



MARGINALITY: Concepts and their Limitations

IP6 Working Paper No. 4

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dialogue

Collaborating Institution



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The Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South is based on a network of partnerships with research institutions in the South and East, focusing on the analysis and mitigation of syndromes of global change and globalisation. Its sub-group named IP6 focuses on institutional change and livelihood strategies: State policies as well as other regional and international institutions – which are exposed to and embedded in national economies and processes of globalisation and global change – have an impact on local people's livelihood practices and strategies as well as on institutions developed by the people themselves. Otherwise, these institutionally shaped livelihood activities have an impact on livelihood outcomes and the sustainability of resource use. Understanding how the micro- and macro-levels of this institutional context interact is of vital importance for developing sustainable local natural resource management as well as supporting local livelihoods. For an update of IP6 activities see <http://www.nccr-north-south.unibe.ch> (> Individual Projects > IP6)

This IP6 Working Paper Series presents preliminary research emerging from IP6 for discussion and critical comment.

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Cover Photo

Living on the edge of society: Peasants in Far-West Nepal (photo: M. Kollmair)

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1 Introduction

The concept of **marginality** is widely used by the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South researchers while conducting their investigations as a crosscutting issue in the field of inter- and transdisciplinary empirical research. The relevance of this concept especially for JACS South Asia has emerged during the identification of core problems and potentials in the initial JACS South Asia Workshop: "Sustainable Development in Marginal Regions of South Asia" held in Kathmandu in August 2001 (Müller-Böker et al., 2004). As a contribution to the "global overviews", a brainstorming session was also held on the indicators of marginality in February 2003 among the IP6 research group at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich (Geiser, 2003). These first inputs were discussed and refined during the ITC Workshop held in Kyrgyzstan in September 2003. A group exercise was organised to identify the different ideas underlying the "marginality" concepts, and to initiate a further debate within the Joint Areas of Case Studies (JACS) South Asia.

At the same time, it was decided that a discussion paper on the **marginality concept** should be produced that might promote further discussion and deepen understanding among researchers. In this regard, the following paper was prepared. The main objective of this paper is to enhance understanding and common use of the concept in the field of inter- and transdisciplinary scientific research initiated by the IP6 in particular and the NCCR North-South in general. It briefly defines and describes the basic concepts of marginality based on literature review and inputs from the participants at the above mentioned workshops, and attempts to provide some of the key answers to the pertinent questions: **What is marginality and what are marginality indicators?** At the end, a brief conclusion is drawn from the overall understanding of the concept.

2 Marginality

Marginality is generally used to describe and analyse socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access (societal and spatial) to resources, and full participation in social life (Anderson and Larsen, 1998; Brodwin, 2001; Davis, 2003b; Sommers et al., 1999). In other words, marginalised people might be socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded or neglected, and are therefore vulnerable to livelihood change (Brodwin, 2001; Geddes, 1997; Larsen, 2002b; Marcuse, 1996; Müller-Böker et al., 2004; Perlman, 2002; Sommers et al., 1999).

2.1 Definitions

The following common definitions of marginality may be used as a starting point to comprehend and examine the concept of marginality.

Marginality can be defined as “the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic), ... in mind, when one excludes certain domains or phenomena from one’s thinking because they do not correspond to the mainstream philosophy” (International Geographical Union (IGU), 2003:2)

“Socio-economic marginality is a condition of socio-spatial structure and process in which components of society and space in a territorial unit are observed to lag behind an expected level of performance in economic, political and social well being compared with average condition in the territory as a whole” (Sommers et al., 1999:7)

Marginality is primarily defined and described by two major conceptual frameworks, i.e., societal and spatial¹. The **societal** framework focuses on human dimensions such as demography, religion, culture, social structure (e.g., caste/hierarchy/class/ethnicity/gender), economics and politics in connection with access to resources by individuals and groups. In this regard, the emphasis is placed on understanding of the underlying causes of exclusion, inequality, social injustice and spatial segregation of people (Brodwin, 2001; Darden, 1989; Davis, 2003a; Gans, 1996; Hoskins, 1993; Leimgruber, 2004; Massey, 1994; Sommers et al., 1999).

The explanation of the **spatial** dimension of marginality is primarily based on physical location and distance from centres of development, lying at the edge of or poorly inte-

¹ Spatial marginality is also referred as **geographical** or **physical** marginality in the literature (IGU, 2003; Goussal et al., 2003)

grated into system (Larsen, 2002b; Leimgruber, 2004; Müller-Böker et al., 2004; Sommers et al., 1999). With this concept, it is intended to gain insights into the influence of physical locations and distance on the livelihoods of individuals/groups and the space itself.

