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- nationallevel 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-Phathanothai, 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,"

(Tschakert et al., 2016, p. 192). They conclude that "the main lesson learned from observing power dynamics in adaptive co-learning spaces is that emancipatory agency can indeed emerge but it is likely to be fluid and multifaceted, not neatly black and white, not merely consenting or contesting authority" (Tschakert et al., 2016, p. 192). These findings point to the importance of carefully examining the outcomes of vulnerability reduction projects and to engage stakeholders in contexts wherein they can give frank assessments of whether their needs are being met or not.

To try to overcome some of the power dynamics emerging from the local level, Fazy has focused on techniques to better integrate knowledge across scales, emphasizing the importance of continual engagement with local people beyond the initial participatory encounter. As they argue, "[i]mportantly, in-community methods mean that local beneficiaries are separated from the critical stages of reflection, analysis and interpretation, with most of the learning taking place in distant research institutes." (Fazey et al., 2010, p. 714). They advocate for extending participatory processes to encompass the analysis phases of research. Yet given that such a stance is difficult to implement within research contexts, it is unclear what constraints are thrown up by policy contexts and whether this kind of continual engagement can really overcome the silencing of marginalized people within participatory processes.

Tschakert et al.'s (2016) and Fazy et al.'s (2010) findings point to the importance of tracing how local-level exclusion is linked to exclusion that begins much further up the chain of policy development. The fluidity of emancipatory agency means that under representation of marginalized people remains important and persistent, which many have argued is linked to long-term social relations of exclusion (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Das, 2013; Godfrey-Wood & Naess, 2016; Nightingale, 2011). One key to understanding how exclusions across scales are linked is to attend to the "political and structural barriers at higher spacial and institutional levels as well as to social (cognitive, institutional, and cultural/normative including values) barriers at the local level" (Shackleton, Ziervogel, Sallu, Gill, & Tschakert, 2015, p. 338). To try to cope with these barriers, Ojha et al. (2016) argue that "a new model of delocalized "community" needs to be envisaged, one that emphasizes the interactions among actors within and between spatial scales and levels of political organization (p. 275)." Such observations call for a critical assessment of the inherent limitations of current CCA approaches in addressing the processes through which vulnerability itself is produced. More specifically, there is a need for a better understanding of the moments wherein CCA can perpetuate rather than alleviate the conditions that create differential vulnerability patterns at village level and their origins at other levels of the policy process (see also Eriksen et al., 2015; Mapfumo et al., 2015; Nightingale, 2017; Pelling, 2011).

Nepal's CCA processes are a good context for trying to unravel these barriers and linkages to inclusion because they explicitly try to link scales. Nepal's flagship CCA, the Local Adaptation Plan of Action (LAPA), has been cited as effective and innovative because the LAPA involves integration of top-down and bottom-up approaches to mainstream adaptation into development planning from local to the national level through public participation (Chaudhury et al., 2016; GoN, 2011). During the process of formulating CCA policies, there was an explicit attempt to avoid current political dynamics (Nightingale, 2015; Ojha et al., 2015). Political party debates and alliances were explicitly side-lined in discussions in favor of a focus on technical solutions to adaptation. Yet, cultural and political expressions of power – including through caste, ethnicity, gender, income levels, and political party networks – play an important role in determining access to resources and decision-making processes, and thus in defining differential vul-

nerability patterns (Nightingale, 2006, 2017; Ojha, Khatri, Shrestha, Bushley, & Sharma, 2013) and Humla district is no exception (Nagoda & Eriksen, 2015).

In the context of Humla, we have chosen to view and investigate vulnerability through the lens of food insecurity. Nagoda's research (2015, 2017) has shown that most households in the study area perceive food insecurity as both an outcome of and a measure of their vulnerability. Likewise, the NAPA and LAPAs identify food insecurity resulting from the negative effects of climate change on agricultural production as a main concern, and highlight policies that promote food security interventions as a means of building adaptive capacity in rural areas (MoE, 2010). Such links between food security and vulnerability are well documented in the literature, with studies showing how food deficits can enhance vulnerability to stresses including climate change, and how vulnerability may in turn aggravate food insecurity for certain groups of people (Bohle et al., 1994; Downing, Munasinghe, & Depledge, 2003; Yaro, 2004). We now turn to probing how power relations play out in participatory processes of CCA initiated by food security programs in Humla.

