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Asymmetrical power relationships in disaster reduction remain the key barrier to sustainable recovery: Neoliberalism and Nepal's post-earthquake recovery experiences

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Abstract

Making reference to recent scholarly discussions on neoliberalism and disaster recovery, in this paper I discuss how the implemented neoliberal doctrines of governance have reinforced the existing asymmetrical power relationships between the state, international agencies and citizens. This process constitutes a major barrier to achieving sustainable recovery after the 2015 Nepal earthquake. In particular, three issues, namely the risk of disempowering local communities' capacity, lack of commitment to long-term recovery, and commodification of the recovery process, have resulted that the recovery policy basically favours the interests of international donors, and NGOs, not those of local communities. To achieve sustainable recovery, post disaster interventions must be socially inclusive. Local affected communities should be meaningfully engaged, and that social learning and sustainability transformation should be enabled as these are key processes at the core of community resilience and of any community resilience-building strategy.

KEYWORDS

2015 earthquake, disaster reduction, neoliberalism, Nepal, post-disaster recovery, sustainability

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although new concepts like 'resilience',[1] 'building back better' and 'local participation' are commonly incorporated in recent post-disaster recovery policies including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (United Nations, 2015), the outcomes of disaster recovery projects remain far from satisfactory. Research indicates that failing to meet the needs of local communities and the minimal participation of disaster-affected communities are attributed to project failure (Lam & Kuipers, 2018; Lyons et al., 2010). In addition, the top-down disaster interventions further worse social risks, vulnerability of local communities and lead to second disasters (Clark-Ginsberg, 2020; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021). Extensive social science studies on disaster recovery show that resilience-based post-disaster

policies often fail because they do not enable meaningful social learning opportunities among the disaster-affected communities. Yet, this is in fact a key process to long-term and successful sustainable recovery (Choudhury et al., 2021; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021).

Studies find that the planning and implementation of disaster recovery interventions remain top-down and negatively influenced by a command-and-control approach which together cause counterproductive learning and transformation outcomes for local communities (Choudhury et al., 2021; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021). Disaster victims are often perceived as incapable of dealing with crises but this is a myth (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2016; Tierney et al., 2006). Under state emergency circumstances, the decision is largely controlled and made by government authorities and powerful external parties. At the operational level, community resilience-centred policies are hijacked by a

few experts, businesses and local elites, not the local communities (Choudhury et al., 2021; Clark-Ginsberg, 2020; Finucane et al., 2020). In their study on the 2009 L'Aquila post-earthquake recovery, Imperiale and Vanclay (2020, 2021) argue that the command-and-control approach creates counterproductive outcomes for social learning. Instead of learning from crises, disaster interventions increase the dependence of local communities on external assistance. Without social learning, sustainability transformation will not happen. This is a stumbling block for building a resilient community.

This paper examines the post-2015 Nepal earthquake recovery processes, focusing particular attention on the issue of community resilience, with recent scholarly discourses on neoliberalism and disaster recovery. I chose this scholarship as the analytical framework for my current study because it helps emphasise: firstly, the power relationships held by disaster recovery stakeholders; and secondly, how recovery policies are shaped by powerful international development organisations and private sector corporations. The scholarship offers a relevant, critical, in-depth and holistic perspective that helps us to understand the recovery challenges relating to the 2015 Nepal earthquake.

The paper is based on four years' ethnographic study of Katunje villagers. Their recovery experiences provide insights of how "local voices" are constantly not heard in the process of reconstruction despite the introduction of resilience-based disaster recovery policy (Lam & Kuipers, 2018). In the early recovery stage, the villagers' collective action was inspiring. They worked together to ensure every villager had a shelter and made community welling the top priority. However, their caring, social responsibility and sense of community diminished when the disaster recovery interventions increased. They became more dependent for external assistance and displayed no interest in community efforts. The recovery story of Katunje reveals a nuanced account concerning how implemented neoliberal doctrines of governance have not only reinforced the existing unequal power relationships between the state, international agencies and citizens in a post-disaster phase, but also pose a threat to sustainable recovery by hampering the ability to build back better recovery goals. The study outcomes provide an important policy insight that is to achieve sustainable recovery, local communities should be meaningfully engaged in the disaster recovery process since this social process constitute the core of community resilience. In order to retain their anonymity, participants' names are replaced by pseudonyms in this paper.

2 | COMMUNUNITY RESILIENCE AND NEOLIBERAL DISASTER RECOVERY POLICIES

2.1 | Proactive agency of community resilience

Community resilience has been extensively studied in social science (e.g., Berkes & Ross, 2016; Cutter, 2016; Folke et al., 2002; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017). In terms of social system, a resilient community/society means it can learn and change for the better following a disturbance (Berkes et al., 2003; Berkes & Ross, 2016; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2016; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2008). While socio-economic factors often influence the resilience capacity of local communities (Cutter

et al., 2008; Matarrita-Cascante et al., 2017; Norris et al., 2008), recent studies show the agency dimension of community resilience (Berkes & Ross, 2016; Brown, 2014; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021). In particular, disturbances such as disasters can be seen as windows of opportunity for communities to learn, transform and build back better. For example, while people perceive new risks due to changing environment or experience suffering from crises, they develop new understanding of risks and vulnerabilities. Afterward, this learning process leads people to develop collective intentions to think about shared solutions to reduce their vulnerabilities and increase their capacity to cope with future disasters. Imperiale and Vanclay (2021) describe this cognitive and interactional social learning process as crucial for community resilience. This social process allows local people to think about common problems, to share their empathy towards others, as well as to take social responsibility that improves the overall community wellbeing. This process happens naturally, however, it can be enhanced or undermined by the implementation of disaster recovery interventions.

