1.6. RURAL DEVELOPMENT & LIVELIHOOD CHANGES

Modern Welfare and Traditions of Reciprocity: Parahita Organizations and Emergent Ecologies of Redistribution

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Abstract

Current dialogues on social protection typically emphasize centralized, institutionalized redistributive practice, focusing on social contracts between individuals and the State (DSW, 2015; Infante Villarroel, 2015). However, recent research demonstrates the high prevalence, and considerable redistributive practice of localized, community based organizations, typically organized around parahita-inspired principles (Griffiths, 2017a; McCarthy, 2016a). Not only are such organizations associated with lower degrees of inequality, and positive changes in terms of household resilience (Griffiths, 2017b), but they also represent a rich source of operational capacity for social welfare at community level (Mangshan, 2017), suggesting that the discourse around welfare systems should include proposals for co-operative approaches for welfare. This paper reports on the findings of a three year action research project conducted in Myaung Township, Sagaing Region, where 40 village-based parahita organizations undertook more traditional, self-funded welfare, as well as distributing a newer, individualized welfare instrument-the so-called '1000 day grant' monthly cash payment to pregnant mothers and young children. Whilst focusing on the processes of welfare provision, this research explores the operational nature of parahita organizations, and reports on the impact of this co-operative approach to welfare, both in terms of changes in socio-economic status, and operational challenges. This presents a critical alternative to centrally institutionalized welfare approaches by co-operating with pre-existing community organizations who have developed strong practices of redistribution, exhibiting high degrees of 'horizontal' social contracts.
Keywords: reciprocity, social protection, welfare, redistribution

Rising Rural Precarity and the Need for Social Welfare

> Once rural economies break up and money […] becomes the dominant means of exchange, societies have to make some collective provision in cash and kind unless they are prepared to let the weakest literally go to the wall (Timmins, 2001, p. 120).

Perhaps with exception of some programmes in Africa, social welfare programmes have, historically, emerged in the context of socio-economic change and increased urbanization/industrialization (Devereux, Roelen, & Ulrichs, 2015; Midgley, 1986). Broader definitions of welfare have

encompassed health, education, housing, unemployment benefits, social insurance, legal protection and child protection (Timmins, 2001). Much of the focus of historical study has been on State-led welfare programmes (Handler, 1990; Trattner, 2007), with less focus on 'emergent ecologies' of welfare typified by grassroots movements of solidarity (Bartkowski & Regis, 2003; Smith, 2014; Ungar, 2012). However, three factors suggest the need for a renewed focus on emergent ecologies of redistribution: firstly, the political and economic costs of the welfare state have resulted in a critique, and in many cases a rolling back (or reform) of welfare regimes (Abrahamson, 2012; Atkinson, 1999; Vis, Van Kersbergen, & Hylands, 2011). Secondly, the assumptions underpinning welfare models appear increasingly unsound: for example, modes of employment based mainly on formal sector employment; aspirations to full employment, and sustained political consensus supporting redistribution (Ferguson, 2015). Added to this, thirdly, are the effect of increased rates of migration, both regionally and trans-regionally, on notions of eligibility and qualification for welfare (as evidenced by, for example, discussions around post-Brexit arrangements for UK-based EU nationals and eligibility or otherwise for State welfare) (Bommes & Geddes, 2003; Hunger, 2000; Portes, 2016). The increased awareness of precarity, and precarious labor, as a condition which characterized by

> Insecure and uncertain waged work….the decline or elimination of social safety nets and entitlements...rising consumer prices because of inflation, and the gradual elimination of subsistence agriculture (Arnold, 2013, p. 468).

