

Ecosystems of Advice: Unfolding Dynamics of Business and Development in South Asia

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Inequalities in South Asian Advicescapes

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Abstract

Providing advice to people starting small businesses – whether as family firms, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), or as micro-entrepreneurs – has long been seen by governments and development agencies as a necessary part of supporting economic development. Since the heyday of modernisation theory in the 1960s advice has also been part of the project of international aid. Developing countries were seen as constrained by a lack of resources, poor infrastructure, limited know-how, and adverse ‘cultural traditions’ that stifled entrepreneurial potential. Because of these beliefs, advice was packaged as part of ‘technology transfer’. The rise of microfinance as a development approach during the 1980s, framed as a response to the problem of poor people in accessing credit, generated further advice provision as part of microfinance services. Today’s emphasis on an enhanced private sector role, and growing policy interest in the world of tech start-ups and venture capitalism, situates advice as part of efforts to build ‘entrepreneurship ecosystems’, with business advice itself increasingly viewed as a commodity and not just a developmental input.

Drawing on recent fieldwork in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, this paper first sketches out the main transformations in the business-development landscape before mapping the broad contours of the ‘advice ecosystems’ in each country, using a brief illustrative case study. We argue that these ecosystems are becoming more complex in terms of the range of private, public and non-governmental actors taking part, and more marketized in the types of exchanges and transactions taking place. Business advice continues to play roles in welfare interventions (the ‘needs economy’), but is also becoming more established within marketized approaches to entrepreneurship support. The case studies make visible two different yet interconnected trajectories in business-centred/led-development: one in which advice has become heavily incorporated into both state machinery and private capital in a way which tends to exclude people from the provision and delivery of advice (Sri Lanka); and a second where an increasingly authoritarian government invests in business support, backed by international donors, in pursuit of economic growth and stability as well as the political objectives of consolidating power and managing a young population (Bangladesh). The implications of these changes – for debates around entrepreneurship, financialization, and development - are discussed in the conclusion.

1. Introduction

The provision of advice to those starting or running a small business – whether as family firms, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), or micro-entrepreneurs – is a rarely explored aspect of local economic development in South Asia that we suggest merits closer scholarly attention. Advice provision has long been viewed by governments and development agencies as a necessary component of supporting economic development. During the era of ‘modernisation theory’ in the 1950s and 1960s, developing countries were understood to be constrained by a lack of resources, poor infrastructure, limited know-how, and adverse ‘cultural traditions’ that stifled entrepreneurial potential. Entrepreneurship advice to SMEs and family firms was provided, in various forms, as part of the solution. Over time, the forms and reach of this advice has been extended. In the context of neoliberal market logic during the 1980s and 1990s, the reach of entrepreneurship advice broadened beyond SMEs to new forms of clients, such as rural women entrepreneurs in the informal sector, who were constructed as borrowers within microcredit programmes delivered primarily by NGOs. What Schwittay (2011) has termed the ‘marketization of poverty’ assumed new dimensions with rise of ‘bottom of the pyramid’ thinking promoted by C.K. Prahalad and favoured large-scale entrepreneurship as a solution to poverty in line with an individualised neoliberal vision of entrepreneurs of the self. A recent ‘startup boom’ has altered the landscape further, by further expanding the space and scope of advice provision in South Asia.

Today’s field of entrepreneurial advice has diversified in three main inter-related ways. The first is the new centrality of the private sector as the driver of development, which has returned the figure of the entrepreneur to centre stage. The private sector has been (re)established as a central driver of development, bringing a set of ‘turbulent changes’ in the ways ‘development imaginaries and interventions’ are framed (Mawdsley, 2018). In the new focus on market-driven development, a key objective of ‘aid’ is increasingly one of assisting in the production of a de-risked investment environment for capitalist expansion. Global and national financial processes increasingly shape the lives of poor people (Kar 2018). The second is the rapid growth of interest by policy makers and investors in the digital technology-driven startup sector, inspired by Silicon Valley models and advanced tech policies in countries such as Singapore, and backed by international donors.¹ Increasingly, advice is no longer simply provided inclusively as part of technology-transfer or micro-lending but is understood according to market logics. Entrepreneurs invest in start-ups and ‘incubators’ with an eye on returns, and with advice seen increasingly as a commodity that can be paid for. The third is a trend towards ever deeper levels of financialization in sectors such as banking, health and agriculture, reflecting a growing importance of financial activities as a source of profit in the economy.² For example, in the face of saturated credit

¹ See for example ‘Startup boom in Bangladesh’, Tasmim Sultana, July 20, 2022 *The Financial Express*, Dhaka <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/startup-boom-in-bangladesh-1658303801>

² The move to private sector-led development is distinct from, but increasing associated with, increasing ‘financialization’ of the economy and service provision. For example, Hunter and Murray’s

markets, investors seek higher returns by converting people on low incomes into formal borrowers rather than relying on older models of savings groups, small group lending and development enterprise training. While loans often come with the rhetoric of entrepreneurship support, the reality is often one in which borrowing is needed to meet reproductive requirements.