Ideally, if the government and external agencies can work together with local communities, the disaster interventions can better address local vulnerabilities and increase local capacity to manage future disasters. However, studies concluded that - influenced by the paternalistic culture of social protection - disaster victims are often perceived as incapable and lack the ability to deal with disasters (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2016; Tierney et al., 2006). Consequently, most disaster recovery policies are top-down planning exercises and become technical and over-engineered solutions which are often captured by experts, national and local elites (Clark-Ginsberg, 2020; Lam, 2023). Without the local voices, the disaster interventions tend to create counterproductive learning opportunities for local people because they will not learn from the past and develop local solutions. Instead, they follow the external actors' notion of resilience (Choudhury et al., 2021). Furthermore, the policies cause counterproductive consequences which seriously affect the community resilience in the long-term. For example, studies demonstrate that vulnerable groups affected by 2005 Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 Haiti earthquake were forgotten in the recovery process and felt into the poverty trap (Pyles, 2009; Schuller, 2016; Tierney, 2015).

2.2 | Neoliberalism and disaster recovery

Why do those in charge of disaster recovery fail to work with local people? This involves a complex power relationship between the state government, donors, NGOs, and citizens following the expansion of neoliberal philosophies of governance. Neoliberalism is based on the founding idea in that the pursuit of maximum human wellbeing, it can only be achieved by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedom and skills with minimal government involvement. In practice, this is intrinsically associated with private property rights, free market, free trade, and the reduction of state intervention in economic policies and activities (Harvey, 2005). Most social scientists believe that neoliberalism is characterised by an opposition to social collectivism, or communal organisation and instead emphasises individual responsibility, perseverance, and initiative which widens social inequalities (Hilgers, 2011).

Disaster studies scholars are increasingly concerned that the failure of disaster recovery is in fact due to these neoliberal policies (Barrios, 2017; Gunewardena & Schuller, 2008; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021; Klein, 2007; Schuller, 2016; Tierney, 2015). Two major consequences of neoliberalism on disaster policies are identified: firstly, changes in the state-society relationship; and secondly, the capitalisation of disasters. Scholars point out that neoliberalism implies political restructuring, with a shift from 'government to governance' (Castree, 2008; Gane, 2012; Jones et al., 2014). This suggests that the state is no longer the sole body in establishing and implementing disaster prevention and recovery policies.

Both the involvement of civil society organisations (CSOs) particularly non-government/non-profit organisations (NGOs), and private sector corporations, have increasingly made their presence in disaster management and recovery. This explains why the rapid expansion of the NGO sector has occurred in many developing countries in the last two decades. It is assumed that NGOs are highly flexible and have a wide spectrum of values which can respond to the needs of disaster-affected communities more effectively than the state. However, studies have revealed that in reality NGOs tend to reproduce the existing hierarchies of the societies they operate in, through clientelism, corruption, nepotism, and neo-patrimonial networks (Frewer, 2013; O'Reilly, 2010; Suleiman, 2013). These NGOs often receive enormous support from international aid donors. They are active agents who promote the donors' preferred post-disaster policies, not the local needs. The phenomenon is described as neo-colonialism which still exists in modern-day aid systems: the funding and decisions are controlled by a small number of Western donors and INGOs (Peace Direct, 2021).

Another critique is that disaster shocks in turn open the door for implementing market-based neoliberal policies (Klein, 2007). Studies demonstrate that profit-driven corporates like insurance companies, housing developers, construction materials companies, and professional experts have replaced the state, and now play the key role in providing disaster relief services to affected communities in more recent times (Schuller, 2016; Tierney, 2015). Scholars contend that the donor- or supply-driven-based disaster policy not only weakens state and local ownership, but it also further leads to disorderly or non-meaningful decision-making and deepens a country's dependence on foreign experts and funding. Gunewardena (2008) critiques that the neoliberal approach shifts the disaster recovery concept from assistance to investment which often exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, the capitalised disaster recovery strategy will further lead to the commodification of social relationships. Economic power has become the major currency of any recovery effort and leave vulnerable groups behind (Gunewardena & Schuller, 2008; Lam & Kuipers, 2018).

3 | NEOLIBERALISM IN THE NEPAL CONTEXT: BEFORE AND AFTER 2015 EARTHQUAKE

Since Nepal became an official democratic state in 1990, it has experienced the liberalisation process which emphasised the NGOs and private sector as able to deliver services and economic progress (Bhatta, 2016). The number of local, national and international NGOs in Nepal amounted to 221 in 1990 and this has rose to more than 30,000 by 2011 (Yogi, 2012). Most of these NGOs were established with outside support (Bhatta, 2016). The latest figure now stands at 40,000 with 189 INGOs from 25 countries (The Himalayan Times, 2014, cited by Jones et al., 2014). In fact, the amount of foreign aid has increasingly played a key role in Nepal's development and now accounts for approximately 26% of the country's national budget (MoF, 2013). In other words, external donors wield huge power and greatly influence the Nepali government's economic development policies.

In Nepal, the development funds often go through the trusted INGOs and then the national/local partnership NGOs which are often controlled by urban elites (Fehr, 2022; Khadka, 1994; Panday, 2012; Rijal, 2004). As a result, the highly hierarchical and powerful NGO industry has now established itself in Nepal, and this poses a threat to the government's power and authority (Bhatta, 2016). This not only generates monitoring and accountability concerns, but it dangerously undermines collaboration between NGOs and the State. Their relationship is competitive, retaliatory and not complementary (Bhatta, 2016: 88). In a study of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Policy in Nepal (Jones et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2016), researchers find that although the external donors and NGOs were very keen to mainstream DRR as a policy prior to the 2015 earthquake, the government's lack of motivation and interest in this strategy, as well as limited capacity of local government had seriously hampered the implementation of DRR projects.

