

From Ecosystems to Advicescapes: Business, Development and Advice in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

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Abstract

The provision of entrepreneurship advice is a growing feature of private sector development in South Asia but has so far received little attention from researchers. The article explores the theme of business advice in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, drawing on recent ethnographic fieldwork among advice seekers to explore the significance of low-income households of business advice within the unfolding processes of both marketization and state support. It offers a theoretical innovation in the concept of ‘advicescape’, supported by ethnographic materials conveying local-level perspectives and experiences of business advice users. Despite the growth of a complex business support ecosystem in each country, the article finds that many such people are falling through the cracks, in that they face problems accessing advice, find its quality variable and instead rely heavily on informal advice. It ends with reflections on the now dominant business-and-development approach, including a brief observation on improving the inclusivity and effectiveness of entrepreneurship advice.

Keywords

Anthropology and development, Bangladesh, business development, development policy, entrepreneurship, South Asia studies, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

The promotion of ‘private sector development’ and ‘business development services’ has become a key policy theme in South Asia. Newspaper headlines such as ‘Start-up boom in Bangladesh’ (*The Financial Express*, 20 July 2022) and the ‘Importance of promoting entrepreneurship for economic success’ in Sri Lanka (*Sunday Observer*, 21 May 2023) underline the new centrality of entrepreneurship support within economic development policies in South Asia. This also reflects development’s ‘private sector turn’ during the past two decades, with an increased emphasis now given to the role of financial markets as sources of development financing, and to the repurposing of international aid as a tool for ‘de-risking’ capital investment in the Global South. Aid agencies currently spend more than a billion dollars a year on entrepreneurship training (VoxDevLit, 2023).

The promotion of private sector development has generated a diverse set of organizational pathways for the delivery of a range of business development services in the form of finance, technology and know-how, with both international and local dimensions. This article draws on ethnographic research from specific community settings in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in order to explore people’s experiences of *business advice provision*, focusing on small community-level enterprises. We draw on recent work by Brown and De Neve (2023) on the ‘social life of skills’ approach where they argue that insufficient attention is paid to the everyday ways in which skills are ‘acquired, disseminated and used’. Our aim is to link local-level experiences of giving and receiving advice with the wider changes in the landscape of policy and investment, and the ways that advice also reflects an increased penetration of private capital into areas of economic and social life. In so doing, we argue that there remains a substantial gap between expectations and outcomes concerning the provision of business advice, shaped by inequalities rooted within both locally and regionally situated contexts combined with a lack of follow-up and accountability.

The study is based on a wide range of sources and data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews conducted with a range of organizations and advice providers in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, short-term community level ethnographic fieldwork with advice seekers and providers in two main field sites, and a review of academic and agency ‘grey’ literature on entrepreneurship support in South Asia.¹

The anthropological study of advice is a relatively new sub-field. In their research on the role of advice provision within declining European welfare states, James and Koch (2020) identify and describe a ‘pluralistic landscape of advice giving’, in which welfare advice is increasingly provided by a wide range of community groups, trade unions and charities. When it comes to entrepreneurship advice in South Asia, there is a similar diversity of advice-giving actors including government agencies, non-government organizations (NGOs), private consultants, universities and international aid donors, and where advice provision can be formal as well as informal. Here, we contribute a new conceptual framework of ‘advicescapes’ with which to understand this diversity of advice and the way in which works within the communities it is intended to support.

Entrepreneurship, Business Ecosystems and Development

This prioritization of private sector development policies has brought a renewed emphasis on the promotion of *entrepreneurship* as a driver of change. While entrepreneurship has long been a part of economic development policy debates, its relative centrality has waxed and waned across different decades. In the 1960s, during the era of modernization theory, there was a heavy focus on the individual dimensions of entrepreneurship, and on whether the value system and role expectations found in a particular society would favour the emergence of entrepreneurial behaviour such as risk-taking and innovation in the Global South. State support and foreign aid were each seen as having the potential to help overcome perceived barriers to building more entrepreneurial societies. The imposition of structural adjustment programmes that followed during the 1980s reflected the arrival of neoliberal ideology, where it was assumed that simply rolling back the state would be enough to unleash the power of market forces and would by itself create the conditions for an environment in which entrepreneurship-driven growth would flourish.

Disappointment with the results of the ‘naive utopianism’ that characterized this neoliberal market fundamentalism brought a renewed emphasis on enhancing the state’s role in developing capitalist markets, and in finding new ways to promote the private sector in the Global South (Bierschenk & Muñoz, 2021). Following the global financial crisis, the state came to be seen as the supporter of last resort for the financial sector. The state’s role has continued to increase in the promotion of economic development since then, supported by a range of policy discourses around themes such as ‘inclusive growth’, ‘shared prosperity’, ‘making markets work for the poor’ and ‘creating shared value’. These policy narratives also reflect changes in the international aid regime that have been characterized as ‘retoliberalism’, in which aid is being repurposed in support of stimulating capitalism, rather than directed towards poverty reduction or the restructuring of inequalities (Murray & Overton, 2016).

