

Key Note by Robert Piper

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At The Role of NGOs/ INGOs in Developing Madhesh

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Honorable Minister for Women, Children and Social Welfare Dan Bahadur Chaudary

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Scholars, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be here today in the midst of intellectuals, experts, and professionals from various backgrounds who are engaged in the larger discourse on the Madhesh and development. Looking at the program, I can see that a whole spectrum of development areas will be covered in these two days. This conference will hopefully create a much needed space to discuss the development of the Madhesh in general and that of the role of development actors in particular. I would like to thank the organizers for gathering such an esteemed group of individuals here to discuss this very important topic.

Nepal is marketed globally through images of the mountains, mountain peoples, yaks, hill terrains, and the mysterious “yeti”—all symbols capturing Nepal’s mountains, hills and cultures. It is because of the promotion of this exotic and mythical “Shangri La” image that an average non-Nepali person who reads the literature on tourism understands Nepal to be made up of predominantly mountain and hill peoples and cultures. Even the rich ethnographic anthropological literature on Nepal is dominated by studies of hill and mountain ethnic groups, and there have been relatively few anthropological studies on Madhesi communities. Since tourism material and anthropological studies are what an average non-Nepali interested to learn about Nepal typically looks up, he or she misses out on the information about the the Madhes and Madhesi peoples’ rich cultures. Triggered by the political changes in Nepal in the last five years, I believe that the way in which Nepal is portrayed to the rest of the world is also changing with a greater sensitivity to Nepal’s cultural diversity that is more inclusive of Madhesi cultures and peoples.

The marginalization of the Madhesh and Madheshis in Nepal’s politics of development has been brought to the surface particularly after the 2007 Madhesi Andolan. This historical movement helped the Madhesi as a social group to be recognized in development policies and programs. Subsequently, for example, the Three Year Interim Plan for 2007-2010, for the first time I understand, had a separate sub-chapter on Madhesi Community Development along with similar sub-chapters on Dalits and Janajatis. Similarly, under the current Three Year Plan, there is a sub-chapter on the Madhesi community. While this recognition is a good indicator of a shift in development planning and policy making at the national level,

it is also true that a lot more needs to happen to see real changes in people's lives in Madhesh.

In addition to the state, non-state actors, including international development partners and the NGOs, have played a critical role in Nepal's development in general and that of the Madhesh in particular. The Madesh Andolaan was an eye opener for the development partners too. It urged them to go through a

process of self-reflection to see where they had spent their resources directly through non-state partners and how their support had been utilized by the Nepali state. And as social inclusion became more prominent on the national agenda, it forced all development actors—state and non-state—to look into our policies, programs and to look at how we measure our development results. Even to look at the composition of our staff.

When I first arrived in Nepal 4 years ago, like others I did a lot of reading and listening to colleagues, academics, journalists and others. In talking about the Madhesh one person pointed out to me that if I want to go looking for the richest person in Nepal, I should start my search in the Tarai. By the same token, he also pointed out that I will find Nepal's poorest person there as well. The Tarai does indeed generate approximately two thirds of the country's GDP. It is the food basket of the country. The place that has seen the greatest industrial development. Its proximity to India and an open border makes it the obvious trading zone of the country as well. Yet it is also the home of most Moslem girls, whose literacy rates are as low as 36.7% as compared to the national average of 58%. And the Human Development Index value for Madheshi Dalits is the lowest in the country. In short, I learned quickly that this is a region of great diversity and potential. And of huge development challenges.

A process of self-reflection within the UN has led us to develop a workforce diversity policy that has helped increase the chances of individuals from excluded communities (including Madheshis) to be hired through our recruitment processes. We have also recently launched an internship program to create opportunities for young men and women from excluded communities to give them 11 months of work experience in an international organization, thereby becoming more competitive for the job market. Overall the UN employs more Brahmin Chhettris from the Madhesh than the national average, but other Madheshi groups remain underrepresented.

The UN has also introduced a framework on Gender Equality, Social Inclusion and Human Rights as a programming tool to make sure that we mainstream these cross-cutting issues into our entire program. For its part, UNDP has established a Gender and Social Inclusion-sensitive Monitoring Information System (GSI-MIS) where data of its program beneficiaries are disaggregated into both sex and social groups encompassing the diversity in both hill and Tarai.