Instead of the state, most DRR funds went directly to international NGOs first, then were distributed to national/local NGOs for local level project implementation yet some of these local NGOs were not credible or reputable. In fact, the NGOs' activities in Nepal have been criticised as being too much influenced by personal, political, and other self-centered interests rather than doing the public good (Bhatta, 2016; Rijal, 2004).

The 7.8 magnitude earthquake in 2015 caused massive losses of life and property in Nepal. Approximately 8790 people died and 22,300 more were injured. At least 500,000 private houses and a huge amount of public infrastructure were completely destroyed. After the 2015 earthquake, there was a flow of relief and recovery aid pouring into Nepal from different countries and development agencies: India ($250 million in grants, and $750 million in soft loans); China ($767 million in grants to its own projects, and later $8.3 billion in infrastructure development programs); Japan (US$260 million); US (US$130 million and an additional of development grant of $500 million for building highways and infrastructure); European countries (US$342) through the NGOs; as well as ADB and the World Bank (Paudel & Le Billion, 2020). According to one U.N. report, more than 450 humanitarian agencies responded to deliver aid to Nepal (U.N. Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, 2015). They initially focused on distributing relief materials, food aid, and later became involved in different reconstruction projects such as rebuilding public infrastructure and private houses, as well as livelihood training.

National Reconstruction Authority's (NRA) data shows that 241 I/NGOs had official permission to work during reconstruction; they partnered with national/local NGOs to implement more than 412 projects with a total estimated funding of NPR 62.5 billion (Subedi, 2021).

However, the effectiveness of these reconstruction projects has been questioned. For example, in Fehr's recent study (Fehr, 2022), it was found that most reconstruction projects were short-term, donor-favouring policies without consideration of the local context. As a result, instead of producing meaningful development for the community, these projects increased local communities' dependence on external assistance packages. Paudel and Le Billion (2020) point out that a large part of the reconstruction fund was used for implementing donor countries' political and economic agendas.

4 | METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on interviews and participant observations conducted in Katunje Village from August 2015 to December 2019. It is part of my larger project which examines the impacts of the 2015 Nepal earthquake on the state-civil society relationship. Following this earthquake, I went to Nepal in August 2015. Since then, I have revisited the country on a regular basis to conduct fieldwork (December 2015; March and September 2016; April and December 2017; March and December 2018; April, August and December 2019). The prolonged fieldwork time allowed me to document in detail the interactions between State, NGOs and the Katunge villagers throughout the entire reconstruction period.

Katunje was chosen as the case study area for two reasons. Firstly, the suffering and recovery experience of its villagers very much reflected the situation of thousands of villagers living in other earthquake-hit districts of Nepal. Their housing reconstruction experiences would share many features with other earthquake-affected districts. Secondly, I accumulated rich knowledge about this village prior to the earthquake event. My relationship with this village went back to 2004 from a first visit and since then I worked closely with villagers on various social developmental projects. After the earthquake, as the founder of a grassroots organisation, I became deeply involved in humanitarian relief and community-based housing reconstruction programs in Katunje. My involvement in recovery projects allowed me to act as both participant and observer. Not only did I discuss with villagers the recovery plan at local meetings, I also observed how villagers formed the reconstruction committee to coordinate all house rebuilding matters. All these activities made it possible for me to observe closely how the earthquake affected villagers, and the ways in which they responded to the catastrophe and to the post-disaster reconstruction policy.

A total of 40 in-depth interviews were conducted in Katunje village during two major periods, late 2017 and 2019. These two interview times enabled me to document villagers' recovery experiences in different reconstruction stages. Interview respondents included 21 males, and 19 females ranging in age from 24 to 72. They represented various caste and ethnic/indigenous nationalities – Brahmin and Chettri (17),

Tamang (3), Gurung and Gubbaju (6), Newar (5) and Dalit (9) from different hamlets in Katunje. Most of the respondents depended on agriculture, animal husbandry, labour work, and remittances that they receive from their family members who are working overseas for the purposes of livelihood. A few respondents were employed in service sector industries (e.g., elected leaders, teachers and social mobilisers). Apart from myself, a Nepali graduate student was hired as a research assistant to conduct the interviews. All respondents were told the purpose of the study and gave their consent to be interviewed.

Most interviews were conducted in Nepali and two in English. The Nepali interview transcripts were translated into English. Each interview lasted about 30 min to 1 h. The respondents were asked to share: (1) their experiences of life after the earthquake; (2) how they coped with livelihood changes; (3) decision-making on rebuilding houses; (4) changes in community after earthquake; and (5) how they thought about the government and NGOs' performance in the post-disaster period. Thematic analysis was used to code and categorise the key results from the interviews. It is a flexible method that can be used in many methodologies and questions as it assists in understanding people's perceptions, feelings, values and experiences. Then these themes are presented in different reconstruction stages so that we can understand the dynamic interactions between different reconstruction stakeholders over time.

In addition to in-depth interviews, open-ended conversations and observations in Katunge, interviews were undertaken with government officials, foreign donors, INGOs/NGOs at the district and central (Kathmandu-based) levels as well as other earthquake affected districts. This information made it possible to acquire knowledge for undertakings of the reconstruction work from a holistic perspective. Although Katunje villagers' voices about recovery experiences could be shaped by their roles in recovery programs, it is not the intention to deny efforts and achievements that the Nepal reconstruction program had made. Instead, in this paper, through a critical analysis on the interactions between different stakeholders in the reconstruction processes, I uncover issues concerning neoliberal forms of governance that indeed have undermined the effectiveness of post-disaster recovery policies and building community resilience.

