



Agricultural land underutilisation in the hills of Nepal: Investigating socio-environmental pathways of change



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ABSTRACT

Why should a parcel of agricultural land be abandoned when there is a scarcity of food? In this paper, we address this question in relation to the hills of Nepal, where agricultural land is being abandoned at an unprecedented rate, despite looming food scarcity. Responding to studies that have highlighted land abandonment trends, we conducted in-depth case studies in two of Nepal's hill districts to understand how land abandonment is taking place, and under what circumstances. Using an interdisciplinary lens and transcending linear models of agrarian change which attribute land abandonment to one or more prominent factors, our study unravels complex, cross-scalar processes, involving the interaction among social forces and environmental factors which lead to land underutilisation. The paper shows that land underutilisation happens through what we term 'socio-environmental pathways', which operate across scales, yet are deeply rooted in local dynamics of agrarian change. These pathways are triggered by, and embroiled within, three wider socio-economic and political dynamics in contemporary Nepal, namely: socio-cultural changes that favour out-migration; evolving economic opportunities that make farming less profitable; and a policy context in which the gravity of the land abandonment challenge goes unrecognised. The framework of 'socio-environmental pathways' applied here also advances a theoretical lens to explain agrarian change in a way that integrates multiple scales and multiple sectors, emphasising a thoroughly empirical approach. Finally, we identify key policy implications of this research on livelihoods and sustainable development.

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1. Introduction

On a fine autumn morning in 2014 in Nalma Village of Lamjung district in the central Nepal Himalayas, a Gurung farmer expressed deep frustration over his family farm business. A father of three sons and two daughters, Mr. Gurung had only his wife and a hired labourer to work on his farm. During the previous six years, he had abandoned over half his farmland. He explained:

"My sons do not want to work on the farm. Two of them have already left for Arab, and the third and the youngest one has just sent his passport and some money to a manpower agency in Kathmandu. The youngest son is anxiously awaiting the visa. He is spending time wandering through the village, playing football, and dancing with friends. The new generation loves going out and none of them wants to stay in the village. I have two daughters who are younger than [my] sons and go to school. I have seven members in the family, but only my wife and I are here to work on the farm. We just cultivate parts of the farm around the house"

Mr. Gurung is not alone in this village of 438 families, and Nalma

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is not the only village in Nepal to have experienced such land underutilisation and abandonment. Evidence indicates that agricultural land is being abandoned in Nepal at an unprecedented rate. Nepal was a food-exporting country until the 1970s, but is now a net food-importing nation (Baral, 2000; Pyakuryal et al., 2010). With only 21 percent of the country's land area being arable, the Himalayan country is facing the spectre of growing food shortages (Hobbs, 2009). Given the scale of the food insecurity challenge facing Nepal, the ways and rate at which the underutilisation of arable land is occurring are particularly troubling. As recent studies show, agricultural land is being abandoned or underutilised while the majority of the population still derives subsistence from agriculture (Adhikari et al., 2016; Malla, 1992; Pain et al., 2014), and where a food security crisis looms due to declining overall availability of food. Arable patches of agricultural land, owned by farmers, are being abandoned. The trend has escalated over the past 15 years or so, when the country experienced a nation-wide Maoist War which led to the political transition and instability (Paudel et al., 2014). Much of the land that is left underutilised in the rural areas, which means that the regional political economy – favouring the accumulation of people of wealth in key centres of power and wealth – is also likely at play. Evidently, land abandonment is not peculiar to Nepal, nor to the contemporary historical era. It has been reported in other national contexts and in other time periods and has, in the past, been attributed to rapid industrial development, an abundance of non-farm opportunities, and the increasing prosperity of the general population (see, for example, Walther, 1986).