The result is that the figure of the entrepreneur has once again been returned to centre stage. Despite its newer twenty-first-century framing of entrepreneurship around digital technologies, start-ups and rhetoric of ‘disruption’, part of the discourse is reminiscent of earlier visions of the ‘heroic’ entrepreneur, with echoes of McClelland’s (1961) work on ‘achievement orientation’ in Nigeria during the 1950s. This had focused on the psychosocial dimensions of building an entrepreneurial ‘mindset’ that was believed absent, and on overcoming both the financial and cultural obstacles that were thought to hold back innovation; approaches that were criticized both for the nature of their ‘culturalist’ assumptions and for paying insufficient attention to the structural aspects of local and international inequalities.

At the same time, the return of entrepreneurship serves as a policy discourse with powerful effects. In India for example, Irani (2019) suggests that ‘the figure of the entrepreneur has been a dynamic tool used by policy and industry elites to legitimize liberalization and explain how development ought to proceed in shifting political economies’. Indeed, ideas about the value of ‘entrepreneurship’ now carry a very heavy weight of expectation in South Asia. Entrepreneurship is seen as both an

important driver of growth and modernization and a potential solution to problems of poverty and exclusion. At the same time, such individualized representations of change have political effects in that they support a vision of development that upholds the existing order and eschews structural change.

This has resulted in a variety of interventions aimed at *entrepreneurship promotion*, and the emergence of complex entrepreneurial support systems in countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Promotion and support take many forms, including financial, technical and training for high-profile start-ups, more traditional types of support to small and medium enterprises, and services designed to bolster informal sector businesses. Entrepreneurship support is provided by a range of government agencies, NGOs and private consultancy firms, to different kinds of entrepreneurs, from high profile capital intensive start-ups to small informal sector family enterprises. Despite extensive efforts to train entrepreneurs, evidence of its effectiveness ‘is not as strong as it might be’, due in part to the heterogeneity of firms and entrepreneurs (VoxDevLit, 2023).

Entrepreneurship is not only viewed by the government as a means of contributing to economic growth but also as a response to a deepening economic crisis that leads more people to start their own businesses and therefore also as a way of addressing poverty and unemployment, particularly among youth. These latter efforts are primarily focused on what Sanyal (2007) terms the ‘need economy’—the extensive low-productivity sector of the economy managed by state and development agencies. Businesses in the need economy tend to be ‘survivalist’—small and informal, rather than growth-oriented. Here, entrepreneurship and skills training can be understood primarily as part of the bundle of welfare support services provided to low-income people in urban and rural areas. As we will show, this type of entrepreneurship promotion has important local effects in shaping both the lives of individual business owners and the communities of which they form a part.

The more specific role of business advice within these promotion efforts—provided either as part of formal services, or gathered informally from family and community—remains a relatively unexplored theme both in South Asia and elsewhere. There is some critical research literature on business and entrepreneurship promotion (Bierschenk & Muñoz, 2021), and on skills training (Brown & De Neve, 2023). Gender critics of entrepreneurship support also note its ‘false promise’ vis-a-vis the gendered role of advice as part of the neoliberal discourse of individual agency within free markets. This, they argue deflects attention from structural barriers towards an emphasis on women’s perceived shortcomings as entrepreneurs that can be overcome with the right kind of support (Ahl & Morrow, 2021).² This of course contributes to an individualizing view of the development scheme that contributes to the maintenance of the status quo. However, most available work on advice provision tends to be found in the more normative management research literature (such as Mole, 2026). Here, less attention is paid to Global South contexts,³ nor to questions of whether issues of exclusion and inequality are challenged, or reinforced, by advice provision.

The research on advice poses several challenges. It may be embedded in wider skills training and financing arrangements, and difficult to separate from other forms of support. It also takes highly diverse forms. By advice, we are referring to different *relationships, activities and exchanges*. There is formally provided

advice embedded within training, business support services, paid-for advice as part of consultancy arrangements, as well as voluntaristic mentorship programmes or ‘shadowing’ schemes, and informal advice given by family and friends. There may or may not be a demand for advice to be provided. Advice may be purchased or exchanged, and offered on request or imposed on recipients. It could be given on the basis of a one-off exchange, or form part of a regular or long-term interaction or relationship. The *content* of advice might include technical information, contacts and networking as well as forms of emotional support, reassurance and confidence building.