These changes reflect new relationships between business and development, and shifts within the dominant discourse of entrepreneurship, identified and discussed in recent anthropological work. The figure of the *entrepreneur*³ has moved from being seen simply as a business owner to become regarded as ‘an agent of change’, a new kind of citizen whose role is to reframe the dissatisfactions, hardships and demands of poverty as ‘opportunities’ to their backers to be addressed through ‘inclusive growth’ (Irani, 2019). Another shift, discussed among others by Huang (2020), is that the objectives of governments, businesses and development agencies have become aligned around the idea of ‘poverty capitalism’ in which the search for ‘new frontiers of profit and growth’ has brought the worlds of business and development closer together. Alongside these changes we also note the persistence of the ‘needs economy’ - distinctive non-capitalist low productivity area of the economy managed by state and development agencies, and where skills training functions to provide a form of welfare for poorer people (Sanyal 2007). This remains an important site for the provision of entrepreneurship advice by government and NGOs.

In this paper we further explore these themes through focusing on *advice-giving*, an activity that links would-be entrepreneurs with financial capital.⁴ By ‘advice’ we refer to formal and informal types of advice embedded within training, business support services, and mentorship programmes or ‘shadowing’ schemes. Advice comes in many forms – it may be given freely or imposed, it may be requested, and it may be exchanged or purchased. It may be given on the basis of a one-off exchange, or as part of a regular or long-term interaction or relationship. It may be provided by state, private sector or non-governmental actors, or obtained informally from kin or community networks.

(2018) deconstruction of the financialization of healthcare examines the private sector’s infiltration of healthcare systems in middle-income countries, where the ‘quest to improve human well-being is now being re-framed around the notion of “unlocking the transformative potential” of the private sector’ (p.1263).

³ Entrepreneurship can be understood in different ways – starting a new enterprise, taking risks and initiative, or as self-employment. Here we are concerned with the ways that different ideas and assumptions about entrepreneurship inform advice provision.

⁴ This paper is the first output from a research project entitled *Ethnographic Solutions to Inequalities in South Asian Advicescapes* that focuses on advice to youth in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The project is funded by the Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity programme at the International Inequalities Institute (III) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). It is a collaborative project with BRAC in Bangladesh and Centre for a Smart Future in Sri Lanka.

The content of advice might include technical information, contacts and networking as well as forms of emotional support and reassurance. Those who receive advice vary, from young people undergoing skills training by NGOs in rural areas, to would-be entrepreneurs at university looking to launch their own startup. Advice can be requested and acted upon, or imposed as part of a wider package of training and credit, and it may be found to be useful or, conversely, to be largely redundant. Advice is a complex bundle of information, judgment, problem diagnosis created within sets of shifting relationships between people. With its formal and informal dimensions, and its role in structuring new forms of social relationships, advice lends itself particularly well to anthropological study.⁵

We suggest that our focus on advice provides an analytical entry point into three inter-related sets of issues: (i) understandings and expectations of entrepreneurship; (ii) insights into financialization; (iii) the changing ideas and practices of development actors.

In the section that follows, we first outline our approach to conceptualising, mapping and analysing these advice ecosystems, as well as some of the methodological challenges posed. This is followed by two brief overviews of the advice ecosystems in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The paper ends with a concluding analysis of key themes arising from the work so far, some reflections on insights gained, and ideas for further research.

2. An ‘ecosystems of advice’ approach

The ‘advice ecosystem’ is a sub-set of a wider entrepreneurial ecosystem in which *advice givers* of different kinds (governmental, NGO, private sector, family, etc) and *advice receivers* (potential entrepreneurs, trainees, borrowers, startup competition winners, etc) interact. Advice provision requires that a set of relationships be put in place between these advice providers and receivers, as well as spaces or arenas in which advice exchanges can take place, and resources need to be mobilised to create relationships and enable advice activities to take place. Framing these components holistically as an *ecosystem* reflects the complex, interdependent and changing dynamics between these different elements.

Recent work in economic anthropology has explored ‘the pluralistic landscape of advice giving’ in the context of declining welfare states, in which advice provided by a range of community groups, trade unions, and charities help ‘enable the productivity of austerity

⁵ We also recognise and draw on studies of advice from the management field. For example, Mole’s (2015) work on SME advice in the UK suggests that advice is often sought following a ‘trigger event’, that more educated managers tend to be more willing to seek advice, that advice works better when an advice provider has a detailed understanding of a particular firm, and that the psychological dimensions of advice-giving (such as confidence building) are more important than tends to be appreciated. While normative aspects of advice are central to our project, they are not the primary focus of this overview paper.

regimes' mainly in the context of the Global North (James and Koch, 2020).⁶ Taking this approach as our starting point, we develop the idea of 'ecosystems of advice' as a conceptual framework for our analysis of local economic development and enterprise in South Asia, where advice also offers insights into wider processes of change, such as the encroachment of market logic on the international aid sector, or changing forms of government control of business formation.⁷

The metaphor of the 'business ecosystem' is also found in the management practitioner literature. Researchers in management studies identify the concept of the 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' as a frame for analysing a range of actors, policies and services including finance intended to promote entrepreneurship, and for measuring the extent to which levels of commercial and legal infrastructure, education and knowledge, market dynamics, and social and cultural norms provide an optimum environment for business promotion (Kelley et al., 2016). Diagnostic tools such as the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM)'s *Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Quality Composite Index* compares different contexts along these lines. Development agencies engaged in the promotion of women's entrepreneurship use the entrepreneurial ecosystem idea to help them identify the factors believed to influence its development – such as legal rights, national family leave policies, cultural norms, and access to education (Asia Foundation/ADB 2018).

