**Manipur’s Development Debacle in Post 2015 Context**

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Hectic negotiation marks the ongoing efforts to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with Sustainable Development Goals in a post 2015 development agenda definition process in UN, with the developed, developing and least developed countries aggressively pursuing their interest. One wonders if the re-definition of current development discourse in the post 2015 will ever led to a rethinking of the current development model and processes pursued across Manipur and other parts of India’s North East. For instance, will there be a rethinking into the proposed plans to built colossal mega dams all across the rivers of Manipur and other rivers in the region for a more sustainable and alternative options? Or will there be a rethinking in introducing other extractive industries and other large infrastructure projects that will destroy the rich biodiversity, flora and fauna of the region with serious implications for indigenous communities inhabiting the state and across region. Will the new SDGs led to more involvement of communities in defining development priorities and processes?

The outcome document of the Rio+20 global Summit on Environment and Development held at Rio De Janiero in June 2012 sets the momentum towards defining Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The limitations of the MDGs in terms of content and also its definition processes further provided impetus for SDGs. As diplomatic efforts and intensive negotiations among different stakeholders unfold, there’s clearly an obvious reality, of overwhelming focus on privatization of development, to entrust and legitimize corporate bodies’ role and involvement in all development processes throughout. Other pressing decision making process on key development challenges such as UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which gears up for a significant decision by 2015 year end also witnessed delegating maximum responsibilities to private sector development processes with limited or extremely weak accountability mechanisms. Hopes fades fast as one perceives the pattern of decisions shaped in defining SDGs primarily at the UN HQs.

The current discourse is already marked by refusal of many States of UN to refer to the term “human rights based approach to development” or HRBA in defining sustainable development goals. The overt emphasis on private sector led growth as the ultimate model of development in the Mexico High Level Meeting (HLM) of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation (GPEDC) and as also visible in the post Rio+20 processes without establishing a clear set of rules for accountability and respect of human rights of communities already provoked wide condemnations from CSOs and will only contribute in deepening inequality and human rights violations all over.

The international discourse is strongly experienced in Manipur too, of increased effort to privatize people’s land and their survival sources in the name of development and clear cut refusal to uphold indigenous peoples’ rights. Manipur witnessed series of development policies formed in the last decade, interestingly in the last few years, to promote corporatization and privatization of community resources and commodification of peoples live and future, such as the Manipur Loktak Lake Protection Act, 2006, the Manipur Tourism Policy, 2011 and the most recent controversy is the Manipur Hydroelectric Power Policy 2012 and the New Land Use Policy, 2014.

One also wonders if there can ever be just and sustainable development when corporate bodies, which only prioritize on profits, led such kind of development, especially at this time of multiple global crisis? Given the aggressive pursuance of policy deregulation towards corporatization of communities land and resources with militarism, the simplification of processes to seek such approval (single window clearances) and exclusion of community voices and space to air in their grievances and alternatives, one wonders if this will lead to sustainable development in Manipur. One wonder if emphasis on colossal projects in Manipur such as mining, mega dams etc, that will entail massive impacts be considered as sustainable and be pursued as key components of SDGs.

Manipur today witnessed increased intrusion of multinational companies both from developed and developing countries, whichever has the best capacity to loot, destroy, burn and ruin communities land, resources, their lives and future. In the case of ongoing process to drill and explore oil and natural gas in Manipur, oil companies and the State unleashed both misinformation and denial of information. There is serious accountability issue with the oil company, Jubilant Energy and Oil and Gas Corporation of India, as both failed to take the free, prior and informed consent of communities who depend on their land for survival. Rather there’s bribery of community leaders and manipulation of traditional decision making process, which creates confusions within and among communities.

In India’s NE, the definition of development priorities continues to be defined by International Financial Institutions with State facilitation, which promoted enabling environment for private sector/business rather than communities in an atmosphere of exclusivity and lack of transparency and accountability. Such process lacks a full scale impact appraisal, denial of information, misinformation, upsetting the fragile ecological integrity and destroying cultures. The adherence to human rights standards, such as, UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, 2007, is absent. In India’s North East alone, more than 200 mega dams are being pursued with several constructed in Brahmaputra-Barak River Basin. These dams have already threatened indigenous farming in India’s North East States by submerging vast tract of agriculture land, wetlands and forest[[1]](#footnote-1). And with lack of accountability of most of the corporate bodies involved in large scale destructive development, such as the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) in the case of destruction of Loktak Wetlands by its 105 MW Loktak Project, one wonders if there ever will be development justice in Manipur? A development justice, which places people – that is the majority poor and the marginalized – at the front and centre of development as the primary agents and subjects of change. A development justice, where development process is designed and adapted in response to the aspirations of the people and their available resources, and not imposed by technocrats and so-called high-level experts for all time and for all peoples.

There is no difference between the way how decisions are made on development processes, for specific development projects and policies introduced at the local context. The trend of development introduced in Manipur and across North East India is now a serious matter of alarm and concern. The focus of the region in global economic development, mostly to foster trade and development between South Asia and South East Asia through construction of gigantic highways, railways and other mega infrastructure projects along with promotion of extractive industries and big mega dams targeting the rich natural resources in the region will intensify social, environmental, cultural, health impacts and complicates the already worse human rights violations records in the region. Already, the Trans Asian Highway project and the High Transmission and Distribution Lines with Asian Development Bank and World Bank respectively and passing through Manipur had already displaced several communities from their agriculture and residential land areas. One wonders if the development decision making process in Manipur and across India’s North East works exclusively to the international decision making processes and other advances in development rights regime. There’s a strong disconnect. Marginalized communities most affected by such exclusive process will continue to be impacted, impoverished and pauperized. How can such development process bereft of taking communities into consent be considered sustainable and just? Development fostered under the current development architecture has already ruined lives, destroyed futures of many indigenous communities, displaced fisher folks, small scale farmers and women from their survival sources not only in Manipur, but also across communities worldwide.