3. Participatory adaptation in Nepal and Humla

Nepal developed a National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) in 2010, supported by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) that provided resources for CCA projects in Least Developed Countries. Under the leadership of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment of Nepal (MoSTE) ,[1] the program aims to coordinate the implementation of and international support for the country's adaptation efforts. Partly because of the particular legacies of participatory forest governance institutions, combined with calls for greater political inclusion in the NAPA process, it was decided to focus primarily on the local level by developing a series of LAPAs (Local Adaptation Plans of Action) (Nightingale, 2015). The LAPAs are intended to ensure that the process of integrating climate change adaptation into local planning is "bottom-up, inclusive, responsive and flexible" (GoN, 2011, p. 3). At the time of our fieldwork, LAPAs were being developed in 70 Village Development Committees (VDC)[2], including five VDCs of Humla.

Various mechanisms and political spaces are supposed to ensure that local needs are taken into account in the formulation and implementation of the country's CCA policies. Responsibility for ensuring local-level participation rests with the District Development Committees (DDCs),[3] which are tasked with coordinating the formulation and implementation of LAPAs in particularly vulnerable VDCs. Importance is also given to Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and village-level "user groups", which are required to include a minimum of 30% women and minorities based on caste and ethnicity to ensure the inclusion of the most vulnerable in decision-making processes (interviews with policy makers; GoN, 2011). These user groups can be new groups or those that have already been established as part of previous or ongoing development efforts (MoE, 2010). The LAPA also has a well-developed participatory methodology that includes the co-identification of local-level hazards and vulnerability, as well as problem-solving activities aimed at generating community consensus over adaptation priorities (Nightingale, 2015; Regmi et al., 2016).

Some of the challenges facing Nepal's CCA policy processes must be understood in relation to the history of the country's insti-

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[1] The Ministry of Environment changed its name to the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment after the adoption of the NAPA in 2010.

[2] A VDC is the smallest administrative unit after the ward in Nepal and contains different villages.

[3] The DDC contains different VDCs. The DDC of Humla contains 27 VDCs.

tutional development and the dynamics of social-political exclusion. Of particular relevance to our topic is the fact that under past autocratic regimes, most of the population, except men from the so-called highest castes, were excluded from formal politics and government bureaucracy (Bista, 1994; Whelpton, 2005). This legacy of socio-political exclusion continues to shape the gender, caste, and ethnic composition of the entire government and civil service structure to this day, and has fueled recent political violence and instability (Jha, 2014). Access to government services is therefore strongly tied to ethnic and community identities. These exclusions sit awkwardly within a development machinery that is, at least on paper, committed to social inclusion.

The district of Humla reflects well the overall character of Nepal's rich cultural and social diversity across ethnic groups and castes. It is a mountainous district bordering Tibet, with altitudes varying from 1524 to 7337 meters above sea level (Roy, 2010). The district is among the poorest (UNFCO, 2013) and most food insecure in the country (DFSN, 2010; UNFCO, 2013). In 2010, the District Food Security Network (DFSN) estimated that about 80% of its 50,000 inhabitants suffered from food insecurity (DFSN, 2010; see also http://neksap.org.np). Humla is also considered to be highly vulnerable to climate change with reports indicating that heavier rainfall during summer and less snow during winter will create unpredictability that undermines traditional livelihood strategies (MoE, 2010; WFP, 2012). In response to the extreme poverty and more recently, to the negative effects of climate change, the district is receiving substantial amounts of humanitarian aid in an effort to enhance the food security situation (Adhikari, 2008) and people's adaptive capacity (MoE, 2010; WFP, 2012).