However, precarity has been applied mainly to urban conditions, with less attention paid to rural contexts, where the steady decline of agricultural livelihoods, cycles of out-migration and increased exposure to both meteorological and economic shocks have in many countries profoundly eroded the rural economy (Haggblade, Hazell, & Reardon, 2010; Rigg, 2004, 2005). Accepting a definition of precarity as based on uncertainty, the absence of safety nets, and the decline in subsistence agriculture, precarity can be usefully applied to the rural context (Berckmoes & White, 2014; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2012). In Myanmar, where 70% of Myanmar's population live in places classified as 'rural' (Department of Population, 2015), recent studies illustrate the nature of rural precarity. Respondents in a recent large-scale, national survey of rural communities identified issues such as climate change, market fluctuations and youth unemployment as key drivers of rising poverty (Griffiths, 2015). A triad of declining yields, increased costs (both for living costs and livelihood inputs) and increased risk, against an absence of risk-mitigating measures, results in agriculture which is increasingly debt-driven (Griffiths, 2017f). Nearly one-third of rural households reported declining incomes over the previous 12 months (Griffiths, 2017e), with a third reporting increasing indebtedness, with household debt consuming between 12% and 14% of household income (Griffiths, 2016c). The non-viability of rural livelihoods is strongly associated with increased levels of out-migration, where one in five rural households have at least one member who has migrated (Ito & Griffiths, 2016). The absence of safety nets to mitigate for livelihood shocks, health crises and increased demands for out-of-pocket payments for public services such as education result in substantial erosion of economic capital in rural households: without safety nets, most households turn to borrowing, often at high interest and with high risk of asset forfeiture in the case of non-repayment. Fully 12% of rural households in a large (10,000 household national survey) reported borrowing in the previous12 months to meet food shortages (Griffiths, 2016d), with nearly half of

these requiring interest rates over 5%. Expenditure on healthcare and education in rural households accounts for nearly a third of rural expenditure. Despite obvious high levels of need, less than 25% of rural households reported ever having received social assistance from a government-led or social insurance programme (Griffiths, 2015). A recent review of State-led social protection noted that

> the lack of adequate formal social assistance mechanisms suggest that many households in the informal economy, in rural areas, disaster prone areas, and in the ethnic minority areas are at high risk of falling into poverty" (Nishino & Koehler, 2011, p. 9)

Despite recent efforts to develop and implement a National Social Protection Strategy (DSW, 2015), implementation remains patchy due to budgetary constraints, limited institutional capacity for delivery (Schjoedt, 2014) and ongoing issues of political legitimacy (Mangshan, 2017). Funding remains a significant issue: despite recent attempts at tax reform, Myanmar has a low tax base (3.7% to GDP) (Aye Thida Kyaw, 2012) and more recent efforts to increase citizen-derived tax revenues have to date been modest (McCarthy, 2016b). The result is, at best, a patchy State presence with regard to welfare, with little evidence of expectations of provision on the State (McCarthy, 2016c). Thus, a picture of rural precarity emerges as a confluence of declining viability, increased exposure to hazards and shocks, and limited options and resources with which to mitigate risk (essentially, limited options to build one's own resilience). Faced with this increasing precarity, and in a context of increasing rural and urban transformation, what is the response of rural communities in Myanmar? This paper looks principally at the emergent processes and practices of self-organized welfare groups in rural communities in Myanmar (as opposed to externally organized 'CBOs' established by some outside actors). A brief methodology is presented here, followed by an analysis of the data in the light of relevant theoretical frameworks, such as Ferguson's concept of redistribution and Judith Butler's work on precarity and performativity.

Researching Community Organizations: Brief Methodology

The widespread presence of community social organizations in rural Myanmar has been demonstrated in several large-scale surveys (M Griffiths, 2016c, 2016). This paper pincipally draws on data from a longitudinal study of the practices of community social organizations in 40 villages in three Townships in Sagaing Region, central Myanmar, and in-depth interviews with leaders and members of 10 of these organizations. This area, and the communities, were purposively selected on the basis that they had a 'story to tell' with regard to village organizations. This area of Myanmar is known to be predominantly Buddhist, made up mostly of people of Bamar ethnicity, and to have a strong tradition of local organizations. The villages selected have previously participated in action research processes around the development of community organizations, and the author has visited each community several times previously. Each community involved was requested to assemble key persons from the community social organization. The interviews were conducted in May and October 2017, over two periods of three days, with the interview process typically lasting 2-3 hours per community. Interviews were conducted in Burmese language, with the lead researcher (Dr. Mike Griffiths) conducting a group interview with office holders of the community organization (such as chairperson, treasurer) and village elders, and a female research assistant (Mya Thida Soe) conducting interviews with group members, most of whom were female.

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide aimed at eliciting narratives on five main topics:

1. The triggers and processes formation of community organizations
2. The activities and member participation in community organizations
3. The essence of community organizations-specifically, what motivates people to give time and money?
4. The benefits and challenges of community organizations
5. The future of community organizations-threats, opportunities

In total, 20 interviews were conducted in 10 communities, resulting in over 300 pages of transcribed text. Analysis was conducted on the Burmese transcripts, with translation of key findings and text into English.

