

DISCUSSION DOCUMENT

06.08.20 | WEBINAR

TRANSFORMATIVE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION: DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS' TALK

EVENT DETAILS

This third CSSG workshop for the summer was held on Aug 6, 2020. The session was attended by 15 participants. Participants included academics [NUIG, UCC, UCD, University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt (FHWS) in Germany], international NGOs [Plan, UCDVO, Comhlámh], and students.

Speakers included

- Mark Cumming, Head of Comhlámh
- Sharanya Nayak lives and works with Adivasi communities of southern Odisha
- Dr SuMingKhoo, NUI Galway

The Chair and Moderator was Dr Nita Mishra, University College Cork and CSSG Study Group Convenor.

OVERVIEW

Mark Cumming focused on how Comhlámh has transformed its activities since he joined as the Head.

- The re-naming of meeting rooms to Freire, and Marius Schoone; sharing office space with its member groups (more than 100 civil society organisations) who have access to its premises and facilities at odd hours to hold their meetings;
- its highly successful Trade Justice group which has members from disparate bodies such as the Irish Cancer Society and People Before Profit;
- the newly formed Access to Medicine group which challenges the motives of the Pharma industry; linking with its Northern Ireland partners on mining resistance movements;
- its policy related actions on secondary school curriculum, e.g., 'Planet and our place in it';
- the Focus magazine which instead of discussing the achievements of Comhlámh, provides a platform for burning social issues globally for other groups with a focus on linking the local with the global.

Evidence of the transformative impact of these activities can be seen in the re-framing of the Code of Practice (third revision in 2019) which has shifted its tone to a more inclusive and rights' approach in the discourse.

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Sharanya Nayak begun her talk as an 'un'-development practitioner and shared her journey to where she is currently.

From being a development worker with Action Aid International in Odisha, she decided to commit to a life of a farmer activist in a Koraput village with fellow indigenous communities. She spoke of the loss of the ability of critical thinking which was inherent in indigenous culture. Highlighting the absence of terms such as waste, development, progress, prosperity in Adivasi language, Nayak argued passionately that Adivasi way of life was inherently interdependent with their environment which has been labelled as 'underdevelopment' or in need of development by the current liberal mode of thinking.

Adivasi idea of territory and nation-state was primarily 'desh' which referred to their immediate lands with other Adivasi groups which is in contrast to our idea of nation-states. Sharanya argued for the importance to indigenisation of community, education, popularise their right to self-determination and land and communitarian sharing of 'resources' amongst other issues.

She argued against the 'developmentality' notion and for a more people's rights to self-determine their lives approach. Sharanya ended with a poem from a Adivasi colleague which speaks of the loss of indigenous voice to the dominant global narrative.

Dr Su-Ming Khoo summed up the emerging themes as roots versus radical approaches which meant going deeper:

- what are we doing here, and why;
- what will be different if we had started from somewhere else;
- begin a reflective praxis focusing on the above;
- the theme of education and human development which must mean multiple freedoms.

She concluded that the CSSG is an excellent space to brainstorm these questions, dialogues and discussions globally. This was supported by Dr Tanja Kleibl who argued for a common reflective space.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The session ran overtime by half an hour with participants requesting for part 2 of the same title which will be planned for early September.
- There was synergy between the themes of the two speakers who spoke from experience in two very different contexts; e.g., the issue of mining and people's movements; NGOs accepting funds from mining corporations globally uncritically.
- The idea of corporatisation of NGOs was brought forth to reflect on the idea of the 'colonisation of the mind', and decolonial perspectives.
- The take-away points were:
 - *'Let us dis-invest in that innocence that we do not know which action of ours is dispossessing people elsewhere';*
 - Let us take responsibility for that dispossession, shift our solidarities to people;
 - In understanding that dispossession, consider Sharanya's arguments (listening to the recording is recommended) - from critical thinking to factory schools; from multiple freedoms to monolithic integration; from territorial sovereignty to violent dispossessions and from ecological well-being to welfare dependency.

RESOURCES

- Sharanya Nayak's power point presentation
- Webinar recording available for playback
- <https://www.convivialthinking.org/>
- <https://decolonialfutures.net/>
- <https://comhlamh.org/>

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ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Mark Cumming brings together his life-long interest in community service, volunteering and international development in his role as Head of Comhlámh. His early formative career was in Human Resources with International and Irish owned industry. He worked as a volunteer youth and community worker in Kenya and later worked for several years in recruitment and selection for the Agency for Personal Service Overseas, an agency of Irish Aid. He spent 13 years with Trócaire (Caritas Ireland), across a range of governance and human rights programming, evaluation and policy/advocacy functions in Ireland and the Global South.

Sharanya Nayak lives and works with adivasi communities of southern Odisha since 1999. She has worked as a sub-editor with New Indian Express and ActionAd. She has worked in Bolangir district, Malkangiri, and now actively engaged with adivasi communities across Rayagada, Malkangiri and Koraput on issues ranging from land, forest, language and culture. She quit her job in 2015 and moved to a farm in an adivasi village 10 kms from Koraput town.

Dr Su-Ming Khoo (Lecturer Bar/College Lecturer) of NUIG was discussant for the session. Her research and teaching promote knowledge and enquiry concerning different meanings of globalization and development and the contestation of those meanings along North/South lines. It addresses the challenge of development after 'post-development'. Her research and course material engages with development theory and political economy of development, with an emphasis on alternative approaches including human development, human rights and sustainable development.

POSTPONED SPEAKER 'Ntombi' Nyathi, is a feminist an international grail woman, and Executive Director of Training for Transformation a global training program based in South Africa. Unfortunately, Ntombi could not present at the session as planned due to unforeseen reasons. She will be invited to present at the next session being planned as Part II of this discussion.