5 | CASE STUDY: KATUNJE VILLAGE

Katunje village[2] is located 100 kms from the capital city, Kathmandu, and is situated in the district of Dhading (Figure 1). It has nine wards and consists of 1425 households (CBS, 2011). The village is composed of a heterogeneous population, mainly derived from the Brahmin, Chhetri, Newar, Dalit, Tamang and Gurung castes. On 25 April, 2015, the earthquake caused extensive damage to the rural villages outside of Kathmandu, and the Katunje area was no exception. All the houses had collapsed and people were killed. Most of the local school buildings were destroyed, villagers had no shelter, and they were forced to sleep in the fields. There was a severe food and water shortage, and immediate assistance from the large humanitarian organisations was not forthcoming.

FIGURE 1 Location of Katunje Village in Nepal.

5.1 | Early recovery stage

Most Katunje villagers recalled that after the earthquake, people first stayed in the tarpaulin-made emergency shelters made by the community. They used the common kitchens and shared utensils and food. A few days later, some NGOs came and delivered the rice, tarpaulins and CGI sheets. According to our respondents, relief was insufficient and often proved difficult to reach to all hamlets in Katunje. Particularly, vulnerable groups such as single women, disabled people, and Dalits complained they did not know of any relief activities. One of our respondents described the relief effort in Katunje just like "a bone given to dogs" (*Rahaat Kukurharulai ek haddi phayakidinu jastai ho*); it was like a drama to silence the voices of earthquake victims.

Our in-depth interviews and field observations indicated that community responses to disaster in Katunje varied from group to group. Our Dalit interviewees stated that they did not receive any help from their Brahmin and Chhetri caste neighbours, but they got help from other ethnic groups like the Gurung. Community played an important role for early recovery especially for the Gurung, Tamang and Gubbaju groups. When a Gurung woman shared her recovery experience during the interview, she proudly said, "Gurung community is rich in labour exchange. No matter what the situation is, they offer free labour in the community".

Collective action is not always in line with caste and ethnic division. This occurred in Ward 9. A few days after the earthquake, I noticed that large INGOs/NGOs were not offering support to the villagers. My organisation became the first to provide emergency relief in the area, which included funding for the new community building, rice distribution, emergency supplies, and materials, such as fertilisers, to ensure a normal planting season as soon as possible. When first visiting the village after the earthquake in August 2015, it was surprising that all villagers in Ward 9 moved from the previous tarpaulin-made shelters into CGI and with wood could make their own temporary shelters. The villagers told me that in the first two months, by working together they managed to build a community centre, a temporary school and over 100 temporary shelters. It was very inspiring to hear these stories of how they worked together. Inspired by such community spirit, later our organisation introduced a community-based housing reconstruction program in the area.

5.2 | Mass reconstruction started

5.2.1 | Government rural housing reconstruction policy program

The 2015 earthquake damaged more than 500,000 houses which made millions of people homeless, so shelter subsequently emerged as one of the top priorities in the post-disaster recovery process. To respond to this, the GoN adopted owner-driven reconstruction

(ODR) as the official housing reconstruction strategy shortly after the earthquake. All the eligible households would receive 3 lakh (about US $2750) housing grants to rebuild their homes in three tranches. During the Donor Conference in June 2015, the GoN also promised to establish the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) to oversee all reconstruction work including eligibility assessment, project approval and policy implementation. The NRA was also responsible for coordination, guiding and supporting the reconstruction activities for local authorities and partner organisations (HRRP, 2017). Furthermore, under the ODR program, the government would deploy over 3000 engineers to assist earthquake-affected households to build "earthquake-resistant houses". However, the ODR program encountered enormous challenges in its implementation. Particularly, the NRA was only established in January 2016, which left Nepal without any official national reconstruction policy for eight months (Lam et al., 2017).

5.2.2 | The major reconstruction actors

The reconstruction process was complex with coordination among different government offices and INGOs/NGOs at both central, and district levels under the leadership of NRA headquarters in Kathmandu. NRA took a key role in implementing reconstruction activities in Dhading through the Secretariat of District Coordination Committee (NRA, Dhading) including Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (Division Office Dhading), Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development; Earthquake Housing Reconstruction Project and District Level Project Implementation Unit (MoFALD, EHRP, DLPIU, Dhading), and the District Coordination Committee and HRRP-Dhading. It was noted in the fieldwork that none of the NGOs/INGOs directly funded the private house rebuild in the Dhading district; however, they became involved in masonry training, house construction demonstrations, technical support, as well as reconstruction of schools, healthcare posts, community centres and water facilities. A requirement of the NRA was that all INGOs must have their respective partners (national/local NGOs) to implement their projects. After the local election in May 2017, the first time since Nepal's new constitution was promulgated in September 2015, the newly elected representatives of Rural Municipality (RM) became the key participants in the reconstruction. These elected leaders had the right to implement the reconstruction activities in their areas. Theoretically, all INGOs/NGOs must submit their reconstruction proposals and obtain approval from the local leaders.