People receiving advice can range from young people undergoing skills training by NGOs in rural areas to would-be entrepreneurs at university looking to launch their own start-up. Advice may be found to be useful and acted upon, or, conversely, found to be largely redundant. Advice is therefore a complex bundle of information, judgement and problem diagnosis created within sets of relationships. With its formal and informal dimensions, and its role in structuring new forms of social relationships, advice lends itself particularly well to anthropological study. Understanding these exchanges and their effects at the local community level is the focus of this article. We ask how advice fits within the promotion, financing and training of entrepreneurs, and we make the case to better understand the effects of how advice is delivered, acquired and utilized. While we recognize the scale and diversity of advice ecosystems in South Asia, our emphasis here is on advice provision at the level of the small-scale household business.

From Ecosystems of Advice to Advicescape

Much of the available research literature around these themes is framed around the ‘entrepreneurial ecosystem’ idea, used as both an analytical and a normative framework for analysing the different actors, policies and services encountered in a given context, and for assessing the extent to which infrastructure, knowledge, market and cultural norms are judged to be supportive (Kelley et al., 2016). Across different settings, and at different times, entrepreneurship ecosystems can be seen to vary in character and scope. They are shaped by the backdrop of historically specific experiences of economic liberalization, as well as much longer histories of gendered, racialized and ethnicized ideas around accumulation through commercial activity in South Asia (see Schuster & Kar, 2021). While different histories and policy environments shape each country’s ecosystem of business advice and finance, all are increasingly subject to the same macro policy environment, which emphasizes income and uses GDP as a barometer of both development and aid-worthiness.

The ecosystem concept is useful because it highlights the ways a wide range of contextual and institutional factors shape the delivery, acquisition and utilization of advice.⁴ For example, it draws attention not only to the role of formal actors and relationships around entrepreneurship advice but also to the importance of its informal dimensions—which is important in the context of South Asia, where most people are employed in the informal sector. It is also widely used in normative

ways, where the entrepreneurship ecosystem idea is used as a frame for analysing a range of actors, policies and services 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 offer 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* compare different countries along these lines. Development agencies engaged in the promotion of women's entrepreneurship use the entrepreneurial ecosystem idea to help them identify and measure 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).

While the ecosystem idea has value, it also has certain limitations. It usefully highlights how all the different elements in a system interact, but it can risk implying that there is a *self-ordering* of individually competing elements—when in fact there are decisions that shape outcomes based on power, along with opportunities for cooperation as well as competition. There may be for example important inconsistencies and contradictions within ecosystems, such as the state's role in offering tax breaks to certain forms of large-scale investor and tech start-up while those in the SME sector face significant tax and administrative burdens. Additionally, a key objective of our study is to understand how social inequalities play a role in determining whether or not a person can gain access to advice, as well as the question of whether advice provision can help achieve more equitable outcomes in terms of how people can access the resources needed to start an enterprise. We therefore seek to pay closer attention to relational dynamics and agree with the call for more 'power-inflected' versions of the ecosystem concept (see Brown, 2022).

To move this agenda forward, we propose the concept of the 'advicescape' as a potentially more productive way to understand how advice increasingly forms part of *the flow of people, things and ideas*. This idea builds on Appadurai's (1991) notion of 'scape' as an expression of global interconnectedness and flow. This makes it possible to explore ethnographically the various actors, relationships and information that animate the provision of advice, taking into account both the material dimensions of global changes as well as the subjectivities that inform identities, decisions and actions. The advicescape concept adds to our analysis because it critically engages with the relational dynamics of advice provision within an ecosystem, adding a crucial dimension to the mapping of business support ecosystems and better illuminating the issues of access and exclusion that emerged from our ethnographic work in two low-income communities. With this in mind, we turn now to the task of providing a brief sketch of the advice ecosystem in each country, showing its history, increasing complexity and growing marketization.

Advicescapes in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

Both countries share long histories of provision of business development services by both government and private agencies, including the strong influence of international donors and external resource flows in the shaping of their support

ecosystems. Both have relatively youthful populations, as well as governments that increasingly prioritize employment creation for young people—not only as desirable policy goals in themselves but also as a response to the risk that high levels of youth unemployment might contribute to political instability, particularly after the shocks endured in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are also major differences, including Bangladesh's relative stability and steady economic progress based on its export-led growth strategy, and Sri Lanka's slow emergence from its long period of civil war and the recent 2022 economic and political crisis that has brought an additional level of increased economic hardship for much of its population.

