



Between a rock and a hard place: Vulnerability and precarity in rural Nepal



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a local study on Nepal's Terai, this paper explores the nature of livelihood exposure to shocks and stresses among rural households in two Village Development Committees in Sunsari District. The primary data are derived from a 117 household survey supplemented by 19 purposefully sampled follow-up interviews. The paper opens with a discussion of the changing nature of exposure in the global South, distinguishing between inherited vulnerability and produced precarity. We then provide background to the research site and the research methods. In the core empirical part of the paper we unravel and distinguish between the livelihood threats and opportunities faced by households in the area and use these to reflect on the nature of 'exposure', its historical origins and contemporary (re)production. The final part of the paper uses the Nepal case to build a more general argument, proposing that if we are to understand the puzzle of continued livelihood exposure and uncertainty in the context of aggregate economic expansion we need to identify and interrogate the processes that may, at the same time, produce wealth and reduce vulnerability, while also generating precarity.

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1. Introduction

Central to the sustainable livelihoods approach is vulnerability (Chambers and Conway, 1991; Chambers, 1988; Ashley and Carney, 1999). Development, particularly in rural areas of the global South, has been predicated on the assumption that poor households are poor at least in part because they are vulnerable (Wisner et al., 2004). If people – or rather, households – are vulnerable then their livelihoods cannot be regarded as sustainable (Scoones, 2009). Vulnerability is, in turn, seen to be associated with political and social marginalisation, physical and environmental exposure, spatial isolation, limited human and social capital, and inadequate physical (especially land) and financial assets (Wisner et al., 2004). Poverty is a state of being, usually assessed at the household level according to some money-metric measure, and usually determined according to a poverty 'line'. Vulnerability, on the other hand, has a forward-looking and predictive quality. It highlights why individuals or households might be *prone* to poverty. Vulnerable individuals or households need not be poor, although the poor are

invariably vulnerable. Development interventions help address one or more of these facets of vulnerability whether through, for example, micro-credit schemes, investments in schools and training initiatives, programmes of empowerment, rural road building and access schemes, or land titling. In these ways, 'development' helps to reduce the vulnerability of marginal and (potentially) poor groups, thereby contributing to achieving sustainable livelihoods.

The aspects of vulnerability that are addressed by such mainstream development interventions are not infrequently seen to be inheritances of the past. Poverty, therefore is, in a real sense, 'old' (Rigg, 2005). It lies in a set of inherited conditions and tendencies which development interventions can address whether through education, roads, technology, money or training. The underpinning logic here is the need to bring people into the mainstream and, more particularly, to connect them to the market (Rigg and Oven, 2015). Vulnerability, therefore, tends to be viewed as a reflection of a pre-existing state of marginality or exposure, whether social (e.g. caste or gender relations), physical (e.g. isolation), environmental (e.g. unimproved land or water resources) or economic (e.g. lack of market engagement or access to financial resources). Mainstream development tends not to pay great attention to the ways in which contemporary processes of development may themselves be marginalising.

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Illustration 1. Sunsari District.

This paper explores the intersections between inherited ‘old’ poverty and produced ‘new’ poverty among households on southern Nepal’s lowland Terai (*Illustration 1*). It proposes that economic expansion generates new forms of livelihood risk. The fact that aggregate economic growth is not neatly and equally translated into resilient and more sustainable livelihoods is well known, but this is usually put down to the unequal distribution of the benefits of growth, thus requiring that more attention be paid to strategies of ‘pro-poor’, ‘inclusive’ or ‘shared’ growth (Best, 2013). Here we suggest that there is a further complication to the *idée fixe* of growth: that it also produces new forms and manifestations of vulnerability and, therefore, the non-achievement of sustainable livelihoods may lie in how contemporary processes of growth becoming imprinted, in livelihood terms, at the individual, household and settlement levels.

1.1. The Nepal development context

Nepal has experienced significant development gains since 1951, when the development ‘project’ was first set in train and development assistance began. There has been, for example, a dramatic decline in under-five mortality from 323 to 36 deaths per 1000 between 1960 and 2013, and a near doubling of life expectancy from 35 to 68 years over the same period. Adult literacy has improved from 21 per cent of the adult population in 1980 to 60 per cent in 2010. Set against such indicators of improvement, however, can be arrayed a good deal of evidence to suggest that, overall, the successes in comparative terms have been modest, even disappointing. Nepal remains one of the world’s 48 ‘least’ developed countries, and 37 per cent of the population live on less than \$1.51 a day (ADB, 2014), even after more than sixty years of ‘development’.