5.2.3 | The influx of INGOs/NGOs in Katunje

The INGOs/NGOs' presence was very minimal in Katunje prior to the earthquake. However, most of our interviewees noted changes after the earthquake. According to the new elected leader in Katunje, the NGOs activities were different from previous ones, which he explained as follows:

> Before the earthquake, there were not so many NGOs here. We heard about NGOs/ INGOs before, they did quite big projects. Many of these works were supported by Japan or other big organisations and these projects were not directly doing for people's individual lives. ……After the earthquake, many NGOs/ NGOs (e.g., Red Cross, Focus Nepal, Future Village, Together for Nepal, German Nepal and so on) came to the our village to do the livelihood activities which were directly done for the people. (Fieldnote, 2019)

Another interviewee, Sita, was working as a social mobiliser in the Katunje area after the earthquake. According to her, for the first few months after the earthquake many NGOs came to the village to distribute food, clothes, CGI sheets and vegetable seeds. Afterwards, these NGOs launched various training programs, such as plumbing, electrician, carpentry and other construction and livelihood activities. She remembered at least 12 NGOs that offered private housing reconstruction training in Katunje. Most NGOs offered cash allowances, snacks, and meals to the participants.

5.3 | Local opinions to NGOs' disaster recovery projects and state-led housing reconstruction program

5.3.1 | NGOs' programs were insufficient and irrelevant

It was clear from our field study that the local feedback for NGOs' recovery activities was mixed. A few interviewed villagers commented that NGOs' housing training programs were welcome because they learned new skills and could successfully rebuild their earthquake-resistant houses. Sham was one of them. He relied on agriculture and labouring work for his livelihood prior to the earthquake. Then he became a leader of a local house rebuilding working group after he completed the training. His team built over 100 earthquake-resistant houses in Katunje. Unlike most households, instead of having to deal with labour shortages and high labour wages, Sham's neighbours were worked with each other when building houses. When interviewed in 2019, he expressed great satisfaction for his recovery experiences and his new house as stated below:

> There was a lot of work, however, we worked together, we exchanged the labour and my son also supported me financially. In these three years, I learned many things. Before, when we built houses, we only cared about looking nice, but now we are more concentrating on how the things should be joined together. I feel now my house is very strong. (Fieldnote, 2019)

Sham's story was exceptional. In fact, most stories we heard from the interviews reflected villagers' frustrations with NGOs' activities. One Dalit woman said angrily that she refused to attend the NGOs'

FIGURE 2 A model house built by an NGO in Ward 7, Katunje (now Netrawati Municipality Ward 5). Photograph by author (2017).

meetings and training programs because she "just received a notebook and a pen which cost five rupees" and this did not help her at all. During the interviews, some respondents complained the masonry training was not effective because trainees were elected by local political leaders, and after training they simply did not take part in housing reconstruction. Some female villagers also told us that even though women completed the masonry training, they hardly received any employment unlike the males, and when they did so they received much lower wages. According to my field study in Katunje, it was common to see that villagers received in-kind transfers like water filters and goats from the NGOs. All villagers could access clean drinking water; however, they did not understand why the NGOs gave them the filters. One villager also complained that only two goats were given to each village, and this simply would not help them restore their livelihoods at all.

5.3.2 | Overlapping of recovery funds

It was evident that the misuse and overlapping of recovery funds was common in Katunje. On a Friday night in December 2017, the new elected ward leader of Katunje suddenly received a call from a large national NGO which wanted to provide 60-day masonry training for local people with the daily allowance being Rs. 300 (about US$2.6). He was requested to organise some locals as trainees. The leader commented that the training was replicated and offered at the wrong time. He stated, "It is not attractive at all. Now even the unskilled labourer can earn at least Rs. 800 per day. The program will also deteriorate the labour shortage problem as the trainees are the only workers who have skills to rebuild houses."

Despite the fact that for the locals the program appeared to be meaningless, it was difficult for him to reject the program. He explained that, "We want the NGOs to come back to help us in the future." Due to the GoN's reconstruction policy, most NGOs were not directly involved in rebuilding houses for individual families but rather spent funds on training and earthquake-resistant model houses

projects. The NGO model houses were found almost in every ward in Katunje, however, whether or not the locals would follow the design was in doubt. For example, locals told me there was one model house in Ward 7 that cost nearly US$26,000 (Figure 2) while most locals lived below the poverty line, and simply could not afford this. According to World Bank data (2017), Nepal's GNI per capita in 2017 was US$800 and 25% of the country's population is living below the poverty line and live on US 50 cents/day.

Indeed, the upper echelons of government often controlled the recovery projects without doing any local consultation. The Narayan Devi Primary School in Ward 5 is a good example of this. The school offered classes up to Grade 5 and all the classrooms were damaged by the earthquake. Shortly after the earthquake struck, the school had secured sponsorship from two NGOs to rebuild six classrooms. In late 2018, when revisiting the school, I saw some new NGO-sponsored larger classrooms. According to my observation, the school did not use all new classrooms, but instead rented them out to construction workers. It was not only a shame for students who could not study in safe classrooms, but also a waste of funding. While one local primary school received three rebuilding projects, on the other hand, more than 2000 schools still have not been rebuilt and repaired due to the lack of funding and human resources (The Kathmandu Post, 2018). The ward leader felt hopeless about changing the situation and commented, "The agreement was signed between the school, the upper-level government and NGO before the local election was undertaken."

This example clearly demonstrates that the inherent hierarchical structure of the international aid industry would decide how the funds are spent in a particular way, which often favours the government, donors, and elites' preferences. Consequently, the recovery projects would become meaningless to local people's actual needs. In spite of decentralising power from the NRA to local government bodies after the 2017 election as all NGO projects must be endorsed by local governments, it was too late to fully solve governance problems using neoliberal disaster recovery policies. One of the elected Katunje leaders shared his concern as stated here:

> Some NGOs they don't let us know their projects; they just do the things they want. These NGOs/INGOs made the proposal to the Nepali government, they informed the Social Welfare Council, when they got the permission, they did not care about the local people and the local government; they came, worked, and went. We are happy to see them come because we always think something is better than nothing. In my opinion, I don't think there are good coordination among the state government, INGOs/NGOs and the local government. (Fieldnote, 2019)

5.3.3 | Wait-and-see attitudes among earthquake-affected communities

In regard to the housing reconstruction in Katunje village, it made only slow progress. By the time we conducted fieldwork in mid-2017, most

villagers continued to live in their temporary shelters. The district office data shows that the number of completed rebuilt houses in Katunje was still nil with only 10.65% Katunje households receiving second instalments. Most of these were from relatively wealthy Brahmin families.