Responses: Self-reliance and Self-organized Responses

Whilst the nature and resilience of the 'moral economy' is much disputed, the presence of redistributive welfare in various forms is widespread (Ferguson, 2015; Scott, 1976):

> few village studies of Southeast Asia fail to remark on the informal social controls which act to provide for the minimal needs of the village poor"(Scott, 1976, p. 41)

Recent rural surveys in Myanmar have demonstrated the widespread presence of locally-derived community welfare organizations, as distinct from organizations established for religious, administrative or development purposes, or organizations established by external political or humanitarian agencies (Griffiths, 2016b). The emergence of community organizations was described as a confluence of factors: the recognition of need-particularly to provide a more organized form of support for critical social needs such as funeral costs and emergency health costs; the presence of existing, but relatively informal 'norms of reciprocity' which had hitherto been mobilized to provide assistance, albeit on a limited basis; and the perception that previous restrictions on non-State organizations had been relaxed. Whilst a few organizations existed in some form before 2012, the majority indicated their formation after that year-which was the first year of the non-military government of President U Thein Sein. However, a notable absence, in all the narratives of group formation, is reference to the State, or to expectations that the State would provide any assistance. Instead, the narratives describe processes of self-organization to provide welfare (as opposed to forms of solidarity to demand State assistance). This is similar to findings by McCarthy, who noted a

> lack of popular reliance and confidence in state institutions [...] In these contexts provision of 'supplementary' support from government officials is often seen as a welcome but unexpected complement to assistance from the community (McCarthy, 2016c, p. 4)

By contrast

> collective efforts for localized, self-organized collection and redistribution of welfare funds appear to have grown: recent studies in two areas of central Myanmar contrast the level of tax paid as a percentage of household income (around 4%) with the amount of income spent on voluntary donations (8.5%). (McCarthy, 2016b, pp. 6-7)

Thus, the 'performative assembly', to borrow Judith Butler's term (Butler, 2015) is in this case directed towards the claiming not of a physical space from which to articulate claims, but a moral and economic space whereby claims are considered on the basis of locally derived needs, resources and principles. What is of interest is, firstly, the moral/economic space which appears to have been claimed by community organizations; secondly, the sources of legitimacy for such organizations; and thirdly, the nature of the 'performativity' which sustains them.

When the activities of the organizations are analyzed, they to some extent are more sophisticated, codified and formalized implementation of activities previously undertaken either under the guidance of the village abbot, the *Kalatha Kaungsaung* (village youth organization) or the village headman, and often incorporating established traditions of reciprocity (such as collective action for funerals). Hence, the 'space' occupied by the organizations studied here is located between the formal administrative bodies at local level, local religious institutions, and agents of village traditions of reciprocity; and to some extent, by appropriating and formalizing some of the roles previously undertaken by these three institutions, the community organizations establish certain claims on traditions and protective roles. For this, some source of legitimacy is required, and in most cases, it is the concept of parahita which provides it.

The dominant narrative in terms of self-identification is that of 'parahita': a Pali term describing an attitude of altruism, where a person or organization works selflessly for the benefit of others (Ashin Sandar Thika, 2014). The 'character' of parahita organizations is expressed in the names of the organizations, which are selected to illustrate a particular virtue (Table 1) and which thus frame the identity of the parahita organization in terms of virtuous action. The utility of parahita as an organizing concept is threefold: firstly, appealing to parahita allows the organizations to create and occupy a social space located between formal administration, religious institutions and community traditions of reciprocity. Parahita functions as a boundary object to legitimize the supplanting of some of these roles by a new organization. As a broad ethical concept with religious connotations, parahita is still able to appeal to religious beliefs and traditions, and purport to represent continuity rather than disruption, and thus the organizations can be seen to complement, rather than threaten, existing institutions, structures and traditions.