These definitions clearly indicate that marginality is a **process** that emerges and evolves with time in various types and scales under socio-economical and geo-political environment. Thus, it reinforces and reproduces the state of marginalization to a great extent (Kirkby, 2000). Colonization, apartheid and ethnicity can be taken as examples of situations where one group assumes superior status. In this process, marginalised people are often condemned for making their living in marginal environments despite the fact that they are unlikely to have access to resources needed to overcome restrictions imposed by marginal environments (Kirkby, 2000, Larsen, 2002a).

Marginality as defined by the IGU (2003) is seen to be a **dynamic** concept, since each region has potential to overcome the situation that is perceived to be marginal or unsatisfactory. However, the negative consequences of marginality can even serve as the starting point of innovations and potentials. As Japanese innovation and development after the Second World War has illustrated, marginality can provide even an extra edge to start development (Mizuuchi, 2003, Davis, 2003a). Indeed, the surroundings of Mount Everest, one of the most inaccessible and environmentally harsh regions of Nepal inhabited by an ethnic minority (Sherpa) is now developed into one of most prosperous tourist destinations with much better access to basic infrastructures and services (health care, communications, education and transportation) than most of the other mountainous areas of the country. This illustrates clearly that the scale of investigations is important to understand the complexity of marginality in a given space. Focussing on human needs, attention needs to be paid to the marginality within the spatial and societal dimension of mountains rather than the mountains per se (Müller-Böker et al., 2004:252).

Marginality occurs across human settlements, from the most isolated geographical settlements to the most highly developed metropolitan cities (IGU, 2003; Sommers et al., 1999; Larsen, 2002b; Müller-Böker et al., 2004). However, the type and **scale** of marginality may differ depending upon the physical and social settings under which marginality occurs. For instance, marginality in developed regions is more prevalent in the context of societal (e.g., care services deficit) than spatial (Larsen, 2002b) issues, whereas both spatial and societal marginality are widespread in less developed regions due to the differential access to infrastructure, innovations, technology and communication (Goussal & Lezcano, 2003; Müller-Böker et al., 2004). The type and scale of marginality as stated in the IGU (2003:3) is highly influenced by the changing role of volatile economic, political and social change as well as technology and communication that creates marginality both in developed and less developed areas and countries.

Table 1: Main Components of Marginality Definitions

Component of definition	Conceptualisation
Scale of investigation	Multiple scales; scale dependent
Characteristics	Dynamic process; often negative connotation, potential frequently neglected
Spatial dimension	Remote in physical sense; poor infrastructure
Societal dimension	Outside the mainstream of society; invisibility in official statistics, media and research
Overlapping dimensions	At the edge of systems; exclusion

2.2 Societal Marginality

As indicated earlier, societal marginality is interpreted according to social conditions. Disparities are often a result of exclusion from the 'mainstream'. Here the scale and state of social, economic and political disparities between the marginalised and the mainstream are examined in relation to equitable and legitimate access to resources and decisionmaking processes. So, marginality could be better understood, if the so-called 'mainstream' could be clearly defined. Furthermore, the marginalisation process within marginalised groups should not be neglected (Dain, 2003, Larsen 2002b, Perlman, 2002).

Societal marginality is by and large reflected on the underlying social conditions of people. The conditions are represented by poor livelihood options (lack of resources, skills and opportunities), reduced or restricted participation in public decision-making, less use of public space, lower sense of community and low self-esteem (Brodwin, 2001; Larsen, 2002a). Marginalised people are usually discriminated against, stigmatized, ignored and often suppressed on the basis of race, gender, age, culture, religion, ethnicity, occupation, education and economy by the mainstream (Larsen, 2002b).

As stated earlier, marginality occurs across the globe spatially and socio-economically at different intensities and typology (IGU, 2003), creating various forms of vulnerabilities for marginal regions and people. For developing countries, physical vulnerabilities are more likely to be the main concern as a result of population dynamics, political instability, intensification of agriculture, degradation of land resources, poor access to technologies and slow industrial growth. Moreover, marginality can further be exaggerated by “non-democratic regimes, corrupt officials, dualistic economics, religious fundamentalism, ethno-linguistic tribalism, and sectarianism” (Sommers et al., 1999:21). All these factors could contribute to marginality, and the effects on marginalized areas and people are likely to get worse “as increased globalization leads to bipolarization and segmentation of the national work force” (Sommers et al., 1999:21). Although, technology may help to mitigate some of the spatial marginality, societal factors (age, gender, ethnicity and immigration status) are likely to persist (Mehta, 1995; Kirkby, 2000).