One may also ponder if long standing complaints of affected communities to listen to the inconvenience and violations by those projects are ever listened to and considered for necessary action. There are even cases of community members including women killed, assaulted and threatened for demanding just development, for fair rehabilitation and resettlement, for review of destructive projects, for calling for rightful space to air in calls for alternatives and impact assessments. Three people affected by Khuga dam lost their lives in police firing in December 2005. In 2008, Ms. Lungmila of Louphoung Village affected by Mapithel dam in Manipur remain paralyzed after hit by tear gas canister fired by personnel of Indian Reserve Battalion[[2]](#footnote-2). How can development process which involves taking lives of communities and militarizing their land for asserting their legitimate rights be considered as sustainable and just development?

Given the indications of exclusion of community representatives, stakeholders in the officials decision making process in defining sustainable development goals in the ongoing post 2015 processes in the UN HQ has already led to widespread condemnations. The process, now solely confined for participation and decision among the member States of the United Nations is already arbitrary, exclusive and undermines international advances on just development, to ensure participation of communities and other stakeholders and also undermines the very spirit and outcome of the Earth Summit in 1992 and also the Rio+20 summit in June 2012.

There are several countries, from both developed and developing countries which seriously positioned to exclude civil societies and representatives of communities from the official decision making on defining SDGs and further to curtail mentioning “Human Rights” or even “Rights” for that matter[[3]](#footnote-3). There are even countries that refuse to acknowledge that ‘land’ is life for many, but rather perceive it as yet another “productive resource” for corporate exploitation and expansionism. Developed countries are clear during negotiations, to protect and advance the interest of their corporate bodies and their intellectual property rights regime, the basic premise of their corporate operations to consolidate wealth and profits. One may ask whether the current efforts to find sustainable development goals will really be sustainable and helpful for the communities and nature, already subjected to multiple layers of deprivation, conflict and devastation of their lives. Or will the process contribute at least in restoring the health of our mother earth and in ushering development justice for many communities victimized and marginalized by the dominant development discourse.

The need for a just development is increasingly felt all over the world with states insisting on consolidation of the dominant development model and paradigm. As organizations worldwide prepares to observe the global day of development justice on 21st July to remind ourselves of the development injustice and the multiple impacts on marginalized and impoverished communities in deep corners of our earth, it is high time to remind ourselves if whether the current development process in Manipur actually serves the needs and also compatible to the wishes and aspirations of communities. Or whether it serves the interest and needs of only multinational corporate bodies and those in the State that actively support them. Pursuance of development aggression with intensified militarism will never lead to sustainable development, which actually is all about promoting communities intrinsic rights and democratic decision making processes. For indigenous peoples, recognizing their inherent rights over their land and resources and respecting their right to free, prior and informed consent for any development decision making in their land and territories is key for sustainable development in their land.

Promoting human rights based approach to development, fostering a community led development initiatives, promoting rightful participation, transparency and accountability will be crucial to foster development justice in Manipur. A significant step to promote development justice is to rethink all development processes for its compatibility to standards of human rights based approach to development. Reviewing policies detrimental to the rights of communities and to environmental integrity, and if necessary to repeal, such as Hydroelectric Power Policy, 2012, Manipur Loktak Lake Protection Act, 2006, Manipur tourism policy, Manipur Industrial policy etc, India’s PPP policy etc, Manipur Land Use Policy etc is fundamentally crucial.

Development justice can be best ensured if development processes is rooted in the wishes and aspirations of communities and in promoting health and sustenance of our mother earth. A significant consideration of whose development, who defines and who benefits need be seriously explored. Any development process negating human rights and inconsiderate of the human rights based approach to development will only led to multilayered conflict and confusion and will only reinforce development injustice. Fostering a development process that respect indigenous peoples right to freely assert their self determined development is extremely important to secure development justice in Manipur and beyond. It is high time to advance Development Justice – a transformative development framework that aims to reduce inequalities of wealth, power, and resources between rich and poor, between men and women and between countries. The larger process of defining the Sustainable Developments Goals in the post 2015 process also need be sensitive to the realities of deprivation and inequality prevailing among the most marginalized and the violations within perpetuated by State, Corporate bodies, military and other powerful development actors, as in the case of Manipur and also be sensitive to their voice, aspirations as expressed in their concerted struggles for change and justice.

1. An Assessment of Dams in India’s NE seeking Carbon Credits under CDM of UNFCCC by Jiten Yumnam published by the International Rivers, USA, March 2012

   <http://www.internationalrivers.org/resources/an-assessment-of-dams-in-ne-india-seeking-carbon-credits-from-clean-development-mechanism> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mapithel Dam and Endless Violations, by Jiten Yumnam, Imphal Free press, October 28, 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “OWG proposals risk sidelining consensus on human rights-centered sustainable development” CESR STATEMENT, <http://www.cesr.org/article.php?id=1564> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)