

UNRISD PRESS

Immediate Release,

6 September 2004, Geneva

Understanding the Evolving Diversities and Originalities in Rural Social Movements in the Age of Globalization

UNRISD Civil Society and Social Movements Programme Paper 7

Neil Webster

This paper aims to locate the potential social movements have for development in this age of globalization and, specifically, to trace how the politics of collective action at the local level develop as rural social movements to change and shape national and international development agendas.

The paper takes as its starting point the diversities and originalities of local rural politics in which rural poverty is a dominant factor, where the nature and direction of local politics are shaped, influenced and, at times, determined by national and international processes and actors. It argues that in so far as these exogenous (to the local) processes and actors have direct bearing on the nature and outcomes of local development processes, local social movements can by definition have consequences well beyond the local, as they impact upon or are taken up within national and international development agendas.

The paper sees social movements of the rural poor as being strategic in nature, often possessing a degree of coherence and agreement with respect to their aims and objectives and serving as a means through which to change development processes and outcomes to the greater benefit of the poor. It is also suggested that democratization linked to reforms directed at decentralization, civil society and good governance has created a political space in which the agency of local actors is greater today than previously. The potential for poverty reduction is therefore also greater.

-MORE-

Underlying the discussion is a belief in the importance of the potential offered by democratization for a more pro-poor development trajectory. While the paper does not argue that successful poverty reduction lies in the hands and mobilization of the poor alone, it does argue that the agency of the poor is central to achieving changes in the practice of politics and policies at local, meso and macro levels. The ability of the rural poor to assert such political agency is analysed through the concept of citizenship and the contemporary discussion of a rights-based approach to development.

While the paper draws upon experiences of collective action in rural social formations across countries and continents with very different political histories, development trajectories and traditions of agrarian studies, the bias is toward the South Asian sub-continent where the author's own fieldwork has, for the most part, been undertaken.

Neil Webster is a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Department of Development Research at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen.

Order PPCSSM 7 from UNRISD (US\$ 12 for readers in industrialized countries and US\$ 6 for readers in developing and transitional countries and for students).

For a full list of UNRISD Press Releases, visit www.unrisd.org/news/press. To be informed by email about new UNRISD Press Releases, and other information about the Institute, register for Email Alerts. For more information, visit www.unrisd.org/alerts

The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) was established in 1963 to promote research on the most pressing social issues of development. Multidisciplinary studies are carried out in collaboration with the Institute's extensive network of scholars and research institutes, mainly in developing countries. More information on this press release and/or UNRISD can be obtained by contacting: Nicolas Bovay, Information Officer, UNRISD, Palais des Nations, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland; phone (41 22) 917 1143; fax (41 22) 917 0650; e-mail bovay@unrisd.org. For review copies, please contact Sylvie Brenninkmeijer-Liu; phone (41 22) 917 3011; e-mail liu@unrisd.org. For all other information, please consult www.unrisd.org.

-END-