level expectations for assistance from the GOR. We heard in the voices of villagers above that they continue to expect the state to provide support to the needy (eg drought relief, food and agricultural subsidies). Nor do fieldworkers' actions suggest that NGOs have stopped harboring expectations of support from the state. Most villagers understand from fieldworkers that the GOR (not the World Bank) is giving the subsidies, and expect the GOR to help them when times get tough, most especially during drought periods. In a diversion from the expectations of DPIIP, and in ways reminiscent of the NGO's earlier work, Rural Power fieldworkers approach the GOR on behalf of villagers in distress due to drought, lack of fodder, need for loans, etc. These actions, in turn, generate support for the NGO.

A close look at the DPIIP project in Rajasthan shows that villagers wanted income generation schemes and connections to markets, but at the final stage of DPIIP, villagers had not assumed total, individual responsibility for their livelihood. Villagers eagerly reached out to fieldworkers in order to take advantage of DPIIP, while also maintaining their expectations of support from the state. For their part, neither Rural Power fieldworkers nor the state acted in ways that would consistently promote neoliberal empowerment. Although DPIIP is based on establishing more intense and expansive networks of financial and ideological flows based on neoliberal notions of empowerment, members of the NGO were simultaneously promoting contradictory patronage networks. I call these patronage networks "contradictory" because they both adopted and adapted some of the neoliberal empowerment ideals informing the project. Instead of the state withdrawing and turning the provision of development services and welfare over to NGOs (a form of privatization), the state continues to offer support to the poor (a move against neoliberal empowerment ideals), but does so through NGOs that use their position to establish patron-client relationships. The formation of patron-client relationships may be viewed as entrepreneurial, and therefore an

adoption of neoliberal empowerment, since patron–client relationships kept villagers and fieldworkers connected to material benefits and sustained the NGO.

Conclusions

In recent decades there has been an outpouring of scholarship on the rise and dominance of a neoliberal agenda in development (Crush 1995; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Watts 1995). And yet, as Kothari (2005) writes, while there is ongoing critique, most of this is restricted to challenges that may change how development is implemented, but not the foundational discourse: “The question remains . . . how can critical voices be effective within a neoliberal agenda?” O’Reilly (2007) argues that the language of development is spoken by project actors in ways that come to redefine particular terms, like “participation”, to emerge as counter-hegemonic and to enable alternative practices. McKinnon (2007) concludes that the development process should always been seen as a political struggle, and as such, the possibility of “new strategies and modes of engagement” opens. In opposition to assertions of northern NGOs’ hegemonic power, Walker et al (2007) demonstrate that indigenous communities, on the basis of territorial control of their living area, successfully make demands on NGOs and set the rules for interventions. This paper attempts to answer Kothari’s posed question by examining the dynamics of NGO–client relationships. The results of this multi-year research indicate that the work of Rural Power acts to stabilize neoliberal development by facilitating the work and ideas of DPIP. However, the NGO’s work also simultaneously undermines neoliberal discourses and practices, because fieldworkers and villagers continue to insist on community cooperation and government intervention. The research provides a snapshot of how neoliberal notions of empowerment are both adopted and adapted at the root level by NGOs and by those with whom they work.

Neoliberal notions of empowerment uphold the idea that individuals are responsible for their own livelihood; the state’s responsibility for poverty diminishes (Kamat 2004). However, villagers maintain their expectations of assistance from the NGO and aid from the state. NGOs oblige, thereby reinforcing networks of patronage in the project area. Villagers understand that it is a relationship with the NGO that must be cultivated and maintained to get DPIP subsidies, and that additional benefits may be gained if fieldworkers can be convinced to ask for them from the GOR. Neoliberal notions of empowerment are adopted in patron–client relationships centered on individuals accessing resources for their private benefit. However, in the case of DPIP, goals for individualism are also adapted when patron–client relationships serve to benefit many, eg when loans are given to self-help groups and the NGO

secures a project continuance that keep fieldworkers employed. Both villagers and NGOs expect that the state will continue to provide, and their patron–client relationship depends on the state having an interest in meeting NGO and villagers’ expectations of support. State welfare contradicts neoliberal notions of empowerment, but also helps secure present and future co-operation for project goals. In the case analyzed here, a role for NGOs to connect villagers to government funds (both ordinary entitlements and special benefits) is now stronger than it was at the outset of the project. By enabling the disbursement of large subsidies, poverty alleviation projects serve to enable patron–client relationships between NGOs and villagers, and enroll the state in the continuing provision of benefits beyond those planned by the project.