For the UN, priority focus is on providing support to the poorest and most vulnerable people and to support the Government to do this effectively. For example, UNDP is currently working in 19 Tarai districts in the areas of livelihood promotion, micro-enterprise development, access to finance, biodiversity conservation, gender equality, women's empowerment, peace building, and capacity development of local government bodies, local NGOs, and even community-based organizations like youth clubs and women's groups. These programs are directly benefiting thousands of households and individuals in Madhesh as well as strengthening the nascent civil society there to help make the voices of Madhesh heard. The Livelihoods Recovery for Peace Project has reached 17,000 households in the Madhesh in less than two years of implementation, out of which 60% are Dalits. Other development partners' programs are also covering much of the Tarai districts and communities. DFID's Community Support Program operates in 13 Tarai districts and provides community infrastructure support based on

needs identified by the community. DANIDA is building capacity of local civil society organizations in 11 Tarai districts as well as conducting research on Madhesh issues based on which advocacy is done at the central level. To name only a few of the donor-supported activities in the region.

The need to improve our understanding of the complex issues in the Madhesh, to draw more of the UN's operational work to those regions than had previously been the case and to get a more coherent approach by UN agencies in our work in that region, were also key considerations when we decided in 2009 to experiment with outpostting small UN Field Coordination Offices to the region. With the support of the UK, Australian and Swiss Governments, three of these small teams of development and humanitarian staff that work directly under my office, were placed in Biratnagar, Bara and Nepalgunj accordingly (a fourth was deployed in Dhadeldura). They have since been producing a wealth of analysis, providing district level coordination, generated a 'Who,What,Where' data base for many districts and supporting the preparation of Government district disaster preparedness plans. If we are doing better in our work in the Madhesh over the last year or so, these experimental offices are part of the explanation.

We have also done our best to make sure that we work with local NGOs when it comes to programme implementation and local level advocacy work. The motivation behind this choice is our belief that local context is best understood by the people from the same community. Additionally, we believe that local knowledge of resources, cultural norms, practices, and people's worldviews must be at the core of our community empowerment processes. Today, when UNDP assesses candidates applying to vacancies this kind of local knowledge - and language capacity - is now considered a key competency just as much as a Harvard degree is. If UNDP is to apply community-based and community driven approaches to its work in order to ensure the empowerment of people, this is the right thing to do.

It also needs to be said that working with NGOs has been extremely challenging in some of the Tarai districts. There is high politicization of NGOs, and the capacity of the NGOs still needs strengthening for them to become technically sound and to develop organizationally. In order to win goodwill of communities and trust of donors, they need to improve their performance, transparency, and become stronger organizations with effective management systems in place. While we value local leadership, ownership, and knowledge, an NGO led by a Madheshi does not automatically qualify to gain our trust to work in the Madhesh by virtue of being a Madheshi NGO. It needs to earn the trust of the development partners and the communities through its performance; the same logic applies for organizations working in other areas of Nepal.

Madheshi NGOs can also depart from being “family-run businesses” by ensuring inclusion of diverse groups of individuals in their organizations to represent the ethnic and religious diversity in the Madhesh. There are marginalized groups like the Tarai Dalits and Muslims who are not well represented at the Constituent Assembly or major political parties including the Madheshi political parties. If the state continuously excludes them, it is the non-state actors like the NGOs that can play a critical role in empowering these groups. It is in line with this belief in inclusion that UNDP has started to work at the

percentages of Dalits, women, and other marginalized groups even in the staff composition of its partner NGOs.

If Madheshi NGOs can somehow keep themselves from being politicized, they can be more effective to advocate for greater transparency and accountability on the part of district bureaucrats and local government bodies. They can be the watchdogs to ensure that planning, budgeting and implementation of development programs are done properly for the right beneficiaries and intended results are achieved. In order to do this, the NGOs themselves need to be more transparent and accountable in their own procedures, approaches and work.

In some cases development partners have had to suspend support in Tarai districts because of politicization of the development process where political parties did not agree on fund allocation, or on the results of procurement processes or on the formation of user groups. UN programs in Madheshi areas have certainly had their share of such experiences. While this is not necessarily unique to Tarai districts, when it does happen in Madheshi regions, it is the Madheshi people and communities that lose out.

The delivery of development and humanitarian assistance must be supported by local political leaders without politicization and interruption if development aid is to be effective in Madheshi areas. The international community stands committed to supporting the long-term social transformation agenda encompassed in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. It is through peaceful and constructive initiatives

that we can collectively bring about positive changes in the lives of Madheshi people and others in Nepal who need our support.

Thank you.