Bangladesh

While once Bangladesh was seen predominantly as an aid-dependent 'basket case' during the 1970s and 1980s—in the words of one US undersecretary, and later popularized by Henry Kissinger—today it is a country where high levels of economic growth based on an expanding export-oriented garment industry, have been sustained throughout the past two decades.⁵ Foreign aid now plays a far less significant role as exports and remittances have come to dominate the economy (Hossain, 2017; Lewis, 2011). At the same time, as the government has become more authoritarian, a stance enabled in part by the country's continuing high levels of export-led economic growth, and also influenced by East Asia's state-led economic investment models, which the ruling party has looked to for inspiration and as a basis for social control.

Private sector development has long been an important part of domestic development policy and donor support. Advice ecosystems were primarily focused on SMEs and during the 1970s and 1980s were mainly dominated by the government, backed by foreign aid donors, with advice provision forming part of 'business development services', designed to improve the performance, market access and profitability of enterprises (Islam, 2013). The primary aim was seen as the need to overcome a set of obstacles—lack of capital, lack of skills, lack of infrastructure, 'traditional' mindsets—that could enable the country to progress along the teleological scale endorsed by proponents of modernization theory.⁶ Creating and supporting entrepreneurs through state action was viewed as a necessary part of this strategy to drive this modernization. Yet the provision of finance through the public banking system was inefficient, loan defaulting was commonplace, and the actual needs of SMEs on the ground often went unrecognized and unsupported. Alongside these efforts were a range of public sector agencies and services that were more focused on small enterprises informal sector and the need economy, such as the training and loans extended through the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation, established under the Ministry of Industries.

The 1990s brought a renewed emphasis on the power of markets and private development actors. Alongside existing public sector support services to SMEs, NGOs such as Grameen Bank and the Association for Social Advancement (ASA) were focusing on poor rural women as micro-entrepreneurs, providing loans and

training services—including advice—to support household-level ‘income generation’ activities as a poverty reduction strategy. Specialized business support NGOs also emerged such as Micro-Industries Development Assistance and Services (MIDAS) established with financial assistance from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), to support 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 with the rise of the ‘social enterprise’ idea and private sector business-centred solutions to poverty and other development problems have continued to move centre stage.

While the government still plays a central role, today’s entrepreneurship support ecosystem has become more complex. A Small and Medium Enterprise Foundation (SMEF) was established in 2012 as an autonomous not-for-profit agency established under the Ministry of Industries, providing training and financing to small entrepreneurs, and financed by Bangladesh Bank. As part of the government’s ICT policy, centred on a vision of ‘Digital Bangladesh’, there is an emphasis on stimulating the innovation and entrepreneurship environment through focusing on digital start-ups. In 2019 it created Startup Bangladesh Ltd, a government-run venture capital (VC) fund under the ICT Ministry which supports mainly Dhaka-based entrepreneurs. Another recently created body is the Innovation Design and Entrepreneurship Academy (iDEA), with investment in enterprise park-building programmes and other forms of business infrastructure development.⁷

Alongside these changes, a range of venture capital groups, private consultancy firms and start-up support companies are increasingly visible. Framed as ‘ecosystem building’, these provide investment, training and mentorship programmes. Some firms have adjacent foundations that undertake ‘social enterprise’ work in sectors such as ‘telehealth’, agriculture and ‘fintech’. One such consulting firm is LightCastle Partners,⁸ which sees the current vibrancy around entrepreneurship support not only as the result of increased government support in the form of Startup Bangladesh and other investments but also of the country’s increased levels of digitalization and smartphone take-up. This has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the country’s changing demographic (62% of the population is under 35), and an increased number of private sector ‘incubator’ and ‘accelerator’ facilities for start-ups (LightCastle, 2022). Some of the new private universities too have become significant players in supporting student entrepreneurs through start-up competitions, with advice and finance for the winners.

Today’s NGOs also now speak more of the language of business and entrepreneurship-building. For example, BRAC’s Promoting Business Incubation for Small Entrepreneurs (PROMISE) programme focuses on community-level youth skills-building in locations across the country, seeking to create ‘pathways to sustainable enterprise’. Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha (TMSS), an NGO with a long history of rural microcredit provision and local group formation, is now engaged in selling business services to clients and customers, rather than to ‘beneficiaries’. Once funded primarily by development donors, NGOs such as this one may now serve as contracted intermediaries for banks (e.g., HSBC) and international private finance agencies (Triodos Investment Management).⁹ This

reflects an increasingly saturated credit market, with banks contracting NGOs to help them with what they term ‘last mile’ problems. These include supplying credit to harder-to-reach poor and/or remote households who lack the documents, assets, knowledge or skills needed to access formal loans.