Although much research claims that NGOs are spreading neoliberal development, following Mosse (2004), I find that the empowerment ideals espoused by the World Bank (and other donors) are directly contradicted by NGOs seeking to sustain themselves and by villagers eager for continuing benefits. There is not much cause for celebration in such a conclusion. While neoliberal development policies have been charged with ruining civil society, depoliticizing poverty, and destroying cultures, the co-operation and dependency created by patronage networks does not necessarily mean greater freedom, opportunity, or galvanization at the grassroots. I want to be hopeful in the finding that economic development projects provide a livelihood for some of the poor (including fieldworkers), and that NGOs have a role to play in continuing to insist that poverty is the state’s responsibility. But any excitement is tempered by concerns that such projects reproduce relationships of inequality. In addition, I have not found evidence to suggest that NGO employees seek radical social change.

The future will tell to what extent neoliberal notions of empowerment take hold in rural Rajasthan, and whether or not the ideals espoused by DPIP flourish in villages due to the intervention of NGOs. This paper suggests that we can expect the personal connections established between villagers, specific fieldworkers and the NGO will likely remain for some time in the future. A network connecting villagers and the GOR has been more thoroughly established and enhanced through Rural Power. After the closure of the project, I expect that it will stay in place as villagers and fieldworkers continue to try to take advantage of it. As long as the NGOs work in the area, villagers will contact them when they want help, and the NGOs will work to keep their client base in order to garner future projects. Recall that NGOs are seen as ideal service deliverers by donors because of their social connections; as small NGOs access big money their ability to establish and maintain social networks expands. What kinds of networks will they be?

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Endnotes

¹ Jila Garibi Unmulan Project, aka District Poverty Initiative Project.

² A “no objection” certificate is issued by the GOR to indicate that the work has been done as reported.

³ Political parties and their local leaders also form an important node linking the state and citizens. I do not take up this relationship in this paper because fieldworkers reported that, to their surprise, local politicians were ignoring DPIIP and not interfering with what the NGO was doing. They attributed this to the longstanding belief that Rural Power had nothing to offer; only in the last weeks of project implementation did politicians take notice, fieldworkers said. Villagers did not indicate in their interviews that parties or politicians were encouraging any particular interaction with either the GOR or the NGO.

⁴ Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley (2002) report that the new managerialism agenda arose in the 1980s as neoliberal governments strove to improve efficiency and transparency in the public sector and cap costs. In the 1990s, private-sector management techniques were exported to the global South as part of foreign aid and policy packages.

⁵ Proportion of scheduled castes and tribes to total population; proportion of agricultural workers to total workers; proportion of workers engaged in manufacturing to total workers; kilometers of road per area; female literacy; proportion of villages without a primary school within 5 km; proportion of villages without a health facility within 5 km; net area sown to total cropped area; irrigated area to total cropped area; cropping intensity; per capita rural income.

⁶ The GOR determines a BPL list of families through a census asking about landholdings, access to food, and 11 other questions (http://studentorgs.utexas.edu/aidustin/projects/lss-prayas/bpl/bpl_survey.html, accessed May 2008).

⁷ Rural Power, before DPIIP, linked villagers to available state entitlement programs. Although most fieldworkers informed villagers that they were entitled to these benefits as citizens of Rajasthan, India, villagers still very often understood fieldworkers as patrons. Villagers felt obligated to Rural Power staff because they were aware that without their help, they would neither have known about those benefits, nor would they have likely been able to access them, given the paperwork (which required literacy), travel requirements, and occasional bribes involved.

⁸ The schemes that fieldworkers or their families took advantage of were not schemes that Rural Power had difficulty getting people to join. That is, Rural Power did not use its own fieldworkers to fill quotas.

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