2.3 Spatial Marginality

The dimension of spatial marginality is usually linked to the geographical remoteness of an area from major economic centres (location), and refers to areas that are difficult to reach (access) in the absence of appropriate infrastructure and therefore isolated from mainstream development (Brodwin, 2001; Müller-Böker et al., 2004). According to Leimgruber (2004), a marginal region is defined as an area lying at the edge of a system. Hence, spatial marginality indicates the relative distance from economic and service centres, but regional disparities might persist nationally at different scales regardless of geographical remoteness (Jussila et al., 1999b; Müller-Böker et al., 2004).

The spatial dimension of marginality is a relative concept, where the scale (e.g. from isolated location to national and global level) seems to be the most important factor to consider. On all spatial levels we may find marginalised areas, depending on which level we choose to compare units. Comparing all nations, we may come up with results like 'developing countries' as typical marginal areas. But analysing one of these countries for its own, substantial differences could be observed between the capital and rural areas. Likewise, marginality within the capitals of different countries can also be observed.

Macro-spatial marginality applies to regional disparities in living standards between communities in central locations of economic activity and those in remote areas, or the periphery, with poor resource base (Leimgruber, 2004), where marginality primarily manifests as a result of spatial disadvantages (Larsen, 2002b; Massey, 1994; Sommers et al., 1999). In this case, market forces may play a dominant role as they produce inequalities in competitiveness in terms of locational or physical limitations (Mehta, 1995).

Micro-spatial marginality represents “distressed localities within relatively small territories such as the built-up areas of cities and metropolitan regions” (Sommers et al., 1999:18). This typology is mostly due to social vulnerabilities that are often aggravated by hegemonies associated with the dominant political and socio-cultural order. Here, ethno-cultural distinctions, migration status and economic bipolarizations seem to be prominent vulnerability factors of marginality compared to other factors such as history, age and gender (Davis, 2003a; Sommers et al., 1999). Here spatial marginality is more the result of the social process of marginalisation rather than a precondition.

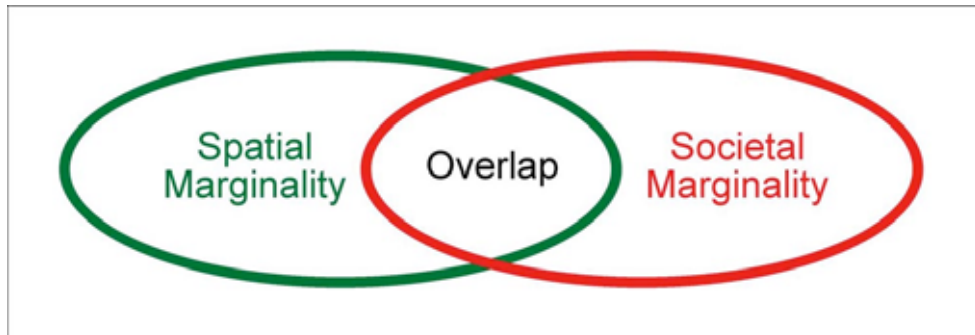
The in situ-spatial marginality refers to “unequal development within very small geographical units” (Sommers et al., 1999:19) where, poor and marginalized households and prosperous households share neighbourhoods and the disparities between them in standards of living are evident. In industrialized countries, such marginalities are consequences of many vulnerability factors such as ethnicity, immigration status and labour segmentation (Larsen, 2002a), whereas in developing countries, “margins are generally a function of class and occupational segmentation of the urban population”

(Sommers et al., 1999:19) that are represented by domestic servants, porters, guards, street paddlers and wage labourers.

2.4 Marginality Overlap

Social as well as spatial marginality occurs everywhere from highly developed, to less developed areas around the globe, and therefore creates an overlap between the two. The border between spatial and societal marginality is blurred as a result of this overlap (see figure 1). In particular, the societal marginality in the context of age, gender, race, ethnicity and social hierarchy is prevalent even in the most geographically isolated locations or those distanced from major economic and service centres. Similarly, marginality exists in the context of urban slums of metropolitan cities (both in developed and less developed regions) where geographical proximity to services might prove irrelevant (Müller-Böker et al., 2004).