Table 1: Names and year of establishment of 12 community organizations in Sagaing Region

Township	Community type	Organization name	Meaning of name[3]	Year formed
Myaung	Large village cluster	Metta Shin	Benevolent one	2014
Myaung	Medium size village	Metta Shin	Benevolent one	2012
Myaung	Large village	Phyu Sin Parami	Pure virtue	2012
Chaung Oo	Medium size village	Tawara Metta	Eternal benevolence	2013
Chaung Oo	Small, remote village	Mudita	Altruistic joy	2013
Monywa	Larger village nearer to town	Myat Su Mon	Noble wish	2011
Myaung	Large village	Aung Sedanar Shin	Great charitiable one	2015
Myaung	Large village	Zeya Thukha	Triumphant happiness	2015
Myaung	Urban quarter	Karuna Shin	Charitable one	2015
Myaung	Urban Quarter	Thit Kwa	Orchid	2016
Myaung	Urban Quarter	Ayearwaddy	(name of the main river, signifying life and abundance)	2017
Myaung	Urban Quarter	Phyu Sin Metta	Pure benevolence	2015

Secondly, parahita as a concept descriptive of virtuous activity provides a motivating and validating framework by which groups can appeal for contributions of time and money. This links to a wider 'performative' element of the organizations, whereby visible, public participation is a critical element of group function (expressed through various actions, such as donation drives, organizational t-shirts, collective efforts to repair roads). Given the significant time (and to some extent financial demands) of group membership, a principle which extends beyond group solidarity is required-meaning that to establish and maintain the level of commitment seen in the groups, there needs to be a motivation other that simply that 'One day I'll benefit from this'. As Bourdieu puts it: "what are the social conditions of possible sites in which virtue pays, in which there is an interest in disinterest?" (Grenfell, 2014, p. 165) Not only does parahita act as a framework for disinterested altruism, the performative element, by also linking to other notions of performativity associated with religious virtue (such as the Buddhist practice of *dana*) also provides ongoing legitimization for the 'ritualization' of a social action (Turner, 1975). The repeated and visible action (the performance) is a critical element, then, in sustaining legitimacy:

> How do we encourage people to get involved? We demonstrate, by doing the work, the attractiveness of parahita. We do it practically (Parahita group leader, Myaung Township)

> Social welfare organization stands for doing good things for the benefit of the public. We do not intent it for personal or political party. Therefore, public spirit is always alive in our hearts. We will carry out social work with that spirit. (Parahita group member, Myaung Township)

[3] Translations taken from Myanmar-English Dictionary (2008) Myanmar Language Commission, Ministry of Education and Dr. U Nyanawara, Myanmar-English Encyclopedic Dictionary of Buddhist terms (2015)

Thirdly, parahita as an organizing concept serves, in a subtle way, to frame activities in a form of collective politics which is separate from State or political party-influenced bodies. Most organizations self-organize with a clear membership and organizational structure, which is, in theory, designed to transcend existing 'party' structures within the community. This does mean that, at its heart, parahita organizations, and their redistributive process, represent a separate political strand; most groups very adamantly pointed this out, and described measures they would take to prevent what they described as 'political interference'.

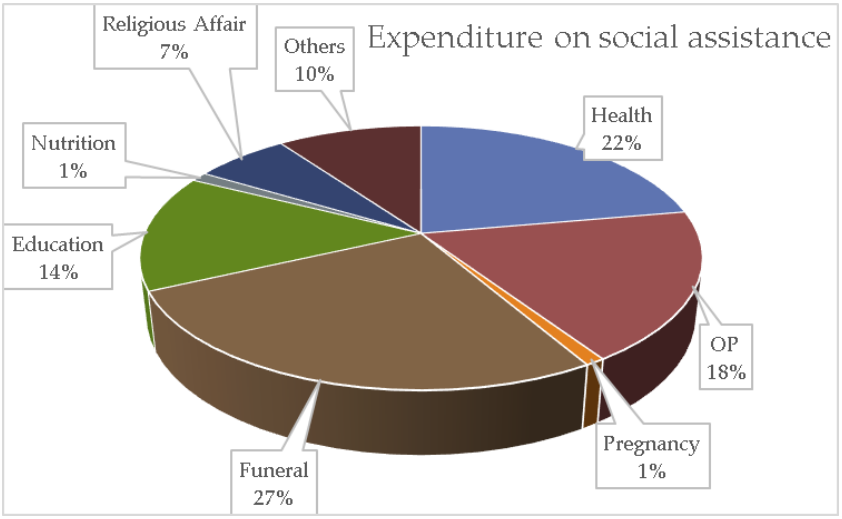
What is Being Redistributed?