Subsistence agriculture, mostly on small and rain-fed cultivated areas, animal husbandry, and trade with Non Timber Forest Product (NTFP) are the dominant livelihood strategies. Both Tibetan and Hindu ethnic groups inhabit Humla, although most settlements are segregated along these broad ethnic lines. Hindu caste groups include the so-called "high" caste Bramhan, Chhetri, and Thakuri, and "low"-caste Dalits (see also Cameron, 1998). Social inequities and marginalization processes based on caste, class, ethnic group, and gender play important roles in shaping vulnerability patterns by enhancing or inhibiting people's access to various assets (Bista, 1994; DFID, 2006; Nightingale, 2006, 2011). A previous study done in the area shows that Dalits and women tend to be the most vulnerable to stress, including climate change, as they often lack access to agricultural assets, land, and networks and are underrepresented in local decision-making processes (Nagoda & Eriksen, 2015). It is within this complex sociopolitical context that CCA programs are expected to address household vulnerability to stressors such as climatic change.

4. Research design

In order to better understand the limitations of current CCA approaches in addressing vulnerability, we examine how various interests were negotiated in the main policy spaces on three levels of the CCA policy process: (i) the village level; (ii) the district level and (iii) the national level and its interface with both the village/district and international levels. National-, district- and village-level data were collected through a total of 194 qualitative interviews over a five-year period from 2009 to 2014 (see also below). Interviewing was done until "theoretical saturation" was reached (Hesse-Biber, 2010), in other words, no new information emerged in subsequent interviews.

On each of the three policy levels, we identify how the interests of different groups are reflected in policy formulation, implementation, and outcomes. Interviews were undertaken in Nepali at village and district levels and in English at national level. Data were

triangulated (Hesse-Biber, 2010) by observations of everyday life in the villages and participation in seminars and political meetings at the district and national levels. Interview material was coded and analyzed for recurring themes related to power relations at different scales.

On the local level, two villages were the focus of the study; Syaandaa in the northern part of Humla and Khanke in the southern part of the district. They suffer from serious food insecurity (DFSN, 2010), are considered particularly vulnerable to climate change (HTSPE, 2012), and have been subject to interventions aimed at enhancing the food security and adaptive capacity of the inhabitants. A total of 102 semi structured and informal interviews were conducted, selected as randomly as possible (through a list of household heads) to get a fairly equal representation within each village. An additional 23 interviews were undertaken in Khaagaagalon, which lies a few hours walk to the north of Syaandaa and is inhabited by Buddhist Tibetan speaking people. Households in Khaagaagaoun engage more in trade and are considered to be less food insecure than the other villages in the study area (DFSN, 2010). The informal qualitative interviews were open ended, focusing on people's perceptions of key factors causing vulnerability and how their concerns were taken into account in decision-making processes. In addition, seven focus groups, including Dalits, Thakuri, women, very poor, and elders, were undertaken to clarify issues brought up during individual interviews. Special attention was paid to the social dynamics and processes of marginalization in the two user group committees created by the World Food Programme (WFP) in the villages of Syaandaa and Khankhe to ensure local participation in its food security and climate change adaptation programs.

At the district level, 28 qualitative interviews were done in the district headquarters of Simkot with local leaders, politicians, NGO representatives and government officials. Questions related to how CCA policies are formulated and implemented, and how information from the local level influences decision-making processes, and the mechanisms in place to ensure participation at the district and national levels. We also observed meetings and informal interactions between district-level development workers, government officials, political parties, and NGOs in order to gain insight into how different knowledges and interests influence decision-making in district-level policy spaces.

At the national level, a total of 48 semi-structured and informal interviews with key informants were conducted with policy makers, donors, and representatives of aid agencies in Kathmandu.

Informants include donors, representatives of international organizations (international NGOs, World Bank, Asian Development Bank and United Nations) and the national government. At the policy level, we were particularly interested in unpacking how policies are formulated and by whom, different understandings of the root causes of vulnerability, how social inclusion is addressed and the extent to which national policies processes are open for the participation of people with different interests. To help triangulate results, a seminar was organized in Kathmandu in 2014 to bring together donors, government officers, international NGOs, and research institutes, both as a means of gaining input to our preliminary research results, and to observe how social and power relations play out in such contexts.

In addition to the interviews mentioned above, we build our analysis on the results of a detailed review of Nepal's main CCA policy documents, the NAPA and the LAPA framework. Documents were coded for the recurrence of themes related to inclusion and vulnerability (see also Nagoda, 2015). Taken together, investigating across these three policy levels allows us to analyze how social and power relations interact at different scales to shape policy processes in a way that favors certain approaches to CCA at the expense of others. As we will probe in the following sections, these

dynamics have a significant influence on the capacity of CCA programs to address the conditions that shape the vulnerability context for the most marginalized households.