The advice ecosystem therefore refers to the configuration of organizational actors and activities that generate advice, shapes its form, content and costs, and identifies those judged suitable to receive it. Across different settings, and at different times, such ecosystems vary in character and scope. They are shaped by the backdrop of historically specific experiences with late-twentieth and early twenty-first century economic liberalization, as well as much longer histories of gendered, racialized and ethicized ideas around accumulation through commercial activity in South Asia (see Schuster and Kar 2021). While these histories and different policy environments have shaped each country's ecosystems of business advice and finance, all are increasingly subject to the same macro policy environment, which emphasises income and GDP as a barometer of development and aid-worthiness.

⁶ Olivier de Sardan (2007) has argued that development agencies push entrepreneurship as part of an individualising and 'responsibilising' response to poverty (alongside 'self-help' and 'empowerment') in contrast to more systematic approaches to welfare and health in the Global North that favour 'the socialization of risk'. This can be understood as part of what Beck has called 'bootstrap development' (Beck 2016).

⁷ The empirical data discussed in this paper was mainly collected during two periods of fieldwork in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, based on semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Heslop conducted over twenty interviews with representatives from a range of national and international development and finance organisations, and with entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka, with participant observation taking place during April and May 2022. Bowers carried out more than 50 interviews during two months of fieldwork in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar between July and September 2022.

By mapping advice ecosystems we hope to

- identify the various advisory agents and bodies that seek to link would-be ‘entrepreneurs’ (or various kinds) with various types of finance (public, private, foreign donor)
- understand the connections, nodes, hierarchies and niches that structure advice ecosystems in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and compare them

Studying advice is methodologically challenging because (i) advice is often embedded within other forms of service provision; (ii) its informal dimensions may not be immediately visible; (iii) social relationships of advice may persist over time beyond the specific events or moments where advice is sought, provided or received. Finally, gaining insight into the relevance and value of advice requires us to understand the perspective of both advice givers and receivers (advisers and advisees).

By offering a preliminary mapping of the ‘advice ecosystem’ in each country we show how ecosystems of advice are expanding and becoming more marketized in both countries, but in different ways and with potentially different implications. In our analysis we identify three main areas of entrepreneurship support: SMEs (formal and informal sector enterprises), micro-entrepreneurs / micro finance clients; and start-ups (enterprises with the possibility for rapid growth/scaling).⁸

3. The advice ecosystem in Bangladesh

Background

In Bangladesh, private sector development has become a more prominent part of domestic development policy and donor support. The country has moved from being viewed by one of as an aid-dependent ‘basket case’ during the 1970s and 1980s – in the notorious words of US undersecretary Ural Alexis Johnson - to one where high levels of economic growth have been sustained throughout the past two decades.⁹ Foreign aid now plays a far less significant role as exports and remittances have come to dominate the economy (Hossain 2017; Lewis, 2011).

During the 1970s the advice ecosystem was dominated by government, backed by foreign aid donors, with provision of advice to entrepreneurs as part of ‘business development services’, designed to improve the performance, market access and profitability of enterprises (Islam, 2013). Economic development was seen as requiring the need to overcome a set of obstacles – lack of capital, lack of skills, lack of infrastructure, ‘traditional’ mindsets - to enable the

⁸ We recognise that government definitions of ‘SME’ vary across different contexts and we use the term in a general sense here.

⁹ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/10/bangladesh-independence-anniversary-basket-case-rising-star/>

country to progress along the teleological scale endorsed by proponents of modernization theory.¹⁰ Creating and supporting small-scale entrepreneurs through state action was viewed as a necessary part of this strategy to drive modernisation. Yet provision of finance through the public banking system was inefficient, rarely addressed the needs of SMEs, and loan defaulting was commonplace. Alongside this were a range of public sector support channels to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), often backed by international donors. For example, training and loans were extended through specialized public sector agencies such as the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), established under the Ministry of Industries, and with a Small and Cottage Industries Training Institute (SCITI) a training institute that has operated since as far back as 1957.

The 1980s brought a renewed emphasis on the power of markets and private development actors. Alongside existing public sector support services to SMEs, a new NGO-driven arena of support focused on women as micro-entrepreneurs, in which loans and training services – including advice - were provided to support mainly household-level ‘income generation’ activities. The aim of this type of entrepreneurship support was primarily seen as improving household income rather than driving economic growth, but the language of enterprise had now become part of the project of poverty reduction in microcredit lending organisations such as the Grameen Bank and Association for Social Advancement (ASA). The rise of NGOs was also associated with a new emphasis on gender within entrepreneurship discourses.

Alongside entrepreneurship promotion as an anti-poverty strategy, specialised NGOs emerged that focused on the business sector. The most significant of these was MIDAS (Micro-Industries Development Assistance and Services), established as an NGO in 1982 with financial assistance from USAID, and which supports mainly women micro-entrepreneurs with loans, training and advice. By the 2000s, the line between NGO development work and the private sector had begun to blur as the idea of ‘social enterprise’ gained popularity, and private sector business-centred solutions to poverty and other development problems have gradually moved centre stage. Bangladesh’s achievement of lower middle income country status in 2016 reinforced the idea that business, overseen by a strong government leadership, rather than development agencies, were best placed to drive change. Three main arenas of entrepreneurship can be distinguished today: (i) micro-entrepreneurship, (ii) SMEs and (iii) the tech-enabled startup world.

¹⁰ Modernization theory was a sociological theory of development influential during the 1960s and 1970s that saw development as an evolutionary process from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern industrial’ society. Rostow’s (1960) version of modernization theory emphasised ‘stages of growth’ leading to developmental ‘take off’, and encouraging entrepreneurship was seen as central to building new social and economic practices. Ideas of modernization have been revived within neoliberal development thinking.