Households in rural Nepal face numerous challenges to building sustainable and resilient livelihoods. Social inequality based on caste and ethnicity remain severe (Sunam and McCarthy, 2016; Cameron, 1998); spatial inequalities – which were one of the main causes of the decade-long civil conflict – are considerable (von Einsiedel et al., 2012); the geography and physical environment of Nepal present numerous challenges, both local and national (Blaikie et al., 1980); and geophysical and hydro-meteorological hazards including earthquakes, landslides and floods pose significant threats, as the recent 2015 Gorkha earthquake and the 2008 Koshi floods exemplify. Such is the paucity of local opportunities for income generation in the country that international labour migration has become key to sustaining livelihoods (Seddon

et al., 2000; Blaikie et al., 2002; Shakya, 2013; Sunam, 2014). In 2009 around one-third of households had a member living in another country and some 15 per cent of working age males were working overseas in 2003–4, mostly in one of the Gulf States and Malaysia (Maharjan et al., 2012). In 2013, personal remittances were equivalent to almost 30 per cent of GDP (World Bank data),¹ almost double the value of the country’s exports (World Bank, 2014).

Development interventions in Nepal have generally been based on the development gaps and absences, and the underpinning logics, set out above (Pigg, 1993). They have sought, in other words, to address identified geographies of dearth related to physical isolation, inadequate service provision, low incomes and in some fields limited (or low quality) human capital, and which have, in turn, been instrumental in perpetuating vulnerability and shaping people’s meagre living. Such approaches to development have been fairly universal, with critics arguing that development often “tailor[s] its description of a country’s problems to fit the measurement of the solutions it has to offer” (Pigg, 1993: 47; see also Ferguson, 1990). There is a (often backward-looking) normative logic to development policies, where identified interventions are related to predetermined development problems that, in turn, are linked at a higher level to ideological framings that are close to dogma. In contemporary critical analyses these are often seen to be tied to ‘neoliberal’ perspectives that shape the framing of problems and their solution but in the past there were equally influential alternatives, not least models of state-led development. There is, in other words, a degree of wishful thinking in each development decade’s identification of the problem and the solution, with the latter often preceding the former.

The top five sectors receiving development assistance in Nepal in 2011/12 were education, local development, road transportation, electricity and health (Ministry of Finance, 2013). The UK Department for International Development’s (DFID’s) operational plan for the period 2011–15² identifies the need to address the ongoing political instability which is considered key to the success of its wealth creation programmes. Emphasis is placed on supporting the private sector with programmes in agriculture and tourism, including skills training and enterprise financing. The number of jobs created and the length of roads built or maintained are seen as indicators of wealth creation and thus of development success. Similarly, Asian Development Bank (ADB) projects have focused on roads to strengthen domestic and regional connectivity, linking remote villages to schools and hospitals and providing farmers with access to markets.³ The World Bank is likewise supporting economic growth by, among other things, enhancing transport connectivity and improving the business environment.⁴ These patterns of concern and interest and the development interventions that result are not peculiar to Nepal; they are repeated across the global South and reflect the received (often predetermined) wisdom of where the development ‘gaps’ lie.

Such interventions may well be, overall and in aggregate economic terms, developmental. Money-metric poverty rates in Nepal, for example, have fallen markedly and this must be counted a considerable achievement (Fig. 1). However there are three important wrinkles to this generalisation and the assumed links between intervention and outcome which this paper explores. First of all, such interventions have differential effects on societal groups –

¹ Data accessed from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TR.F.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>.

² DFID Nepal (2012) Operational Plan 2011–2015, DFID Nepal. Refreshed May 2012. Accessed: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67361/nepal-2011.pdf

³ Asian Development Bank and Nepal: <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/27783/nep.pdf>

⁴ World Bank Group Partnership Strategy for Nepal – Unlocking constraints to growth: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/06/20/world-bank-group-partnership-strategy-for-nepal-unlocking-constraints-to-growth>

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