



# Participation and Power in Climate Change Adaptation Policies: Vulnerability in Food Security Programs in Nepal



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## SUMMARY

The article explores the moments wherein participatory approaches in climate change adaptation (CCA) policies contribute to reinforcing, rather than transforming, the underlying causes of vulnerability. Using the case of food insecure households in the district of Humla in northwestern Nepal, the study demonstrates that the same social and power relations that are driving local vulnerability dynamics, such as caste, gender, and access to social and political networks, also play important roles in shaping the impact of CCA policies. By tracing Nepal's CCA programs, starting with the local level, through district to international-national level dynamics, the study adds insights into the barriers to exclusion that embed power relations all the way through the chain of policy development. The purpose is to better understand how CCA can perpetuate rather than alleviate the conditions that create differential vulnerability patterns at village level. It raises questions about how whether CCA programs are an adequate response to increasing vulnerability for some of the world's most marginalized people.

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## 1. Introduction

“The WFP (World Food Programme) works closely with the government of Nepal and the local communities to reduce food insecurity and to build climate resilience for the most vulnerable people.”

[(WFP interview)]

“The projects have not made us less vulnerable [*asurachit*] to climate change. Next winter I will again lack food and I will have to increase my debt to survive.”

[(Household interview with Dalit)]

The above statements illustrate how when viewed by different actors, the same humanitarian intervention in a remote part of western Nepal that suffers from severe, chronic food insecurity appears to have very different outcomes. This paper asks, how are ambitions to promote local participation and incorporate the needs of the most vulnerable into policy formulation and project implementation at different levels limited by pre-existing power relations across scales? Using the case of Nepal, we explore how power relations play out at all levels of climate change adaptation (CCA) programs to exclude marginalized people. While these insights on the limitations of participatory processes are supported by other studies (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Tschakert et al., 2016), we

also point to how CCA programs themselves create vulnerability and risk, contributing to rather than mitigating the vulnerability of the most marginalized households. Furthermore, the study adds insights into the barriers to exclusion that originate at levels beyond the local, and rather embed power relations much further up the chain of policy development. The purpose is to better understand how CCA can perpetuate rather than alleviate the conditions that create differential vulnerability patterns at village level.

In many countries, participatory CCA policies and action plans have been developed as a means of building resilience and adaptive capacity to climate change (Ayers & Forsyth, 2009; McNamara & Buggy, 2016; Schipper, Ayers, Reid, Huq, & Rahman, 2014). These efforts however, are fundamentally plagued by exclusion of the most marginalized as a result of unequal power relations (Agrawal & Gupta, 2005; Cundill, 2010; Korf, 2010; Tschakert et al., 2016), and the Nepal case is no exception (Nightingale, 2015; Ojha et al., 2015). The case study from a food insecure district of Nepal shows how not only do CCA programs fail to meet their stated objectives, but they can disguise the lack of capacity of national and international actors to effectively address social exclusion and marginalization at the local level. There is a long tradition of scholarship that demonstrates how participatory development practices can in fact further marginalize individuals and groups by ignoring the role of power relations in creating vul-

nerability at local, national, and international levels (Peet & Watts, 2004; Ribot, 2014; Twyman, 2000). Given that global climate change makes already marginalized households even more vulnerable (Adger, 1999; Adger et al., 2014; Bhattarai, Beilin, & Ford, 2015), it is crucial to understand how and why participatory practices fail to address the needs of marginalized people, despite stated objectives to do so.

This article illustrates the levels wherein participatory development efforts in CCA fail to promote meaningful inclusion and address vulnerability. We draw from a case study in the district of Humla in Northwestern Nepal, where we show how the implementation of CCA policies on the national, district, and local levels is strongly shaped by power relations that in turn influence differential vulnerability patterns at the village level. Nepal has long been upheld as a model of successful participatory development schemes, and its National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) (Ministry of the Environment of Nepal [MoE], 2010) and subsequent Local Adaptation Plans of Action (LAPA) (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2011) place great importance on grassroots consultation and participatory planning (Ayers & Forsyth, 2009; Nightingale, 2015; Regmi, Star, & Leal Filho, 2016). Yet the authors have shown in previous studies (Nagoda, 2015) that even if the most vulnerable households are formally included, they have negligible influence on decision-making (see also Ojha et al., 2014, 2016). This analysis adds to these insights by disentangling the moments through which more powerful actors are able to assert their interests within projects intended to benefit the most vulnerable.