The advice ecosystem today

Our main finding is that the advice ecosystem has become more complex in terms of actors, and includes different governmental, non-governmental and private sector providers (see Figure 1). Despite the rise of private actors, the government still plays a major role. Its small and Medium Enterprise Foundation (SMEF), established in 2012, is an autonomous not for profit agency established under the Ministry of Industries, providing training and financing to small entrepreneurs. It works with industry bodies and with the non-governmental sector, drawing finance from Bangladesh Bank. Growing enthusiasm for the digital start-up sector led to the creation in 2019 of Startup Bangladesh Ltd, a government-run venture capital (VC) fund under the ICT Ministry. The government's ICT policy, which centres on the vision of Digital Bangladesh, has also led to the creation of other initiatives to stimulate the innovation and entrepreneurship environment, such as the Innovation Design and Entrepreneurship Academy (iDEA), with investment in business park building programmes and other forms of business infrastructure development. At the same time, as the government has become more authoritarian, a stance enabled in part by the country's continuing high level of export-led economic growth, the ruling party has increasingly looked to East Asia's state-led economic investment models for inspiration and as a basis for social control. The government's presence in the sector is strong, but its formal institutions while high profile are not particularly dynamic.

A range of venture capital groups, private consultancy firms and start-up support companies are increasingly visible as part of the recent startup boom. For example, there are private for-profit consultancies dedicated to the promotion of SMEs and tech start-ups through investment, training and mentorship programmes, which they frame as 'ecosystem building'. Some firms have adjacent foundations that undertake teach-based 'social enterprise' work in sectors such as telehealth, agriculture and fintech. For LightCastle Partners¹¹, one of the high profile private sector business consulting firms active in the Bangladesh startup scene, the current vibrancy is not only the result of government support in the form of Startup Bangladesh and other investments, but also of the country's increased levels of digitalization and smart phone take up. This they argue has been accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, the country's changing demographics (62% of the population is under 35, suggesting a 'tech savvy' young population), and an increased number of private sector initiatives aimed at establishing business 'incubator' and 'accelerator' facilities for startups (LightCastle 2022). This contemporary scene is one characterised by a significant degree of hype – leading Bangladesh Angels for example in a recent presentation to describe the country's start up ecosystem as 'the untapped digital goldmine of Asia' (LightCastle 2021).

NGOs that had for many years provided microfinance services and promoted skills development now increasingly speak the language of business and entrepreneurship-building. For example, Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha (TMSS) has a long history of credit provision and local group formation, but now increasingly sells business services to clients

¹¹ <https://www.lightcastlebd.com>

and customers rather than ‘beneficiaries’. Once funded primarily by development donors, NGOs like this now serve as contracted intermediaries for banks (eg HSBC) and international private finance agencies (Troidos Investment Management).¹² In an increasingly saturated credit market, these banks are entering into contracts with NGOs to help them with what they call their ‘last mile’ problems. These include supplying loans to harder-to-reach poor and/or remote households who – as Muhammad Yunus observed back in the 1970s - do not have access to banks, lacking the documents, assets, knowledge or skills needed to access formal loans. While credit services NGOs could once be characterised as intermediaries between donors and rural households, some are now becoming transformed into ‘contracted’ intermediaries between banks and potential new borrowers, armed with checklists that help people generate the documentation needed to become creditworthy clients.

Private sector Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives are also a growing source of funding for NGOs and startups, as the availability of foreign aid has declined (Ahasan and Gardner, 2016). The move away from aid is also reflected in the re-configuring of finance within schemes designed to promote entrepreneurship. Skills development is a primary aim of the government with considerable expansion of private sector-sponsored training (Aziz and Siddique, 2016). In this scenario, recipients, who once had donor-subsidised access to training and equipment, may be required to self-finance their participation in training initiatives, taking out loans from commercial bank partners of the organisations (see for instance, Huang, 2020).

Foreign donors, long part of the policy landscape in Bangladesh, continue to be active in supporting entrepreneurship, with implications for the advice ecosystem. Bilateral donors, including the Netherlands and Switzerland, working through embassies, support a range of organizations and initiatives, including efforts by some of the private universities to foster entrepreneurship through tech start-up competitions. In these, young people learn how to pitch their tech startup products and ideas, gaining access to seed funding and advice if they are successful.

Emerging themes

Returning to our three inter-related themes set out in Section 1, we draw attention first to changing understandings and expectations of *entrepreneurship*. Although notoriously hard to define, we suggest that there are three different co-existing understandings of the entrepreneur – as the owner or manager of an SME, as a trainee potential entrepreneur within a skills training programme, and as the dynamic startup founder. In line with Irani’s account from India, the idea of entrepreneur as ‘change agent’ – either as bringing about change in their own situation, or in the case of social entrepreneurship, creating change more widely, is increasingly dominant. While the entrepreneur was previously seen as an agent of change

¹² See for example ‘Encouraging female empowerment and resilience in Bangladesh’, Troidos Investment Management, 28 February 2022. <https://www.triodos-im.com/articles/2022/investment-tmf-tfsf--tmss>

within the business sphere, the entrepreneur is increasingly promoted as an agent of change for society more widely.

It also remains common for people to see the process of supporting entrepreneurship in linear, ‘catch up’ terms – ‘we are still five years behind Indonesia’, ‘moving businesses from A to B’, and in ‘cultural’ terms (entrepreneurship as a career option seen as ‘taboo’ for young people, whose families preferred them to seek low risk government jobs). At the same time, in contrast with this linear view, interviewees recognised the interdependent complexity of the ecosystem – a view that advice on problems in one part of the ecosystem can’t easily be solved by advice in another part.