Sri Lanka

Much as in Bangladesh, in Sri Lanka foreign donors have been important players in shaping development policy and practice, and continue to be active in supporting entrepreneurship. Agencies such as USAID, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) have in the past formed the capital-backbone for many state and private sector initiatives into SME and micro-business development schemes. The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, established in 1839, could be taken as one of the oldest formal vehicles of business support in Sri Lanka, and as an organization which expressly supports private enterprise in Sri Lanka. It has long been a key implementing agency for advice, training and capacity-building programmes funded by international donors that operate at the business and development nexus.

From the 1990s onwards, INGOs have also been active in running business development programmes in Sri Lanka as well as micro-finance schemes. Private banks, like CitiBank, 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, while the training and capacity-building projects are implemented by UNDP and the National Youth Services Council (NYSC). Systems for advice and training delivery are well established, with programmes led by international donors often run through the government divisions, or replicated in some form elsewhere by the state.

Today’s business support environment in Sri Lanka is similarly diverse and is notable for the sheer number of administrative organizations involved. The Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MIC), the Ministry of Youth, the Ministry of National Development and Youth (MNDPY) and the Ministry of Development Strategies and International Trade—to list just a few—have spawned beneath them a plethora of organizations, departments, authorities, councils and boards, with a vested and competing interest in offering business advice to would-be entrepreneurs. Business development training at the village-level is replicated by different agencies at the 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. Following a Government White Paper, there are efforts to centralize technical training for small business development (Nishantha, 2010). A key 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 delivered almost exclusively through women’s groups. The proliferation of formal access

points for advice—departments, centres, programmes and organizations—serves to direct would-be entrepreneurs toward commercial sources of finance (Kadirgama, 2017; Kapadia, 2013; Wedagadera, 2020).

The idea of ‘social enterprise’ has also gained popularity in Sri Lanka, and private sector business-centred solutions to poverty and other development problems have moved centre stage as they have in Bangladesh. Lanka Social Ventures (LSV) has a broad mission statement: ‘Supporting Entrepreneurship and Innovation for Social Change’ and find partnerships with international organizations such as Oxfam, the British Council and the World University Service of Canada, as well as with local organizations sharing similar agendas such as the National Enterprise Development Authority (NEDA), Lanka Impact Investment Network (LIIN), and Social Enterprise Lanka. The latter coordinates training programmes 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’.

Universities have, in a limited way, also become sites of advice transfer in Sri Lanka. Support for organizations and initiatives to foster entrepreneurship through tech start-up competitions in national university spaces have become common in recent years.¹⁰ In linking up university students with the business sector a key advisor is employed as an ‘entrepreneur in residence’.

Sri Lanka’s ecosystem of advice is comprised of overlapping and interwoven constituent parts. 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 risk of private initiatives seeking to create new SME owners through credit, particularly following the 2004 tsunami, has brought their own set of problems; leading to high rates of indebtedness, suicide and protests of microfinance, which remains strongly linked with entrepreneurship finance for rural communities (Wedagadera, 2020), as well as with low-income urban neighbourhoods. 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.

There is also 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, as mentioned, and 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.

In Sri Lanka, the popularity of business development schemes suggests the potential for entrepreneurship programmes to be *politically* efficacious spectacles.

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’, provide an opportunity for university graduates to be employed in 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 having much or any practical business experience.

Drawing together these two highly selective historical overviews of the entrepreneurship ecosystems in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, we can draw two main conclusions. First, these multi-actor ecosystems are becoming more complex and marketized. Second, there is an increasing focus on larger businesses and tech start-ups in particular, which limits both the reach and the relevance of business support services, including advice provision, for other types of business owners—including those in low-income urban communities, rural areas and members of minority communities. As we shall see in the next section, our findings suggest a mismatch between the complexity and growing marketization of these national-level advice ecosystems and the needs of low-income households engaged in setting up small businesses.

Access, Exclusion and Utilization

In this section, we present ground-level insights from advice seekers and providers drawn from fieldwork carried out primarily in Seevalipura, a low-income neighbourhood in Colombo, Sri Lanka and in an area of Cox’s Bazaar, in south-eastern Bangladesh.¹¹

Access

We explore how advice issues play out at the community level, mainly from the point of view of small-scale entrepreneurs from low-income households, as they try to navigate highly uncertain advicescapes in which they experience a range of problems. These include dealing with a system that tends to be supply-driven rather than user-focused, a lack of information about what types of advice may be available, a high level of opportunity cost to seeking advice, unequal access to advice, problems combining advice with other forms of support such as credit, difficulties accessing advice that was appropriate to their needs, issues of social stigma and discouragement from family and community, and finally, the importance (and necessity) of informal advice seeking.