On the other hand, since the earthquake our organisation worked closely with Ward 9 villagers. In August 2015, a community-based housing reconstruction project was proposed to the villagers, and the plan was met with great enthusiasm and support from the villagers. A local reconstruction committee was formed to coordinate the rebuilding work. In the months that followed, our organisation established partnerships with several professional organisations. The delivered building materials to villagers, who were required to work together in order to build the houses under the supervision of architects and engineers from our partner organisations. However, instead of joining the community-based housing reconstruction project, at the time when the government had announced the amount of money of the earthquake-affected families would be entitled to and the criteria for receiving such support, villagers were divided into two groups: some preferred to rebuild their houses faster and joined our program, but most chose to wait for the government.

In April 2016, the government announced that families who had received or would receive support from NGOs to rebuild their houses would be ineligible to receive government support. The new policy resulted in more and more villagers taking a wait-and-see attitude; they would not rebuild anything until the government distributed money. Finally, the first tranche only became available to Katunje villagers in September 2016, 16 months after the earthquake. According to our field study, most of the villagers used the first tranche for food purchases, celebratory festivals and rituals. Most villagers felt the government's house design was not appropriate for rural area settings, the design was too expensive, there was no knowledge of how to build them, and a serious labour shortage. Consequently, they had no strategy in place when they started to rebuild their homes.

5.4 | Four years after earthquake

5.4.1 | "We built houses because we did not want to be blacklisted"

As time passed, villagers started to feel trapped by the rising costs of both labour wages and construction materials. According to my field study in Dhading, the costs of essential construction materials like cement, bricks and rods have increased by 20%–36% since the earthquake. The government's deadline policy on housing grants made the situation even worse because most villagers feared being blacklisted, and rushed to build their houses as quickly as they could.[3] Most interviewed Katunje households complained that government funding did not meet the expenses at the current market rates. One interviewee remarked that "the new houses are costly because they require iron rods, cement, sand and bricks. All these construction materials must be purchased from the market which creates extra expenses." The

daily wage for a skilled labourer in Katunje had also risen to Rs. 1200, effectively doubling in a year. Some families who did not have extra land to rebuild their house needed at least US$1000 to remove the damaged structure. Some families had to obtain a loan to rebuild their homes. Struggling with such financial limitations, over 90% of interviewed Katunje families chose to build smaller houses (one- to two-bedroom abodes) in order to get the job done quickly. Although the foundations for earthquake-resistant houses should be at least 3 ft deep, some villagers made it only 2 ft to save in materials, labour costs and time. It appeared to be the case that others targeted the housing grants by not taking care about the practicality and quality of their rebuilt homes. One NRA engineer claimed that beneficiaries pushed him to approve their houses as soon as possible. He felt that "households were building their houses not for their families, but for the government."

Although the Nepal government's reconstruction policy and the previous post-disaster housing reconstruction experiences (Jigyasu, 2013) clearly stated that the engineers should conduct intra-construction as well as post-completion inspections to ensure the quality of the homes were up to standard, this seldom happened. The findings indicated that any technical support was extremely rare in most earthquake-hit regions (HRRP, 2019; Limbu et al., 2019). According to the Katunje villagers, they contacted their municipality's engineers many times, but they did not arrive until they had virtually completed the rebuilt houses themselves. When the engineers found out the rebuilt house design did not comply with the earthquake-resistant standard, they requested the villagers to correct this. The villagers hesitated to do so because the correction often cost extra, and this was an expense and time they could not afford.

The strained situation between villagers and engineers did not improve until these engineers worked under the supervision of newly elected ward leaders, not the NRA office in Kathmandu. Due to the huge number of rebuilt houses emerging in only a short time, it was unrealistic for engineers to physically inspect all of them. In Katunje – and as a last resort - the villagers used their smart phones to take photographs of their rebuilt houses, then went to the ward office to show these to the engineers and lodged their second and third tranche house grant applications. This approach assisted with the fast-tracking of house reconstruction work, but without the proper site intra-construction and post-completion inspections being conducted, the quality and safety of rebuilt houses was still in serious doubt. By 2019, virtually all Katunje villagers had finished rebuilding their homes. The rural rebuilding rate increased to 90% by the end of August 2020 (NRA, 2020).

5.4.2 | After rebuilding houses

When asking villagers about their feeling of recovery and reconstruction experiences, their responses were mixed. A few commented that they felt confident about their future, however, the majority of interviewed villagers expressed their worry about heavy debts. To complete the one-room house, Hari - who has a physical disability - had to

sell his cattle to pay the labourer's wage (Rs. 1200 person/day). For him, the future meant repaying the debts. Deuti, a single Dalit woman, told us she did not have a plan to complete the house quickly because of financial problems. Yet she was told she would need to return the first tranche to the government if she failed to rebuild her home before the deadline. Finally, she completed her house but with mixed feelings, "I am proud of myself. It is a one-room earthquake-resistant house but now I am also in debt."