The advice ecosystem offers insights into processes of financialization in the Bangladesh context. For example, Banks like Standard Chartered now working with NGOs as intermediaries helping them to reach small rural entrepreneurs with loans. The advice ecosystem has new international dimensions, including regional venture capital and support such as MyAsiaVC, and international NGOs such as Youth Business International (YBI), whose motto is ‘share international solutions and localise them’. At the same time, there is evidence that significant sections of the potential entrepreneurs sector, such as small-scale Facebook-based women entrepreneurs, finds itself excluded from access to finance.¹³

As foreign aid levels have reduced in Bangladesh, the landscape is increasingly dominated by government, the private sector and new forms of philanthropy. Government investment in the entrepreneurship/startup sector is part of its ‘digital Bangladesh’ strategy – implying both partnership with and investment in the sector, but with overall political control. There is also a government sponsored media effort to promote entrepreneurship. Many people are positive about this government support (although some say that they don’t make enough useful information available). A growing number of venture capitalist entrepreneurship promoters include philanthropic initiatives within their main for-profit orientation, extending an apolitical outlook in relation to power/structural inequalities.

Finally, what do we learn about advice itself? Concerns were voiced about the need for more attention to be given to the *quality* of advice provided – less ‘off the shelf’ general or ‘instructional’ advice, but more ‘sounding board’ support. Well-meaning advice services may do harm because they are generalized and preformulated, or else delivered by consultants with little or no contextual knowledge. Some forms of advice were seen as not particularly useful or even redundant. We also heard a view – which partially contradicts the above – that what many would-be entrepreneurs actually need is some more generic or basic information

¹³ See ‘Startups not getting local investment due to valuation complications’, 29 October 2022, *The Business Standard*, <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/startups-not-getting-local-investment-due-valuation-complications-522306>

and training on topics such as legal, banking, accounting.¹⁴ Demand for advice may be diverse and segmented. There is an overall consensus from our research participants that ‘soft skills’ related knowledge and training provision is lacking across all three categories of businesses in the study (SMEs, micro businesses and startups).

At the same time new forms of advice are clearly emerging. The startup boom has led to a rise in mentorship programmes, but we often heard that formal business mentoring remains a new idea that people are not used to. Finding suitable mentors, and ensuring the mentees make full use of the opportunity, remains difficult. It is common for young entrepreneurs to say they really need capital, rather than training/advice. There is still little willingness yet to pay for advice – ‘paying for intangibles’ – at least in urban areas. However, it has become common for agribusiness companies offer advice to farmers with their ‘premium’ products. Such advice relates not only to the use of a particular input but also advice on wider aspects of their farm business, such as how to display particular produce in local markets. This is an example of commodification of advice that counters claims that few people are willing to pay for intangibles.

4. The advice ecosystem in Sri Lanka

Background

Advice has long been part of the project of international aid in Sri Lanka, and its main actors are set out in Figure 2 below. Programmes funded bilaterally, or by INGOs and IFOs would commonly bake-in the cost of expert advisors/ consultants as part of a project agreement. Critics have highlighted the historically paternalistic nature of this advice relationship, often pointing to the high salaries of foreign advisors relative to in-country advisors as an understandably contentious detail within a more general critique of the development industry in Sri Lanka in the mid-twentieth century. The direction of advice (as well as its dollar value) evinces a hierarchical relationship between the global north (as advisor) and the global south (as advisee). Salaries aside, the imposition of (largely) western development ideology (and advice) in Sri Lanka from the 1950s onwards has been framed by its staunchest opponents as cultural neo-colonialism (Goonatilake 1975). Today, ecosystems of advice are far more complex in terms of the range of private, public, and non-governmental actors taking part, and more marketized in the types of exchanges and transactions that are taking place.

Support for business development, as part of development *praxis* in post-colonial Sri Lanka, emerged though capacity building projects aimed at state-owned enterprises (SOEs). A particular target for ODA advice was the fisheries industry, but international donors (often countries and associated development organisations, such as DFID, JICA and GTZ) were also heavily interested in agricultural production and activities such as commercial forestry –

¹⁴ It is difficult to assess the role and efficacy of advice on the basis of our preliminary data, but this will form part of the next stage of our research.

each sector having an ecosystem of entrepreneurial activity post-harvest or downstream, as it were. Scholarship in the late-1980s and early 90s remarked that development programmes had become increasingly nationalistic in character (Woost 1990; Tennekoon 1988). In this period, focus had been on large-scale agricultural infrastructure, such as a series of dams to irrigate agricultural lands in the dryer areas in the north of the country: the ‘Great Mahaweli’ irrigation system. In pursuit of this agricultural vision of national development, little attention was paid to things like business advice for would-be entrepreneurs.¹⁵ Advice, was somewhat limited to the technical inputs of infrastructure.

Much as in Bangladesh, in Sri Lanka foreign donors have been an important player in shaping development policy and practice, continue to be active in supporting entrepreneurship, with implications for the advice ecosystem. The International Donor community, in particular USAID, GIZ, JICA and the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency, have in the past formed the capital-backbone for many state and private sector initiatives into SME and micro-business development schemes in Sri Lanka. In the 1990s, INGOs ran numerous business development programmes in Sri Lanka as well as micro-finance schemes. Even today, USAID specifically links entrepreneurship training to banks, and many of the leading banks also set up SME advisory boards, perhaps cynically with a view to minimize default rates. Private banks, like Citi Bank, also provide seed capital for micro-enterprises and have entrepreneur related activities as part of their CSR initiatives. Some projects involve collaborations across the sectors, for example, CitiBank provide finance, whilst the training and capacity building projects are implemented by UNDP and the National Youth Services Council (NYSC).

