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## Disaster vulnerability in Nepal



Komal Raj Aryal\*

National Disaster Management Agency, Office of the President, The Republic of The Gambia, West Africa

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores Nepal's vulnerability from a local perspective. Nepal currently has a disaster management policy and legislative framework yet it is perceived as not trickling down effectively to make significant progress in reducing the impact of disasters at the local level. The article uses the case study method to explore local disaster vulnerability in the Mountain, Hill and Terai regions of Nepal. It concludes that a lack of micro-disaster vulnerability analysis is a problem that remains for effective disaster risk management in Nepal. On the one hand, disaster management practitioners create and enforce disaster management programmes without location-specific knowledge. On the other hand, traditional, less scientific and less disaster risk reduction-centred administrative approaches dominate and push local people into situations where they are vulnerable to disasters.

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## 1. Introduction

Nepal is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to disaster. There are a wide variety and significant number of natural hazards every year and studies have revealed a high level of vulnerability [1–4]. The Government of Nepal has attempted to manage the prevalence of these hazards and their associated disasters through both informal civic involvement and formal government instruments. A legal and policy environment to deal with disasters has existed in one form or another in Nepal since 1982, and has regularly been reviewed [5]. Further a national disaster risk management strategy was approved in 2009 [1]. Why then do Nepalese people continue to be exposed to local disaster vulnerability? A widely accepted view is that there is a crisis of governance in Nepal [6]. This crisis takes the form of political instability, a cumbersome and politicised bureaucracy, a poorly motivated workforce, poor revenue collection, unequal service delivery and

corruption. These are all drivers that make people vulnerable to disasters in Nepal. However, this article attempts to investigate local disaster vulnerability through society, culture, knowledge and behaviours. Social, cultural and behavioural knowledge factors in relation to disaster vulnerability analysis are a very sensitive issue; however, disaster risk management cannot be implemented effectively without understanding the way people interact, think and live with local hazards and risks [7].

## 2. Research locations

There is a variation in the impact of disasters in the Mountain, Hill and Terai regions of Nepal [8]. This study gathered thirty-nine disaster histories from these three regions (Plate 2.1) and these case studies were collected through participatory face-to-face interviews over a period of two years, spending at least two weeks with each participant. Nine out of the thirty-nine case studies were selected for detailed analysis. The nine were chosen because they were rich in historical details and described the impact of disaster in depth. Also, these locations were selected to enable the author to explore disaster vulnerability in rural (Chitwan) and urban (Byas in Tanahu, a

\* Correspondence to. Dr. Komal Raj Aryal, Vulnerability Assessment and Humanitarian Specialist, National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA), Office of The President, The Republic of The Gambia, West Africa.

E-mail address: [komal.aryal@undp.org](mailto:komal.aryal@undp.org)

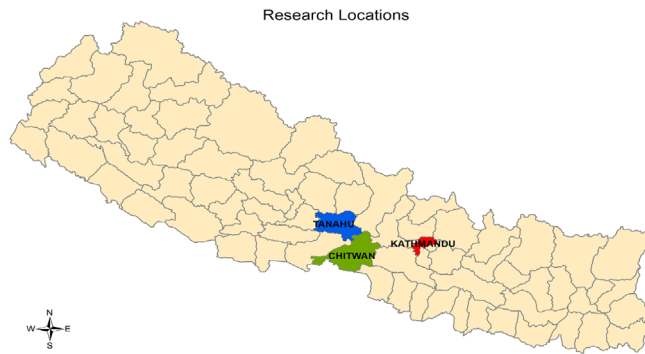


Plate 2.1. Research locations..



Plate 3.1. Gathering information for case studies from senior citizens in Kathmandu..



Plate 5.1. A senior citizen shares his past disaster experiences in Byas..



Plate 5.2. One of my key informants in her home.

newly emerged city) scenarios as well as in Kathmandu (old urban city) (Plates 3.1, 5.1, and 5.2)

### 3. Methodology

Over the years, disaster vulnerability research has almost always been completed after the disaster. Information about survivors prior to their disaster exposure can

therefore be hard to obtain and is sometimes inaccurate. Disaster epistemology is weak. As Stallings points out, “There has been very little written on the topic of methods of disaster research” [9–24]. Research, by implication, needs access to all stakeholders and different levels of information, for instance, from the offices of high-level decision-makers to the temporary living quarters of displaced disaster victims [10,11].

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