The ward leader described the housing reconstruction program in Katunje as just "a project" being pushed by the GoN, and not something that was meaningful to the villagers, and it substantially disturbed people's daily lives:

> Donors send money to the government; it asks people to rebuild the houses and the local people follow the guidelines. It is all for doing a "project" and all of us just want the project to be finished. If you ask me, what are the outcomes? People gain nothing. No safe houses and our government just want us to finish the project faster. ......Our village is poor; we should place other basic needs for services to be developed as the top priority...People are busy preparing for the rice harvest. Skilled labour is in severe shortage. We do not have enough water for building houses. Villagers now have to wait in a long queue to rebuild their houses and have to accept high labour and building materials costs (Fieldnotes, 2018).

Another feeling shared by the Katunje villagers was that social relationships had become materialistic. It was hard to ask for help especially for building houses, and one villager said people would come only when "Pasia Dinus" ("you give me the money").

6 | DISCUSSION

Nepal's reconstruction experience reveals collective actions and community resilience that arose among disaster-affected communities themselves, however unfortunately, the neoliberal doctrines of governance, especially the asymmetrical relationships between the State, donor, NGOs, and citizens have hampered the effectiveness of resilience-based post-disaster recovery interventions. Three issues, namely the risk of disempowering local communities' capacity, lack of commitment to long-term recovery, and commodification of the recovery process have made these sorts of projects futile and ineffective. The policy does not secure sustainable recovery, but instead tends to favour the interests of international donors and NGOs. In the following subsections, I first discuss community spirit of Katunje villagers and then address hidden problems of neoliberal post-disaster recovery strategies and policies, and the ways in which they may undermine the ability of disaster-affected communities to recover, and to cope with future calamities.

6.1 | Local practice towards community resilience

The Katunje villagers' collective effort throughout the early recovery stage proved motivating. Despite having few resources, they shared food and utensils. They collaborated without the aid of outsiders to build makeshift shelters for the monsoon season for every villager. They took thoughtful, well-planned rehabilitation measures. They resumed their rice growing to ensure future food security and built the temporary infrastructure to ensure that kids could start school as soon as possible. They emphasised how crucial it was to have a community center so they could discuss how to rebuild their village. All of these showed that communities affected by disasters had the ability and knowledge to recover from disturbances and change (Berkes & Ross, 2016; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021). However, strong external players like the State government and NGOs failed to acknowledge their proactive agency of community resilience.

6.2 | Disempowering local capacity

Local involvement is one of the key features of current recovery policies, yet the neoliberal rationale of governance tends to disempower local people and what they can contribute. As mentioned before, international donors often prefer to support close link INGOs and national-based NGOs which share the same vision, as a result, the fast-growing NGO industry is evident in developing countries. Under the hierarchical system, the locally-based or grass-roots NGOs often receive the least power/authority and resources. In the released lessons paper on humanitarian response to earthquakes, Juillard and Jourdain (2019) point out that while locally-based NGOs are recognised as an important element of relief efforts, the humanitarian actors' engagement of these NGOs and local authorities in disaster policies is inadequate.

Such a lack of engagement not only seriously undermines international humanitarian actors' understanding of local needs from those who suffer from disasters, it also prevents the development of national and/or local capacity. This situation was very evident in Nepal. There were plenty of locally-based groups representing a spectrum of vulnerable communities in Nepal, but according to Barbar's (Barbar, 2016) study, the major humanitarian organisations did not proactively engage with these groups in their post-disaster assistance projects. She argues that these international humanitarian agencies missed an opportunity to utilise valuable resources so that disaster policy could be improved. The Katunje case also illustrates that neither the GoN nor the local authorities had sufficient funds and manpower to implement the housing reconstruction and resettlement programs. Most of the recovery activities were directly implemented by INGOs/NGOs without any local consultation. Consequently, villagers could not get on-time technical support to rebuild their houses and the aid did not fulfil their recovery needs. Instead of bypassing state institutions, and further undermining the capacity and accountability issues of the government, it is important to work more closely with local governments because they are responsible for providing

basic services in the recovery phrase, and in a sustainable way (Ansari, 2010; Hartberg et al., 2011; Juillard & Jourdain, 2019). Through working with local authorities this could also greatly improve community problem-solving capacities.

Furthermore, the recovery assistance may increase disaster-affected communities' dependence on others as shown in Katunje and other parts of Nepal (Fehr, 2022). When recovery aid is necessary for helping disaster-affected communities build back better, the policy-makers should also consider how it can be implemented to minimise the culture of dependence and empower their incentives in recovery.

6.3 | Lack of commitment to long-term recovery

Another outcome of international-led recovery policy is short-sightedness where the focus is on short-term and easily quantified project results. Disaster recovery in developing countries is extremely challenging work due to its poor governance, weak financial capacity and the widespread nature and depth of poverty. International experiences reveal that large-scale disaster recovery and reconstruction often takes at least a decade to complete (HRRP, 2019). Yet, it is common to see international humanitarian organisations and donors request quick project completions, while neglecting the long-term recovery needs of affected communities (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021; Stirrat, 2006). The Nepalese case perfectly illustrates that quantity is far more important than quality. The country had suffered a 10-year-long civil war and is still ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world with one quarter of the population living below the poverty line. It was unrealistic that these villagers could completely rebuild their homes in such a short timeframe. However, faced with huge pressure and criticism from international donors, GoN policies imposed a deadline to help speed up housing grant applications.

Consequently, the rate of rebuilding houses in a poverty-stricken village like Katunje rose up to 85% in less than 4 years, yet the detrimental costs of this were poorer house quality and more burdens placed on its people. Reconstruction professionals worry that a large number of vulnerable people would fall further into poverty in the future during and following the recovery. Furthermore, although it was claimed that although 90% of rebuilt houses did comply with the government policy, experts pointed out that in 3–4 years' time, people would start readjusting their houses according to their needs which would make them again vulnerable to future disasters.