Arrangements for implementation such as those highlighted above are common; the systems of advice and training delivery is well established and programmes led by international donors were and are often run through the government Divisions, or, have been replicated in some form elsewhere by the state. The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, established in 1839, could be taken as one of the oldest formal vehicles of business support in Sri Lanka. In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that the Chamber, as an organisation which expressly supports private enterprise in Sri Lanka, became a key implementing agency for advice, trainings, and capacity building programmes funded by international donors that operate at the business and development nexus.

The advice ecosystem today

The business support environment in Sri Lanka today is notable for the sheer numbers of administrative organisations involved and by the striking overlap of ‘advice’ and support services that exist. The ecosystem of advice in Sri Lanka is notably crowded at the

¹⁵ The MDIP and later the ‘accelerated’ Mahaweli scheme (1978), which aimed to compress the same process from thirty years to six, was ‘expected to provide irrigation to approximately 130,000 hectares of new agricultural lands and 37,000 hectares of existing paddy lands, more than double the countries hydropower capacity and expand job opportunities’ (Tennekoon 1988: 296)

Ministerial level. The Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MIC) the Ministry of Youth the Ministry of National Development and Youth (MNDPY), Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade – to list just a few – have spawned beneath them a plethora of organisations, departments, authorities, councils, and boards, with a vested and competing interest in offering business advice to would-be entrepreneurs. Business development training at village-level is replicated by different agencies at Divisional and District level. SME and Entrepreneurship Development programmes have been initiated in the garment sector, the Agricultural Department, the Livestock Department, and the Sri Lanka Export Development Board. Per the suggestion of a Government White Paper, efforts were made to centralise technical training for small business development (Nishantha & Padmasiri, 2010). This, however, seemed only to result in creating yet another organisation: The National Export Development Authority (NEDA).

These access points for advice – departments, centres, programmes, and organisations – are doing much the same thing: directing would-be entrepreneurs toward commercial sources of finance (Kadirgama, 2017; Kapadia, 2013; Wedagadara, 2020). An ancillary function of the state-led business-development advice ecosystem, is the delivery of ‘trainings’, and skill development workshops. Skills training as ‘advice’ at the state level, is directed almost exclusively through women’s groups.¹⁶

The popularity of business development schemes suggests the potential for entrepreneurship programmes to be politically efficacious spectacles as well as conduits for nepotism and political appointment. Indeed, perhaps recognising the potential for the misuse of such schemes, recent efforts by the Rajapaksa administration to recruit graduates have been suspended once more due to further scrutiny by the Sri Lankan Electoral Commission (De Alwis, 2020). There are also questions concerning the efficacy and design of such schemes, following the hype that surrounds them. At one level, the launch of an entrepreneurship scheme or a business development and training initiative offers a headline which captures rural aspirations, targeting those in villages potentially eligible for non-concessionary loans. Equally, Departments and Centres set up for ‘business development support’ provide an opportunity for the state to absorb a potentially (and historically) ‘troublesome’ demographic – the educated unemployed. Initiatives geared to harvest ‘rural entrepreneurship’ or provide ‘technical training’, provides an opportunity for university graduates to be employed in

¹⁶ A recurring theme of the research in Sri Lanka was that people from poor urban areas were reluctant to borrow from banks to start their micro enterprises. In the low-income neighbourhoods of Colombo north, where we conducted our research with entrepreneurs, reluctance to borrow from formal lenders, was framed in terms of this kind of borrowing being both too expensive and too administratively burdensome. For the amounts required for micro-enterprises, people were far more likely to turn to family networks, their religious community, or local informal money lenders, using *chit* systems and *cheque* systems. Another obstacle to obtaining formal credit for poorer borrowers was simply a lack of collateral with which to secure any loan. Whilst there is an observable push to link advice, support and training to banking, entrepreneur’s aversion to formal banking is possibly a reason that many in low-income neighbourhoods are excluded from potentially useful advice and support for business development.

seemingly appropriate managerial-level jobs – often in Divisional or District offices outside of the capital city and urban centres. Graduates are employed as ‘business training officers’ despite not have much or any practical business experience.

Emerging themes

Universities have, in a limited way, become sites of advice transfer in Sri Lanka.¹⁷ Support for organizations and initiatives to foster entrepreneurship through tech start-up competitions in national university spaces has been forthcoming in Sri Lanka in recent years. The likes of *Mora Ventures* a university-level incubator at the university of Moratuwa is a programme through which young people learn how to competitively pitch innovative ideas and gain access to seed funding and advice if they are successful. In linking-up University students with the business sector a key advisor is employed as an ‘entrepreneur in residence’. This is a new site for advice transmission which taps into a relatively new and popular kind of advice organisation at the intersection of business and development: the social enterprise.

As in Bangladesh, the idea of ‘social enterprise’ has gained huge popularity in Sri Lanka, and private sector business-centred solutions to poverty and other development problems have similarly moved centre stage. Lanka Social Ventures (LSV) have a broad mission statement: ‘Supporting Entrepreneurship and Innovation for Social Change’ and find partnership with international organisations such as Oxfam, British Council, and the World University Service of Canada, as well as with local organisations sharing similar agendas such as NEDA, Lanka Impact Investment Network, and Social Enterprise Lanka. The latter coordinates training programs and workshops, manages a social enterprise membership directory, supports impact measurement and reporting, and organizes social enterprise awards to recognize the efforts of Sri Lankan social entrepreneurs. The development case for business has been neatly captured in the notion of the ‘social enterprise’; rather than merely running an enterprise and being an entrepreneur, educated, urban, young people strive to be social entrepreneurs.