Previous surveys have estimated the redistributive capacity of community organizations at around $2,500 per annum for a village of 100 households (Thu, 2013), and the survey of 40 organizations in Sagaing Region demonstrated similar capacity, with the majority of redistribution taking the form of grant assistance for funerals, emergency healthcare and education (Griffiths, 2017c). Funds are derived from three sources: membership fees, group fundraising activities and micro-finance loan programmes handled by the organization. In many cases, one of the key benefits of group membership is access to micro-finance; this tends to mean that the income from micro-finance derives from interest on loans taken by slightly wealthier households, in a form of 'virtuous borrowing'. Some organizations also contribute services (such as catering) to weddings and donation festivals, in the expectation of a donation to the organization. The net effect is that organizations would typically raise and redistribute an amount equivalent to around 0.5% of the total community income. Whilst this sounds modest, this contrasts with the current social welfare allocation in the national budget of around 0.3% of overall government spending (New Light of Myanmar, 2017)

Data from 40 organizations showed that over a 12 month period, community organizations had, on average, delivered cash grants to over 40 beneficiaries, mostly for emergency healthcare, support to older persons (OP), education and funeral assistance (see Figure 2). The typical value of cash assistance was 31,000 kyats-with higher levels noted for healthcare and funeral assistance.

Additionally, these 40 organizations had participated in a pilot programme to deliver a standardized cash-based social assistance, known as the '1000 day grant', paid on a monthly basis to pregnant women and children under 2 years of age (Griffiths, 2016a). Whereas other pilot projects paid the grant through midwives, or administrative officials, in this area the grant process was managed by the community organizations themselves, resulting in high levels of localized ownership of the wider issue of maternal and child nutrition, and a highly cost-effective delivery process which enabled localized problem-solving and conflict resolution (Griffiths, 2016a).

Figure 2: Expenditure on social assistance by 40 villages over a 12 month period



Data from large-scale rural household surveys also demonstrates a significant correlation between the presence of community social organizations and lower levels of inequality linked to gender, disability and poverty (Griffiths, 2017b), which suggests either that the emergence of community organizations is more likely in communities with lower levels of inequalities, or that the redistributive effects, particularly aimed at providing a safety net, have some effect in terms of preventing catastrophic consequences of shocks. Given the known negative impact on household economy of catastrophic health events (Lwin, Sillabutra, & Kongsin, 2011), the frequent testimony of the efficacy of alternatives, albeit modest ones, to high-interest, high-risk borrowing in the face of acute illness or death seems to be the most likely mechanism by which community welfare exerts beneficial effects.

A more critical questions arises over the politics of distribution: in particular, who controls the distribution, and who determines eligibility? This then posits potential limits to localized welfare, where communities

> Valorize nearness as a condition for encountering and knowing the other, and so tend to figure ethical relations as binding upon those whose faces we can see, whose names we can pronounce, whom we can already recognize, whose forms and faces are familiar (Butler, 2015, p. 100)

In a localized ethical framework, where the redistribution is of the resources of visible neighbors, what conditions determine eligibility-or in Ferguson's terms, who can make a 'distributive claim' and on what basis? (Ferguson, 2015). Beyond the expected moral strictures (which, for example, would regulate distributive claims based on the claimant's economic status (so some are too rich to qualify) or the ability to effectively use the assistance, other criteria appear to underpin the claims. Firstly, geography: whilst a few organizations described activities where they provided relief to nearby communities affected by floods, the overwhelming focus was local-at times also excluded those whose membership of the community was temporary (such as seasonal laborers). Secondly, although the ethnic and religious homogeneous nature of the communities studied (almost all reported themselves to constitute entirely of Burmese, Buddhist residents) did not allow for significant analysis of inclusion or exclusion based on race or religion, the general trend of practices amongst

the parahita organizations assumed adherence to a Burmese/Buddhist identity. This does not mean that non-Buddhists or non-Burmans are purposefully excluded from claims-but on the other hand a normative framework does exists which informs the modus operandi of the organizations. Thirdly, in terms of types of benefit and beneficiaries, a mix of visible need and performative virtue leads to a higher level of emphasis on care for the elderly and funeral assistance-where collective participation is a critical element of demonstrating the moral character of the community itself:

> Now we can do funerals properly with our parahita organization, we have no need lose face in front of other (villages) (Group leader, Chaung Oo Township)