The advice ecosystem has the characteristics of being more supply than demanded, which mitigated against the likelihood of responsiveness to users. In the case of small enterprise development officers in Colombo, systems of incentives operated

that involved targets set for the number of clients they were supposed to deal with. These were seen as unrealistic and somewhat arbitrary by officials, who were in many cases genuinely interested in helping these business owners. The way the system was set up tended to focus attention more on meeting quotas for lending than for advice, and this worked against the formation of deeper and longer term engagements with business owners.

There is a lack of information about the types of advice available. A key challenge for those seeking to start or maintain a small business is that of navigating a complex, patchy and uncertain advice landscape. People tended to have limited knowledge of the complex range of possible sources of advice, from government, NGOs, banks and other private organizations such as consultancies. Advice was sometimes available through training opportunities and mentoring schemes that came with participating in specific programmes, such as BRAC's PROMISE initiative focused on skills training for young people. But it was rarely clearly signposted. One participant in the Sri Lanka workshop, who had started a small herbal tea business, talked about the slow process of needing to build 'advice literacy' and learn about the different agencies and sources of advice that exist to offer support. Men and women were observed to go about this differently, particularly in Bangladesh, where women tended to begin within their known circles of contacts, while men were more proactive in reaching beyond their immediate contacts to try to solve an issue. However, the ability to do so was also intersected by minority status, as we discovered through participants from Dhaka's Bihari population, who were both reluctant to reach out, and in any case lacked access to external advice provision.

Sometimes informal advice in the early stages of building an enterprise makes it possible for a female entrepreneur to overcome initial resistance from household authority figures and access formal NGO training that helps to move a business forward. One entrepreneur in Cox's Bazar, ended up after a struggle taking a short 2–3 day course on social media and technology and then succeeded in opening a Facebook page for her beauty parlour business. This has now become an important marketing tool for her, with over 6K followers. Another woman in Cox's Bazar, who had started a tailoring business, learned of an NGO entrepreneurship training opportunity by chance when she was at the market talking to a 'junior girl from [her] college'. This training, she explained, had helped her to scale up her business and eventually to open a shop in a local shopping mall.

Seeking advice also carries a high level of opportunity cost. It is difficult, for example, for people who are engaged in small 'survival' businesses to create opportunities or find the time to journey across town to visit local government or other advisers. Transport costs were prohibitive, and they might be kept waiting or face delays travelling at busy times. Among Seevalipura small business owners, there was a stated preference for advisers to try to find ways of 'meeting people where they are'. Not only would this improve accessibility, but also improve the quality of advice since it is possible to learn far more about specific needs and the stage of a business cycle if business owners were visited *in situ*, rather than have them come to their office. During the COVID-19 pandemic period, there was some

evidence that more use was made of IT and social media to improve accessibility and this seems likely to continue.

Exclusion

This unequal access to advice is also caused by structural barriers. Women business owners in particular often faced problems starting a business from among family and community, and getting access to business support services more widely. Starting a business outside of the home can also be particularly challenging. An NGO trainer in Cox's Bazar told us, 'The women clients round up to 30% in my class. I think in this context, it is enough. But when women try to establish business in the market, they face many difficulties. Though the situation is changing, they still need to face certain hindrances. Exceptions are beauty parlours'.¹² Paying attention to structural factors is at odds with the way the wider discourse of female entrepreneurship tends to be presented: 'barriers are not recognized as structurally embedded but rather challenges that individuals can overcome if offered appropriate training, guidance and advice that can fuel a "business development" journey' (Ahl & Marlow, 2021, p. 56).

People from minorities also face additional barriers to accessing entrepreneurship advice. In Bangladesh, small business owners from the 'Bihari' minority community in Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, a Dhaka neighbourhood, have extremely limited options for accessing business advice. However, there are a range of small businesses, including guest houses, a games arcade with old video games, auto repair shops, small convenience stores, cigarette stalls, restaurants and food vendors. When asked if they had received any advice or assistance, all interlocutors replied that they had not, but had simply learned what they knew from observing other businesses around them.

A key issue that emerged from the fieldwork was the way advice was usually linked with other elements of business support, particularly credit. These different elements often did not work in harmony with each other. For one of our interlocutors, who had started a bookshop, a lack of appropriate advice at the outset led to the enterprise becoming hindered by high interest-bearing loans, such that regular repayments, coupled with other types of relatively expensive borrowing, began to eat into already limited profit margins.

In Seevalipura, people from the poorest poor areas tended to be reluctant to borrow from banks to start their micro-enterprises. Borrowing from formal lenders was framed as being both too expensive and too administratively burdensome. In the case of small loans for micro-enterprises, people were far more likely to turn to family networks, their religious community, or local informal money lenders, using *chit* and *cheque* systems. Another obstacle to obtaining formal credit for poorer borrowers was the simple lack of collateral with which to secure a loan. While there was an observable push to link advice, support and training to banking, these micro-entrepreneurs aversion to formal banking is a likely reason why many in low-income neighbourhoods became excluded from potentially useful advice and support for business development.