5. Power within the CCA policy process: The case of Humla

(a). The village level

Community-based user groups are the lowest level policy space in Nepal's CCA policy implementation process. The NAPA considers the user groups to be a key mechanism for ensuring social inclusion, identifying particularly vulnerable groups and households, and proposing measures to reduce their vulnerability (GoN, 2011). However, our analysis of user groups facilitated by WFP in Humla reveals that at the village level, policy implementation and action are not neutral arenas where households participate and contribute on equal terms; rather they are spaces where pre-existing power relations influence whose knowledge and concerns count and whose are ignored.

At the time of fieldwork, the two community-level user groups consisted of nine members each, facilitated by the NGOs responsible for implementing WFP's projects. These user *groups* (also named user *committees* by WFP) included both men and women, and representatives of households from the different local castes, so on the level of policy implementation, it appears that the mandate of inclusion is met. The NGO was also responsible for conveying input from the user committees to WFP on the district and national levels, as well as to the government through the Nepal Food Security Monitoring and Analysis System (NeKSAP), making a link between the local level and the national level. In every Ward[4], one person was responsible for ensuring that as many people as possible participated in the activities decided upon by the user committees. The main activities implemented by the two user committees studied were the construction of irrigation systems, *attis*[5] cultivation and the building of fences to keep livestock out of cultivated areas.

Although the chairman of one user committee assured us that the committees are very inclusive and in particular that women and low-castes households of Dalits are encouraged to participate—again fulfilling the policy mandate at the level of implementation—interviews with villagers and other members of the user committees revealed that decisions made largely coincided with the priorities of economically better-off and high-caste households. Indeed, the most marginalized households, often belonging to Dalit families and the very poor, made a direct link between their vulnerability situation and socio-political discrimination such that they were unable to capitalize upon adaptation measures adopted (see also Nagoda, 2015). The better-off and high-caste households, on the other hand, pointed to the need for technological adaptation measures such as drought resistant crops and irrigation. Unsurprisingly, the user committee's activities were overwhelmingly dominated by these technological measures and thus reflect how exclusion takes place at the moment of adopting adaptation actions.

As a result of these "participatory exclusions", many vulnerable households chose not to participate in user committee meetings, as they did not think that their participation would change outcomes. As one interviewee from a Dalit household stated, "It is a waste of time [to go to these meetings], these people are not interested in listening to us." A female member of a user committee said, "The men don't pay attention to the women anyway, so I would rather work on the fields than go to the meetings." These results suggest that despite well-trained NGO facilitators and various participatory methodologies, marginalized user committee members feel unable to influence the overall process (see also Nightingale, 2011, 2015). Thus, as adaptation actions are executed on the ground, pre-existing relationships undermine inclusion policy goals.

The persons identified as dominating the user committee meetings were without exception men from high castes or better-off households, and were referred to as local leaders by other villagers. Interestingly, local and district level interviews revealed that most of these local elites have connections with political parties, local governments at the VDC or DDC level, and NGOs in Simkot (the district center). Their connections were widely regarded by local people (across castes) as vital for obtaining government resources for the villages, including food aid from humanitarian organizations. At the same time, their network capacity with local, political and governmental organizations at the district level also helps them to promote their own interests and maintain their social status – an opportunity not available to most marginalized households.

While many NGO facilitators recognize that power relations inhibit the active participation of the most vulnerable at user committee meetings, they stated that they find themselves limited to simply encouraging women and Dalits to attend. They have neither the mandate to change power dynamics at the local level, nor are they provided with the tools or guidance necessary to identify and analyze the causes of exclusion in these everyday interactions (see also Tschakert et al., 2016 for the complexities of such exclusions). An NGO staff member said, "There are criteria about women's and Dalits' inclusion in users groups but they just sit down and do not participate. Thus, inclusion is only symbolic. The benefits for them [women and Dalits] are just to get food, but no progress on inclusion is achieved." The result is meetings with lists of participants that "look good on paper", according to the same NGO worker, but do not address the context and dynamics through which the most vulnerable are marginalized. One interviewee at the VDC level went a step further by claiming that most lists of user committees at the village level are fake and include names of Dalits just to get more money from donors. He argued that "everybody can write whatever they want, since donors never come to check what their projects look like". While it is outside the scope of this study to verify such claims, the fact that many villagers and development workers alike expressed deep mistrust of the mechanisms established for local participation, seriously undermines the legitimacy of the CCA policy process to promote inclusion. Of particular importance is the way that power relations shaping access to district-level officials and resources, reinforce the participatory exclusions that go on at village level. While the presence of facilitators is intended to undermine such dynamics, facilitators themselves make it clear there is only so much they can do.