Fig. 1: The Marginality Overlap



The overlap between spatial and societal marginality is not only within a specific space and social setting, but also at all scales ranging from individuals to the global community and a particular geographical site to global levels. Thus, prevalence of marginality can be observed among families, communities and countries, ranging from household to nation states/global level.

2.5 Marginality and Vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability originates in work on famine and food security in the early eighties and has gained importance in interdisciplinary research since then (e.g. Chambers & Conway, 1992). It encompasses both, external (exposure) and internal dimensions and stresses the active role of people in developing coping strategies and improving their resilience regarding natural and societal risks (Bohle, 2001).

Marginality is closely related to the vulnerability of both people and environment as “it victimizes location and communities that are characterized by one or more factors of vulnerability” (Sommers et al., 1999:13). The most commonly recognised vulnerability factor appears to be a poor location and scarcity of natural resources (Hurni et al., 2004), and people’s inability to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from daily life

struggles (Kirkby, 2000). However, vulnerability is most evident when spatial and societal marginality overlap.

Physical factors of vulnerability are somehow seen to be less challenging (particularly in industrialised regions/countries) in comparison with social factors of vulnerability with increasing mobility, transportation, communication and other technologies (Larsen, 2002b; Sommers et al., 1999; Müller-Böker et al., 2004). Social factors such as historical background, ethno-cultural characteristics, minority status, immigration status, age, gender, and educational status are emerging as critical factors making communities and places even more vulnerable to marginality (Davis, 2003a; Sommers et al., 1999:14; Mehta, 1995) regardless of spatial and social settings. A growing trend of exclusion and discrimination based on race, residency (e.g., Favela), style of dress, place of origin and gender was (up from 53% in 1969 to 89% in 2001) observed in Brazil (Perlman, 2002).

Some of the social factors of vulnerability such as immigration status and ethnicity are of particular importance to marginality (Sommers et al., 1999). Under the situation of increasing mobility, immigration status is seen to be one of the most insidious factors of vulnerability for marginalization and exploitation worldwide as reported by Sommers et al., (1999:15). Here, immigrants who arrive unofficially seeking (low-waged) employment face a variety of discriminations such as stereotyping, exploitation and even violence as they lack political and legal recourse (Brodwin, 2001; Mizuuchi, 2003).

Gender, age and disability are important components in the vulnerability to marginality both in industrialized and less developed countries. Indeed, gender-inequity is a constant challenge or persistent problem that undeniably affects the employment and income potential of women (Mehta, 1995) and their ability to overcome limitations. In many cases, women suffer from drudgery due to their socially expected roles/need to combine farming activities with and/or professional work with household chores like fetching water, gathering firewood, laundry and caring for children. Clearly, female-headed households with many children are seen to be particularly vulnerable to marginality, as the highest percent of household below poverty in the United States comprise single mothers with children (Sommers et al., 1999:16). Similarly, the elderly and children in Europe normally lack care and caring resources compared to young people (Brodwin, 2001; Larsen, 2002a).

The relationship between age and marginality in developing countries is rather different. The elderly are generally respected, and both old and very young are cared by extended family and community members, even though they are the first to suffer particularly in times of economic and political stress (Jussila et al., 1999b). Nevertheless, the trend in modern Japan indicates that economic forces contribute to isolate the older generation despite cultural values that honour and value elders (Mizuuchi, 2003:5). This trend seems to be evident worldwide for many transitional countries as well as metropolitan cities of developing countries.

2.6 Marginality and Poverty

Marginality and poverty are often used as synonyms as both describe a situation that people want to escape or turn into opportunities. Often measured only by economic indicators (e.g. 1 US\$/day), poverty means lack of or limited access to shelter, food, to clean water, health care, education, jobs, representation and freedom, and living day-by-day with an uncertain future. In another words, poverty is a “state of economic, social and psychological deprivation occurring among people or countries lacking sufficient ownership, control or access to resources to maintain minimal acceptable standards” (UNDP, 2001:10; see also: Coudouel et al., 2004; Gerster, 2000). The reasons behind these constraints or lack of access to resources are examined in detail under the conceptual framework of marginality (Larsen, 2002a; Leimgruber, 2004; Müller-Böker et al., 2004; Sommers et al., 1999), and thus the issue of marginality emerges whenever poverty is investigated and vice versa.

This interpretation of poverty reflects well on the fundamental indicators of marginality, despite conceptual and application differences exist between the two. In fact, marginality primarily deals with the process of marginalization, whereas poverty emphasises more on measuring the situation, in light of inequity (Gerster, 2000).