Utilization

Issues around access to credit were also raised by our interlocutors in Cox's Bazar, where we observed NGO provision of business 'incubation' support for young entrepreneurs. Advice was provided alongside skills training, including mentorship by more experienced local business owners, but without credit provision. The training was widely seen as useful, but there was disappointment that there were no loans to apply for. One trainee remarked: 'It helped me to know things I did not know before. Now I know how to behave with customers, and how to run a business. I know everything. But I cannot implement my knowledge without any financial support. Although the trainers claimed to have made it clear there were no loans, many participants seemed to have expected it. Those who did succeed in setting up businesses were those who had managed to gain access to private finance. These were often the older participants and migrant returnees, since they had accumulated some savings and collateral, and it was, therefore, these already better-off trainees who gained the most.

As mentioned earlier, microentrepreneurs found it difficult to access advice that was appropriately matched to their specific needs. Both the nature and the content of advice were highly variable. People often reported that advice was not tailored to the particular needs of a small, fragile business, or that it focused on the wrong things. For one of our interlocutors in Dhaka in the NGO sector, who is working on how to strengthen mentorship services, this problem can be associated with the need to better distinguish between the need for relatively generic 'business expertise' advice, which many entrepreneurs would benefit from, and the more difficult but equally important area of 'domain expertise'. The latter requires a mentor to adopt an 'open mindset' and 'active listening' stance in order to diagnose and assist with specific challenges. This is in line with findings from research elsewhere that suggest a common problem is a relative lack of focus more on developing 'managerial capital' (the capacity to make the right decisions in relation to strategic planning, choosing suitable investments, creating a business plan, adapting to unforeseen change, etc.) alongside providing loans and generic training (Pulido, 2021).

The advicescapes are also subject to wider societal issues of social stigma and many women, particularly in the Bangladesh setting we studied, talked about the discouragement they faced from family and community when they tried to enter business. For example, one such entrepreneur told us 'I started a small beauty parlour business, though initially I got no support from my family for this. I went through so much to start my business. But when I started doing well, and reached a position where I could support my family, those family members who had discouraged me before, then came to support me. They gave me courage and helped me to improve my business'. Talking to women about business advice in both countries lent support to findings on gender and entrepreneurship from other contexts. Advice can play an important factor in helping to address key problems faced by women around a lack of skills, low levels of confidence and weak networks (Ahl & Marlow, 2021).

Unlike the picture painted around the elite business centre and the glossy world of urban start-ups, people's relationship with advice at the level of small-scale community businesses is nevertheless often messy and complicated. In Seevalipura, for

example, the act of receiving advice, or asking for advice was often discouraged; and to have benefitted from advice was in some cases even presented as something to be ashamed of. For many of the micro-entrepreneurs and small business owners we spoke to, making one's *own* way in business and establishing oneself without the support of others seemed to be an important part of how people, at least initially, presented themselves and the qualities of being a businessperson. This point of view was reflected in the Sinhala word *swashakthiya* which was repeated by many small-scale entrepreneurs, which roughly translates into *the strength that comes from oneself*—or more simply, the idea of striving to be self-sufficient.

In both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh we found that there was a high level of reliance on the importance of informal advice from family, friends and community in addition to, and sometimes in place of, formal advice provision from public or private providers. For example, we learned in Cox's Bazar from female entrepreneurs in particular who had initially relied on advice and support from key family members, or school peer group friends, to give them the confidence and the strength to push forward with a business idea that was initially opposed by family or community members. This importance of informal advice is very much in line with calls within Southern urban theory to move beyond narrow views of 'practice' only as formal or professional action and to take account of wider informality and more expansive modes of thinking and acting (Bhan, 2019).

Conclusion

Our aim in this article has been (a) to make a case for the importance, roles and changing provision of entrepreneurship advice as a feature of the business and development agenda, and to suggest the use of the 'advicescape' concept as an analytical tool; (b) to locate the study of entrepreneurship advice within the larger changing institutional landscapes of the provision in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and (c) to provide insights into the ways entrepreneurship advice issues are playing out within specific low-income communities in each country, drawing on qualitative data. This reflects community-level views and experiences among advisers and small business owners who might expect to be served by this system.