Sri Lanka’s ecosystem of advice is comprised of overlapping and interwoven constituent parts. At one level, the nature of advice itself largely equates to directing entrepreneurs toward market rate loans in place of non-concessionary support (Advocata, 2019; Asian Development Bank, 2018; French Embassy Sri Lanka, 2019; Sri Lanka Guardian, 2019; Wijesinhe and Perera, 2015). Indeed, advice regarding where one can access cheap credit to start a business was also much desired by our research participants. While private lending markets for credit have become crowded, so too have the government initiatives to support small businesses and would-be entrepreneurs, which to date, face regulatory hurdles and tumultuous party changes hindering SME targeted initiatives and growth (Advocata, 2019; Lanka Business Online, 2019). The increased rise of private initiatives seeking to create new SME owners through credit, particularly following the 2004 tsunami, have brought their own set of problems; leading to high rates of indebtedness, suicide, and protest of microfinance,

¹⁷ Limited as the pandemic, strikes, and political upheaval has stifled successful rollout.

which remains strongly linked with entrepreneurship finance for rural communities (Wedagadera, 2020). Where the state has stepped into the advice scape, the programmes have replicated the models of community leadership established in the heyday of INGO activity in the 1990s. Here, community leaders as ‘advisors’ play a significant role in linking people up to the state mechanisms of advice, such as they are, and allowing the state to access would-be borrowers.

At another level, we see an increased emphasis on channelling advice toward young people – encouraging them to become entrepreneurs as a desirable career option. This has been spearheaded by local ‘social entrepreneurs’ acting as ‘entrepreneurs in residence’ in university spaces, such as *Mora Ventures*, but has also been rolled out through initiatives like the ‘South Asia Leadership and Entrepreneurship’ (SALE) programme, funded by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and supported by the US Department of State.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have set out a rationale and a framework for studying entrepreneurship advice, and provided an initial overview of the advice ecosystems in two South Asian countries. Our central proposition is the idea that advice ecosystems are expanding and becoming more marketized. The case studies suggest many similarities between the two country level ecosystems, including the displacement of development projects by private sector actors, a renewed emphasis on promoting entrepreneurship as a driver of change, and increasing penetration of private capital in both the ‘needs economy’ and the startup sector. At the same time, we also find two different yet interconnected trajectories in business-centred/led-development: one in which advice has become heavily incorporated into both state machinery and private capital in a way which tends to exclude people from the provision and delivery of advice (Sri Lanka); and a second where an increasingly authoritarian government (backed by donors and investors) invests in business development services not only in support of economic growth but also as a way to project (and therefore manage) the idea of economic opportunity among a potentially volatile (young) population (Bangladesh).

Increased interest in advice-giving as a development activity returns us to a view that advice helps to ‘release the constraints’ (of modernisation), in place of addressing deeper structural logics for the persistence of poverty. At the same time, alongside support to small-scale entrepreneurship as a livelihood strategy for the poor we are seeing more emphasis on government-led support to SMEs as central to national development strategy, which risks leaving behind those adversely incorporated into the ‘needs economy’. A shift from skills training to advice provision as a way of facilitating access to markets would further deepen this trend. Although we do not yet have firm data to support this, it seems possible that new forms of advice are complicit in increasing *precarity* in the sense of making people better borrowers, rather than better business people, and moving people away from more

solidaristic forms of group-based saving. There is an historical precedent of structuring precarity within economic systems and labour markets under capitalism.¹⁸

We also aim to show that, additionally, advice is a useful analytical entry point that potentially offers insights into (i) entrepreneurship, (ii) financialization, and (iii) development ideas and practices.

First, understandings and expectations of the entrepreneur are changing. As Mawdsley (2018) shows, the idea of the entrepreneur has been returned to centre stage by the renewal of private sector led development policies. But which vision of the entrepreneur? There are at least three simultaneously at play – the (mainly) poor rural woman entrepreneur struggling to improve the economic position of her household (the traditional NGO target), the (mainly male) SME entrepreneur as ‘businessman’ struggling to maintain an enterprise (but only growing slowly), and finally, the shiny urban startup world of the creative youth/student entrepreneur, seen as possessing the possibility of achieving rapid, scalable success and profits. The contemporary focus may be tilting towards the second and third types, and increasingly leaving the first stranded in the ‘needs economy’, mainly as a recipient of charity or philanthropy.

While earlier notions of the entrepreneur often emphasised self-reliance, persistence and hard work, today’s emphasis has become more managerial, framed within the surface logic of business development services for enterprise support in terms of ‘human resource development’ and ‘skilling’, and within which advice provision increasingly plays a key role. Entrepreneurship is seen as a commodifiable entity, structured by ‘technical training’ and ‘capacity building’ programmes. This transformation, rather than being disruptive to socioeconomic inequality, in fact upholds and normalises hegemonic economic practices, as observed by Irani concerning the failure of misleadingly named ‘hackathons’ in India (2015).¹⁹ As Irani (2019) has argued, ‘the figure of the entrepreneur has been a dynamic tool used by policy and industry elites to legitimise liberalisation and explain how development ought to proceed in shifting political economies’. While standard accounts of entrepreneurship may highlight creativity and disruption, here we find that entrepreneurship advice helps to normalise rather than challenge hegemonic economic practices.