As we explain in the rest of the paper, the agrarian change involving land abandonment has resulted from a complex intersection of government policies, the particular agro-ecologies of specific localities in Nepal, emerging cultural norms and preferred lifestyles, the historical contingencies that have arisen from post-conflict transition, and the place of Nepal in the global economy. We offer empirical insights into the dynamics of the land underutilisation and abandonment phenomenon, focussing on the questions of how it happens – i.e. the dynamics of land underutilisation – and why it happens – i.e. the logics of underutilisation. This research presumes that there is both a national story to tell regarding land abandonment and underutilisation in Nepal, and a multitude of local stories that vary across localities. The latter, in aggregate, inform and explain the former and it is these stories, which constitute the evidence and the discussion that follow. Underpinning our approach is a desire to answer an empirical question: why is land either being underutilised or taken out of production when livelihoods in rural areas are so reliant on farming? To answer this question, we take a pathways approach to rural livelihoods taking clues from the work of Leach et al. (2010), but focussing on 'socio-environmental pathways' driving land abandonment or underutilisation, eventually creating or expanding the underutilised land (UUL). This approach has allowed us to take into what account the complex dynamics leading to land underutilisation, rather than assuming that a few clearly identifiable 'drivers' will be sufficient to explain agrarian transformations.

The pathway approach to analysis (Leach et al., 2010) we present here allows the development of a system-wide and integrated understanding of land underutilisation as a development challenge, and then to explore solutions. As elaborated in the next section, this approach emphasises looking at the emergent and evolutionary socio-environmental links across contexts, drivers, processes and outcomes in relation to the issue of land underutilisation. We approach the question empirically through the experience of two community-level case studies from Nepal's middle hill districts of Lamjung and Kavre. We demonstrate complex and site-specific socio-environmental pathways that incentivise – sometimes

necessitate – landowners and tenants to leave their land unused. Such land is locally referred to as *bajho-jamin* or uncultivated/abandoned land, which we define as parcels of private land (both irrigated *khet* and rainfed *bari* land) that were previously cultivated but have been left unused for at least three years. We use the term 'underutilisation' to refer to the process through which lands are left uncultivated.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on the intersections between migration, agrarian change and development, and then outlines socio-environmental pathways as the analytical approach used in this paper. We present here a cursory overview of a very large literature with a view to situate our own methodological and theoretical approach in the wider theoretical debate. In Third Section, we provide the national context of land use and underutilisation in Nepal, highlighting key trends and emerging socio-political dynamics around the land issue. In Section Four, we present an overview of our methodology, as well as a brief and comparative overview of the two case study sites. Section 5 outlines site specific land underutilisation pathways in the two sites, which represent some of the most prominent social and ecological contexts in terms of land use, livelihoods and ethnic composition of the community in Nepal. We discuss key issues coming out of the case studies in Section 6, while also making an attempt to synthesise findings in relation to the pathway approach to analysis of land underutilisation. In Conclusion, we draw some lessons and policy implications of the study.

2. Agrarian change, migration and rural development: conceptualising socio-environmental pathways

The case of land underutilisation, as manifested in specific parcels of the Nepal's rural landscape, is indeed a result of a complex socio-environmental process that cuts across several broader domains, such as migration, development, environmental change, political economy, and local politics. While migration is presumed to be a cause of land underutilisation, traditionally it has also been assumed that migration from rural areas is driven by poverty and dearth, as migrants and their families strive to improve their living conditions (Ravenstein, 1889; Lee, 1966; Todaro, 1969). The inter-relationship between agrarian change – of which land underutilisation is just one aspect – and the wider political and economic processes is complex and non-linear (see Moore and Venneman, 2003). It has equally been recognised, however, that generalisations about how development and migration are linked to the process of agrarian change often fall at the fence of 'context' (De Haas, 2010). There is not one story to tell, even within single sites or villages, as every household or a community is embedded in different economic contexts, cultural milieu, and social fabric (Rigg, 2007: 163).

Migration has been interpreted as closely linked to agrarian change, and a range of causal factors from environmental change (Massey et al., 2010) to geographic differences in wages are reported (Wise and Veltmeyer, 2016). There are two particular – and problematic – tendencies that have, in the past, characterised studies of rural out-migration. One is what has been termed the 'sedentary peasant paradigm' (Rigg and Salamanca, 2011) – the tendency to assume that, in the past, peasants were largely immobile, cocooned in their natal villages. The second is a tendency to reduce and instrumentalise complex, shifting and varied migration decisions to discrete sets of 'push' and 'pull' factors (e.g. Textor, 1961). In a review paper, De Haas (2010) outlines the evolution of migration theory and draws a line between, on the one hand, a broadly optimistic approach that views rural migrants as rational decision makers, making carefully considered labour optimisation decisions (e.g. De Haas, 2010; Jalilian and Reyes,

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