The big picture reflects a growing dominance of the business-and-development paradigm, a rising level of complexity among the different actors providing advice, and signs of a steady process of marketization of the advicescape. At the local level, we find a *disconnect* between what is provided and the actual needs of low-income small business owners, who find formal advice difficult to access and of uncertain quality. In response to this, many of our interlocutors find it useful to depend on informal advice from family and community, even though this is no guarantee of its reliability. The value of moving from the standard 'business ecosystem' approach to the idea of the 'advicescape' is because it enables us to better capture aspects of the power relations and the social dimensions that influence peoples' access to, and on occasion exclusion from, entrepreneurship advice services. In taking this approach we aim to build upon Brown and De Neve's (2023) call for more attention

to be paid to ‘the social life of skills’, and to reconceptualize advice in ways that include a bottom-up, demand-led perspective. We also believe that this approach has potential value in analysing contexts beyond those in South Asia.

We also follow Irani’s (2019) approach of studying business and entrepreneurship as ‘practice’, finding echoes of the normalizing ways the figure of the entrepreneur has been used in India to legitimize liberalization, and we note that in both of our study countries, there are also signs that this individualization of development interventions plays a role in the maintenance of the status quo under conditions of growing authoritarianism. But we also draw attention to the fact that there is a high level of support for what can be broadly seen as the ‘business and development agenda’ and therefore its transformative potential. People are keen for their businesses to be successful, and those charged with providing business support services tend to want to support small enterprises more effectively. The current disconnect means that while more attention clearly needs to be paid to the role of structural inequalities that produce and maintain exclusion, there is also scope for improving the helpfulness of advice in ways that are currently not sufficiently present.¹³

It is therefore appropriate to recognize the potential value of advice as a productive tool that can be used to inform, empower and build productive social relationships. Our workshop participants held firm views about how their experiences of entrepreneurship advice could be improved. 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’ generalized content that decontextualized people’s challenges. 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 will be required in which needs and support are aligned.

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Notes

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2. According to a 2018 Asian Development Bank report on supporting women entrepreneurs: ‘some have noted that women around the world tend to be “over-mentored and under-sponsored” meaning that actively facilitating useful connections and opening up networks for new entrepreneurs can have a greater impact than simply sharing experience and advice’.
 3. An exception is the following study cited in VoxDevLit (2023): ‘Karlan et al. (2015) found that in an experiment with small tailors in Ghana, taking up the advice of consultants actually lowered profits on average in the short-term, leading them to stop using the recommended practices and revert back to their prior scale of operations. Firms may then rely on recommendations from trusted friends, or require an initial subsidy to learn through experience’. (p.16)
 4. The term is widely used the context of management of technology and innovation, including ‘industrial ecosystem’, ‘business ecosystem’, ‘digital ecosystem’, ‘IT ecosystem’, and ‘innovation ecosystem’.
 5. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/10/bangladesh-independence-anniversary-basket-case-rising-star/>
 6. Modernization theory was influential during the 1960s and 1970s and saw development as an evolutionary process from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern industrial’ society, and encouraging entrepreneurship was seen as central to building new social and economic practices. Some of this thinking lives on within neoliberal and ‘retroliberal’ policies today (Alami et al., 2021; Murray & Overton, 2016).
 7. Paying attention to advice also highlights the inconsistent ways in which government supports different kinds of enterprises. For example, it receives regular criticism for the tax burden it places on the SME sector in contrast to the generous tax breaks offered to start-ups or to foreign investors. See for example ‘SMEs demand withdrawal of 7% tax deduction at source’, *The Business Standard*, 8 February 2024 (<https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/smes-demand-withdrawal-7-tax-deduction-source-635250>) and ‘Government cuts turnover tax for startups’, *The Financial Express*, 9 June 2022 (<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/government-cuts-turnover-tax-for-startups-1654776077>).
 8. <https://www.lightcastlebd.com>
 9. See for example ‘Encouraging female empowerment and resilience in Bangladesh’, *Triodos Investment Management*, 28 February 2022. <https://www.triodos-im.com/articles/2022/investment-tmf-tfsf---tmss>
 10. For example, *Mora Ventures* is a university-level incubator at the university of Moratuwa, offering 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.
 11. These are based on ethnographic fieldwork in these locations, and supplemented by semi-structured interviews and brief visits to other sites, as well as by material gathered

during two in-country participatory workshops with advice providers and enterprise owners—on 12 June 2023 in Colombo and 6 August 2023 in Dhaka—organized by the research team in conjunction with the research partners.

11. Beauty parlours outside of urban areas may be home or community based, and typically consist of interactions between female-only customers.
12. A practical output from the workshop in Sri Lanka was the generation by participants of a wall chart setting out a set of ‘principles of good advice’, to be translated into local languages and intended to serve as a reference for advisers and an accountability aid for those seeking advice. There are plans follow up to assess its usefulness by returning at a later date to settings where advice is provided.

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