This points to a wider scope of community based welfare: beyond the provision of a rudimentary safety net for the most vulnerable, the practice and performance of parahita is part of the wider demonstration of community 'worthiness', which is linked to a higher degree of perceived eligibility for State-funded projects (McCarthy, 2017; Walker, 2012)

> many government grants and rural development schemes explicitly stated in project guidelines or in workshops with prospective communities that villages willing to contribute funds or labor "voluntarily" [are] favored over communities unwilling to make these contributions. [...] This criterion allowed government funds to "go further" and have a wider impact […] Communities that demonstrate a track-record of 'self-reliance' initiatives and a willingness to co-contribute to local improvement initiatives financially or in the form of 'volunteer' labor are thus justifiably favored in selection for these [development] schemes. (McCarthy, 2017, p. 21)

This points, finally, to the wider ecology of localized redistributive politics: that the practice of localized welfare itself then generates a collective 'redistributive claim' on State and non-State donors, not by virtue of demonstrating greater need, but by demonstrating a key quality (unity/organization, in Myanmar စည်းရုံးမှု) which underscores a 'worthiness' of eligibility. Hence, the State's role in the local redistributive ecology is viewed not so much as a guarantor of universal citizen-based rights, but as a potential benefactor which rewards evidence of self-effort.

Conclusion: Economies of Scale for Local Ecologies

The challenge remains, in the face of growing precarity and inequality (Griffiths, 2017d), of how to shape State-led welfare approaches which are neither bound by 'national, cultural, religious or racial belonging' (Butler, 2015, p. 107) nor by the limits of localized ethical obligations, whilst at the same time recognizing the highly significant and valuable resource generated by parahita-inspired modes of redistributive welfare. Such localized ecologies offer potential sources of grassroots legitimacy for the development of more regionalized and nationalized welfare programmes, potentially enabling the establishment of localized social contracts which, in the long term, offer ways to address the chronic lack of trust in central government redistributive capacity which underlies Myanmar's low tax base. In short, as argued by Mangshang (2017), a potentially viable approach to establishing a national social welfare system involves, firstly, building on what is already there (in this case, community led initiatives) and secondly, linking that process to regionally-managed welfare programmes which mobilize local and central resources to meet local needs and priorities. This,

critically, can be a step in establishing a wider, plural ethic of obligation and collective performance, where a wider, more inclusive sense of obligation which is less bounded by locality or familiarity is maintained by interdependence: as Butler puts it:

> We can approach a notion of plurality that is thought together with both performativity and interdependency (Butler, 2015, p. 151)

This requires more interdependent ecologies-which to some extent are also already emergent in wider national movements such as U Kyaw Thu's free funeral organization networks (Wells & Aung, 2014), and perhaps less positively so in national networks for welfare based on ethnicity or religion. In the end, perhaps two options emerge: a centralized approach which defines redistributive claims (and appropriative claims-who is required to pay the tax) largely based on citizenship and biological criteria (women, people with disabilities); or an approach whereby the State partners with more localized systems to develop an outward-expanding, increasingly plural framework of redistribution. This perhaps draws closer to more fluid concepts of community and claiming, whereby in an era of 'perpetual co-existence' (Bauman, 2013, p. 79) there are no final settlements of claims, rather a process by which claims for recognition and entitlement continue to be made and contested. The challenge, of course, is that much of the current basis for claim-making in the Myanmar national context is rooted in notions of plurality designed primarily for effective governance and control (Steinberg, 1997, 2001) rather than for development. In the local ecologies of redistribution studied here, claim-making are weakly framed around local belonging, need, and to some extent a degree of moral worthiness (based on participation in community life), against a background of limited resources. What forms of plural belonging, determined by developmental needs (and not security) can contribute to, and sustain a wider, national ecology of redistribution? To put it in specific terms: what kind of narrative is necessary to actualize a process which may redistribute resources from one locality, ethnic group or social strata to another, in a way which is sustainable economically and politically? Parahita organizations demonstrate the value of a boundary object concept in legitimizing a new moral and economic space; the performative elements which are associated with that continue to validate the redistributive authority of the organization. What concepts may be useful at national level, and what performative processes are needed to maintain redistributive authority? And crucially, having examined existing local ecosystems, how will these local expressions of redistribution interface with national initiatives?

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