Second, we can identify two potentially significant aspects of financialization taking shape in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The first is the circling of regional/international venture capital in the startup scene that is starting to look for ways to secure returns from a new interest in tech-

¹⁸ Louis Hyman goes so far as to argue that consulting firms like McKinsey (and the business advice they formulated) structured precarity in the contemporary American economy, including the use of temporary labour (through ‘temping’ agencies), which resulted in the ‘un-making’ of American work (Hyman 2018).

¹⁹ Here, hackers who perceived themselves to be innovative - ‘disruptors’, creators, path-breakers, and change makers, see their labour commodified and reproducing extractive forms of work.

enabled services in the health, finance, education and agricultural sectors. The second is the effort by the banks to extend their lending to previously unreached and often remote low-income borrowers, through new forms of sub-contracted NGO intermediaries. This can be understood in the context of new financialized alignments between aid and commerce, in which advice may also be playing critical roles in changing arrangements around credit provision in which increasing risk of business ‘failure’ and indebtedness for poor borrowers is both humanized and personalised (i.e. ‘they failed because they did not follow our advice’).²⁰ As with a new managerial emphasis for entrepreneurs, advice seems to ensure smooth flows of capital, requiring managers rather than disruptors.

Third, there are both continuities and disjuncture in terms of development ideas and practices. Today’s discourse of entrepreneurship reinvigorates earlier highly individualised assumptions about entrepreneurs as ‘change agents’ that were found in the modernization theories of the 1960s and 1970s, but subsequently challenged by more structurally-informed accounts of poverty and economic change. There is a repackaging of old ideas as well as new ones. Furthermore, the shift to market-driven development now increasingly reframes a key purpose of ‘aid’ as assisting in the production of a ‘de-risked’ investment environment for capitalist expansion. There is both a declining volume of aid to these countries (‘de-aidification’) and a change in its purpose, towards ‘aid as finance’. The centrality of the private sector as the driver of development is associated with a gradual marketisation of business advice taking place in South Asia – such that livelihood entrepreneurship training, once provided by the state and various NGOs to aspirant entrepreneurs, is no longer necessarily given free of charge (Huang 2017).

Finally, it is important to recognise the potential importance of advice as a productive tool that can be used to inform, empower and build productive social relationships. We conclude with some observations on the limitations of the advice being offered, and offer ideas about how advice might be made more effective. Criticisms of advice include lack of relevance to needs, an instructional tone that implies control over what should be co-produced solutions to problems, and preconceived or ‘off the shelf’ generalised content that decontextualises the challenges faced by those who try to start enterprises. There is a need for advice to be based on less prescriptive assumptions, and maintained through enduring relationships rather than one-off encounters. For advice to work effectively, as for example in the form of mentoring, a problem centred, communicative approach that is sensitive to context will be required - in which needs and support are aligned.

²⁰ Another potentially important area of financialization/advice that we have not explored is risk insurance for farmers (with provision linked to agribusiness/banking).

Conflict of interest

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Government/public sector	Private sector/for-profits	NGOs, NPOs, philanth, donors
<i>World of the 'needs economy' / welfare (advisees primarily rural, poor, female)</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SME Foundation - BSCIC (cottage industries) - Bangladesh Bank 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - CSR initiatives (eg H&M Fdn) - MIDAS Financing Ltd - Standard Chartered Bank - Grameen Phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - BRAC Skills Development - TMSS - IDE - JICA, SDC, Sida - Unicef
<i>World of entrepreneurship, start-ups, venture capital (advisees primarily urban, middle/upper class, male)</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ICT Division - Startup Bangladesh Ltd - iDEA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lightcastle (consultants) - BRAC Bank - Turtle Ventures - IKEA Foundation - MyAsia VC - Anchorless Bangladesh VC - Bangladesh Angels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - BRAC Social Innovation Lab - NGOs w/ paid-for business services - BVC Ltd (Daffodil University) - BFP-B (DFID, now ended) - B'Yeah (link w/YBI)

Figure 1: Simplified sketch of the Bangladesh advice ecosystem by main categories of actor

Government/public sector	Private sector/for-profits	NGOs, NPOs, philanth, donors
<i>World of the 'needs economy' / welfare (advisees primarily rural, poor, female)</i>		

-Ministry of Industry and Commerce		
-Colombo Municipal Council	- CSR initiatives	- Oxfam
-District/Divisional Secretariat	-NEDA	- USAID
- ME Foundation	-SLBDC	-GIZ
- National Youth Services NYSC	- Standard Chartered Bank	- IDE
- Grama Shakhti	- Lanka Social Ventures	- JICA, SDC
	- Social Enterprise Lanka	- Unicef
		-ACTED
<i>World of entrepreneurship, start-ups, venture capital (advisees primarily urban, middle/upper class, male)</i>		

- ICT Ministry	-OMEK Investment Pvt	- NGOs w/ paid-for business services
- Sri Lanka Export Development Board		- United Nations ESCAP
- MoraVentures		
- Enterprise Sri Lanka	-Argent Capital Pvt	- British Council
	-Chelina Capital	- WUSC - EUMC
	-Dillotra Capital	- Government of Canada
	-Lanka Impact Investment Network (LIIN)	

Figure 2: Simplified sketch of the Sri Lankan advice ecosystem by main categories of actor