In many respects, the root causes of poverty such as inequality, vulnerability and exclusion (Dain, 2003; Mizuuchi, 2003; UNDP, 2001) are closely linked with spatial and societal marginality. Dain (2003:22) states that extreme inequality in wages and social exclusion contributes to poverty, particularly where the poor remain in the informal market, traditional sector and at the margin of the modern economic sector, unable to overcome poverty, and adopt the new urban-industrial values of the developed capitalist societies. Here, the likelihood of the poor becoming marginalised seems to be high, not only for the poor from lower social status but also for the poor who belong to the upper classes.

When poverty is understood as a relative concept, the borderline between marginality and poverty becomes blurred, as both concepts analyse the issues in relation to the mainstream from the perspective of inequality in accessing income, goods and services. As one looks at type and scale, the picture becomes much clearer in making the distinction between the two concepts because marginality is not always associated with poverty. For instance, individuals and/or groups might be economically rich and physically as well as psychologically strong, yet they could be socially marginalized based on societal values and norms. Here, wealthy *dalits* (so called untouchables in Hindu society), gay people, gangs, and drug dealers can represent classic examples. They are not poor, yet marginalized. Likewise, poverty analysis is often restricted to absolute terms, whereas marginality may cover a wider spectrum.

3 Marginality Indicators

The indicators listed in Table 2 may provide an overview of both spatial and societal marginality even though they can be challenged. These indicators might help to understand social, economic and political disparities within, among and between individuals, groups, and regions. Each indicator in isolation may not serve alone to provide a sharp picture of marginality, but as a package, this could help to illustrate the overall picture and help to deepen understanding.

The indicators in Table 2 are based on the brainstorming within the IP6-Group (Geiser, 2003) with additional input from the literature (Davis, 2003a; Darden, 1989; Jussila et al., 1999a & b; Larsen, 2002a & b; Leimgruber, 2004; Müller-Böker et al., 2004). Most of these indicative records can be obtained from United Nations (UN) organisations and concerned governments as well as research institutes. However, they could only provide an over-view of marginality (mostly at the national level), and therefore further investigation and analysis for validation within the context of particular regions and communities is required. Specific indicators (like number of people with access to telephones or bank accounts etc.) need be developed for detailed studies, considering the widespread 'invisibility' of marginalised people in official statistics. A more general problem with the identification of indicators is the focus on processes, inherent to the concept of marginality.

Table 2: Suggested Indicators for Marginality

Subject	Indicators
Societal	Child labour; gender inequalities; social exclusion; human rights violations
Infrastructure	Access to clean water; distance to transportation, bank, and communication facilities; energy supply
Health	Life expectancy; infant mortality; under- and malnutrition
Education	Literacy rate, gross enrolment ratio
Political	Participation in elections; corruption index; security status (violence, crime)
Economic	GDP per capita; unemployment rate
Environmental	Environmental pollution; conditions of natural resources
Development Index (existing)	Human Development Index (HDI); Gender Related Development Index (GDI); Human Poverty Index (HPI)

4 Conclusions

Both spatial and societal marginality persist around the globe even though the type and scale of occurrence may differ regardless of physical and social settings. The core challenge for marginal areas and marginalised people lies in poor access to physical and social infrastructures, information, technology and other care services. Furthermore, the vulnerability of marginal regions and people is likely to increase with growing globalization and international competition for trade and development. Thus, it is imperative to address marginality by fully exploring options to reduce social, economic and political disparities among and between marginal regions and people. In this way, marginalised people might be empowered to reverse disadvantages into potentials by improving their livelihood options and bargaining power and promote cooperation, understanding and appreciation of differences, where diversity can serve as an influencing force to overcome marginality.

Rationalising marginality as a process and the notion of overlap, it can enhance understanding of the dynamics of the process and the correlations between spatial and societal marginality. Moreover, it can also contribute to the comprehension of the relationship between marginality and poverty as well as the implications for vulnerability in the context of identifying the root causes.

In conclusion, marginality is an important crosscutting concept in the field of empirical social science research in examining the rationale behind spatial, economic and social disparities among and between regions/countries and individuals/communities in the light of legitimacy, equity and social justice. The concept is even more pivotal to inter- and transdisciplinary research, where multiple causal linkages and relationships need to be investigated and understood to extract meaningful insights for scientific research. It is difficult to generate a concise definition, incorporating all the dimensions of marginality. However, the conceptual framework provided in table 1 might help to provide a deeper understanding of the complex social phenomena and explore alternatives to provide relief from marginality and reduce poverty.

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