6.4 | Commodification of the recovery process

The Nepal reconstruction experience has also indicated the limitations of the owner-driven approach (ODR). It is true that ODR has proved to be more cost-effective and culturally sensitive when compared to contractor-driven reconstruction. Reconstruction professionals believe that ODR can empower local capacity which is important for building a future resilient community. However, some scholars make the criticism that ODR leaves the difficult reconstruction

responsibility to the disaster-affected population who are often still struggling to simply survive from day to day (Lam, 2023; Lam & Kuipers, 2018; Lyons et al., 2010; Oliver-Smith, 2013). The practice of ODR appears to be aligning perfectly with the neoliberal thoughts. In the Katunje village case, the poor had become the scapegoats and were blamed for the slow reconstruction process and so the government had used an administrative strategy (deadlines policy) to coerce the people to rebuild their houses. According to most interviewed Katunje villagers, they had to purchase construction materials from the market to build earthquake-resistant houses. They also complained that government funding was inadequate while low interest rate loans from banks and community help (i.e., labour exchange) were not available for them. Consequently, they took loans from village moneylenders, relatives and friends at high interest rates. The rising costs for building materials, transportation and labour discouraged the villagers to rebuild their houses after the initial disaster stages. This led to it becoming virtually impossible for the most vulnerable groups to afford rebuilding their homes.

7 | A NEED FOR RECOGNISING AND EMPOWERING THE PROACTIVE AGENCY OF COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

To conclude, the entrenchment of neoliberal-type policies in recent times has shaped disaster recovery paradigms as it is demonstrated in the Katunje example. Neoliberal-type recovery and development policies tend to disempower local capacity, since the local communities are rarely involved in meaningful decision-making processes. Donor-led post-disaster recovery policies often lead to short-term and unsustainable projects, and do not seriously consider how these projects can be rather integrated into long-term development policies that seek to enhance vulnerable communities' capacity to cope with future disasters. Finally, a neoliberal disaster recovery strategy tends to leave the recovery work to the market and to the disaster-affected communities themselves. As a result, these interventions create counterproductive aid and transformation. The vulnerable groups are left behind during the recovery process but are also at the mercy of market forces.

Lessons learned from Nepal's catastrophe recovery efforts show that policymakers must immediately acknowledge community resilience as a social process involving local people jointly learning and adapting from crises (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021). Local communities themselves are the ones that start this social learning (Berkes & Ross, 2016; Brown, 2014; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021). Therefore, to enable disaster-affected communities to collectively learn, transform, and develop resilience, policymakers must collaborate with disaster-affected communities, listen to their perspectives, and develop socially sustainable community empowerment strategies in post-disaster management practise (Choudhury et al., 2021; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021). The unequal form and execution of disaster recovery interventions must change if the State government and humanitarian experts are to help a resource-poor nation like Nepal to recover from

the disaster and build a more resilient future. The humanitarian and development practitioners' recent work on "power shift" (Shifting the Power Project, 2017) and "decolonising aid" (Peace Direct, 2021) can help provide disaster recovery professionals with a good departure point to rethink what we can do to make recovery policies better. Furthermore, the Nepal recovery experiences remind us of the danger of top-down resilience initiatives and neoliberal governance assumptions; they tend to normalise vulnerability and make individuals responsible for recovery (Grove, 2018; Gunewardena, 2008; Mackinnon and Derickson, 2013).

To create a resilient society in Nepal, the recovery goals should be to: first, work with local communities to better address local vulnerability and ensure that no one is left behind; and second, give the means for disaster-affected communities to build their capacity in the long-term so that sustainable ways of living can be maintained. To accomplish these goals, humanitarian professionals should identify effective ways to improve the state and local authority expertise and practices, and not deliberately bypass them during the recovery policy-making process as happened in Nepal's case. Top-down reconstruction policy implemented by the state and humanitarian agencies undermines building resilient communities. It is crucial to avoid contributing to and/or fostering a culture of dependence within disaster-affected communities, especially when implementing technical assistance. Hence, local participation should be practiced in a more meaningful way, to allow communities to not simply passively receive donations and materials but in fact, have opportunities to participate in and decide what projects they need to undertake.

Finally, there is currently only little research on the proactive role of community resilience. In particular, there is no mechanism to acknowledge, engage, and empower localities' proactive agency of community resilience. Future study is therefore required to close this gap in disaster recovery and development theory and planning.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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ENDNOTES

[1] The term 'resilience' has appeared in a number of disciplines with significant differences in terminology and criteria. Abundant literature on resilience is now being published (e.g., Bahadur et al., 2010; MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013; Patel et al., 2017). However, in the context of disaster, resilience is not simply defined as the ability to bounce back, or the capacity of a system or community to change and adapt after a disaster (Norris et al., 2008), but also learn to adapt to future shocks and vulnerabilities (Folke et al., 2002; United Nations, 2015).

[2] On March 10th, 2017, the Nepalese government formally adopted a 744 local body system to fulfil the requirements of the new constitution of Nepal in 2015. Katunje village was merged into *Netrawati Rural Municipality*. Although Katunje does in fact no longer exist, I still refer to it throughout the paper as this is what villagers and myself are familiar with.

[3] The GoN announced the first deadline for disbursement of the second tranche of the housing reconstruction funds on 13th April, 2018. Despite the fact that in February 2019, the GoN removed the deadline policy for the second and third tranches regarding the housing grant application, the majority of Katunje villagers had already completed their rebuilt houses.

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