Although the interviews cited above refer to user committees from WFP projects, and thus have a somewhat different participatory methodology for engaging local people, an interview with a local NGO responsible for implementing the LAPA in Humla confirmed that no new tools have been provided in LAPA. Recent reports emerging from the field support the idea that local-level participatory methodologies are inadequate for overcoming entrenched power relations at village level, and even less so at district level (Regmi et al., 2016).

By failing to include the perspectives of the most vulnerable, development and adaptation processes also fail to provide district and national governments with the information they require in order to address the causes of differential vulnerability within the villages. The following sections analyze CCA at district and village local government levels and show how the links between local elites, NGOs, political parties, and local government officials cement pre-existing vulnerability dynamics.

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[4] VDCs are composed of nine wards. One village comprises one or more wards.

[5] *Attis* is a non-timber forest product considered to have high market value in the region.

(b). District and village local government levels

Nepal's CCA policies place significant emphasis on the role of the district-level governments in ensuring that the most vulnerable have a voice in the overall policy processes. However, as demonstrated above, having a voice is not sufficient, nor does a facilitating environment guarantee that the perspectives of the most vulnerable will be taken into account (Ensor & Harvey, 2015; Nightingale, 2017; Tschakert et al., 2016). Rather, power relations and the ubiquitous influence of formal political party politics in all aspects of local governance are a constant barrier to equity in participation in Nepal.

The nefarious aspects of the politicization of all aspects of district-level government emerged in interviews at district-level policy spaces (see also Byrne & Shrestha, 2014; Nightingale, 2015). The need for links between local-level elites and district-level officials and development actors in order to gain access to government resources creates barriers to implementing inclusive policies. A development worker from an International NGO based in Kathmandu expressed it this way: "Working in Humla is like walking on eggs and finding a local partner who is not engaged in politics is hard." Being involved in politics carries with it an implication that district, NGO and village-level actors will prioritize their own constituency over a wider perspective on vulnerability in the district or village as a whole. There is a shared perception that because the district-level government lacks political legitimacy and accountability, it leaves space for opportunistic political actors to grab the benefits of development projects, including CCA programs. This belief is underpinned by reports of corruption and the fact that when local-level elections were finally held in 2017, twenty years had passed since the previous local elections (see also International Crisis Group, 2011).

Many of our respondents described the lack of accountability and legitimacy of the local government as an important reason that CCA programs are struggling to reach the most vulnerable households. For example, the former VDC chairman (an elected position)[6] of a village told us, "A lot of NGOs come here and make agreements with the DDC but the people who are supposed to be the beneficiaries never receive anything from these projects ... There is no law here and the government doesn't care about our problems." District level political leaders themselves also expressed a strong sense of distrust, which they directed upwards and pointed to the lack of integration of interests and accountability across scales. One district leader said: "[In] the name of development, the government and NGOs give millions, but the results are not good. Everything is unstable and there are no control mechanisms. How can the government control NGOs' funds when they don't manage to calculate their own funds?"

The weak administrative capacity caused by the lack of local elected officials and ongoing political instability makes efforts to plan and implement CCA programs at district level extremely challenging (see also Nightingale, 2015, 2017). The DDC reports to the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD), while sectoral line agencies are accountable to their national-level ministries. The MoSTE, which is responsible for the national CCA policy, has no line agency at the district level nor any direct legal links with the DDC (Nightingale, 2015, 2017; Ojha et al., 2015). District government officials reported that they had lost clarity regarding their own roles and responsibilities, particularly as projects work their way through the INGO-DDC-NGO-VDC-village chain. This governance vacuum left by the weak district government is being filled in rather traditional ways, via networks of patronage in which political party representatives, through their links with NGOs and local elites, appear to be particularly active. This claim was well summarized by one district government official who said: "There are a lot of NGOs here and they are doing their own projects. We are responsible for coordinating but we have no authority." This lack of clear responsibility combined with the expansion of patronage networks adds another barrier to executing participatory and inclusive CCA policies.