Vulnerability is conceptualized here to be dynamic and driven by multi-dimensional elements that include political, economic, social, and environmental processes of change, such that climate change is only one of several stressors that contribute to vulnerability (see also Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 1994; Bohle, Downing, & Watts, 1994; Eriksen, Brown, & Kelly, 2005; Marino & Ribot, 2012). It builds from O'Brien, Eriksen, Nygaard, and Schjolden's (2007) contextual vulnerability approach, and recognizes that adaptation to climate change is nearly impossible to isolate from other processes of change. Similarly, adaptation refers to the processes through which individuals and collectives respond to multiple, concurrent environmental and social changes (Eriksen, Nightingale, & Eakin, 2015). We do not limit our understanding of "politics" to the work of politicians, but instead consider its expression in the everyday activities and struggles that are shaped by social and power relations, and through contestations and negotiations between actors to influence decision-making processes. The case of Nepal shows how the outcome of these interactions can be a remarkable stabilization of the status quo, with a focus on technocratic and apolitical approaches to adaptation that deftly exclude the most vulnerable households from processes that are explicitly intended to benefit them.

The research for this paper draws on district- and local-level data from three villages in the district of Humla in northwestern Nepal, as well as an analysis of CCA policy documents and key informant interviews with people involved in policy formulation at the national level. Because the district is highly vulnerable to climate change (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2010) and chronically food insecure, villages in Humla have been key targets for CCA efforts that emphasize enhancing food security in the face of climatic stressors (MoE, 2010). Given the importance placed on food insecurity as a cause and a consequence of vulnerability in policy documents and research (Bohle et al., 1994; MoE, 2010; Yaro, 2004), we use the FAO food security definition, "a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 2002, Chapt. 2) as an entry point to study the implications

of power relations and how vulnerability patterns can be reinforced within CCA policies.

The paper traces Nepal's CCA programs across levels, starting with the local level, through district to international- national-level dynamics. We discuss qualitative evidence at these levels of three key dimensions of CCA development planning and implementation wherein we see the interests of the most marginalized side lined. First, contributions to policy. Nepal's adaptation planning policies place strong emphasis on community participation and yet, this is one domain where the most marginalized—who are often illiterate—are excluded from any meaningful influence on what policies are put in place (Nightingale, 2015; Ojha et al., 2015). Second, contributions to implementation strategies. Policy development is a separate process from decisions over where, when and how to implement them and despite claims of "local participation", the needs of the most marginalized are rarely able to influence strategic decisions about CCA policy implementation (Nightingale, 2015, 2017; Ojha et al., 2014, 2016). Third, contributions to adaptation actions. Once CCA policies are put into practice, there is supposed to be another layer of participation wherein local people make decisions about concrete actions to initiate. Here again we find that the most vulnerable are unable to adequately assert their needs and visions to shape outcomes (Nagoda, 2015; Nightingale, 2017).

In the following sections, we first review literature that highlights some of the challenges associated with participatory processes as a means to ensure that the most vulnerable are adequately represented in policies. We then present a contextual background and our methodology for the development of CCA policies in Nepal in general, and Humla in particular. The results section describes the mechanisms by which the concerns and needs of the most vulnerable are effectively excluded from Nepal's CCA policy process. The article concludes by reflecting on the prospects and limitations of participatory processes for addressing power relations within multi-scalar policy processes like CCA.

## 2. Managing the pitfalls of participatory adaptation

Research on climate change adaptation suggests the need to look at the moments wherein power relations are contested and (re)produced in adaptation planning and projects intended to address vulnerability (Jones & Boyd, 2011; Lemos, Lo, Nelson, Eakin, & Bedran-Martins, 2016; Nightingale, 2017). There is a very large literature that highlights problems of elite capture within participatory development projects (Agrawal & Gupta, 2005; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Harrison & Chiroro, 2016); the main conclusion being that participation needs to be "done better" to ensure inclusion of marginalized people (Cundill, 2010; Tschakert, van Oort, St Clair, & LaMadrid, 2013).

Recently, a number of scholars have engaged in action research projects explicitly designed to try to overcome problems of elite capture within climate change adaptation contexts (Cadag & Gaillard, 2012; Ensor & Harvey, 2015; Fazey et al., 2010; Franks, 2015; Schipper et al., 2014; Tanner & Horn-Phanthanohai, 2014). For example, Tschakert et al. (2013, 2016) in several recent collaborations have tried to implement "anticipatory learning" for adaptation by creating "solution spaces" using scenarios and other participatory methods. In their work, while "the scenario building provided a temporary opening up of a potentially transformational adaptive space, as many voices were reflected in the envisioned storylines, the aspirations of the less powerful were silenced again in the subsequent planning stage. This was manifest in their tacit agreement with stated "community priorities" and the reproduction of subaltern positionality (through under representation and submission to elite control) in the voting for action items,"

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