To strengthen the cross-sectoral coordination capacity at the DDC and VDC levels in relation to CCA programs, new mechanisms have been created under the LAPA framework. These include the District Energy, Environment and Climate Change Committee (DEECCCC) and the Village Environment, Energy and Climate Change Coordination Committee (VEECCCC). According to the MoSTE, efforts are also made to integrate the LAPAs into DDC and VDC development plans. However, local development workers expressed little hope that the CCA policy framework, in its current form, would be able to challenge the dominant role played by powerful actors at national and local levels in defining local development priorities. One of the main barriers is that no official entity is accountable for ensuring that social inclusion and participatory objectives are implemented in CCA. Instead, this responsibility is passed onto the NGOs as project implementers; NGOs which are dominated by patronage networks and links to local elites, and therefore do not necessarily champion the needs of the most marginalized households. In interviews, several representatives of the three main political parties in Humla readily described the close links that they, or their family members, have with local NGOs and our own observations confirmed such links.

The interpersonal connections between political parties, local governments and NGOs are particularly problematic since the LAPA framework allocates an important role to local NGOs (also referred to as "service providers") as a link between the policy spaces at the community level and the local governments (DDC and VDCs). The selected local NGOs are tasked with carrying out participatory local-level vulnerability assessments and feeding these into the district level. However, villagers do not regard NGOs as neutral actors conveying the diversity of opinions and interests from the villages to the district level. Rather, they are seen as representatives of powerful families with particular political and economic interests. One village informant said, "The NGOs don't go to the people here [to understand their needs] but rather make projects just for their friends." In another interview, an informant from the same village stated: "Those who benefit from the projects are always the same people that are educated and have good connections." As a result, the very poor households—who without exception are not well educated and have no political connections—believe they have no opportunity to influence the CCA policy process.

In these ways, at the level of policy implementation, patronage and personal networks block inclusion for the most marginalized. Political and power relationships were consistently hinted at or directly articulated by local interviewees concerned about the lack of transparency in the processes of selecting the villages and NGOs to participate in the CCA process. It is in these ways that we see exclusion begin at the level of policy implementation. Furthermore, development workers told us how the struggle by local political leaders to influence the selection process of the villages and the NGOs eligible for the implementation of the LAPAs has created serious tensions. In the district headquarters of Simkot, for example, one person was reportedly murdered in the wake of disputes between political parties and NGOs attempting to gain access to CCA funding, and for the sake of our own security we were advised by one donor official not to investigate the power struggles relating to the LAPAs.

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[6] He is no longer an elected official but introduced himself to us as the "chairman" indicating he still exercises a local political leadership role.

These findings underscore the fact that CCA forms part of, and cannot be analyzed separately from, the broader vulnerability context that determines the options people have in the process of adapting to change; in fact, CCA may even produce new sources of vulnerability. These new sources include the concentration of project benefits on those already well connected, the exploitation of new projects for political ends, the threat of violence linked to such exploitation, and further exclusion of the poorest.

(c). National policy, donors, and local levels

Our third level of analysis focuses on the policy dynamics that take place in the interface between international aid agencies and donors, national policy objectives, and local-level policy spaces. Interviews at the national level indicated donors mistrust the government's capacity to implement CCA interventions effectively, and rather overwhelmingly favor the use of NGOs to implement their programs. This institutional choice (Ribot, 2003) further undermines the ability of district and local level government offices to incorporate the perspectives of the most marginalized into CCA implementation and action.

Similar to our findings at district level, interviews with representatives of international agencies pointed to political instability, corruption and the personal agenda of politicians and civil servants as major hindrances to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable in the face of climate change. One donor representative admitted that donor agencies could do more to help create the necessary capacity within the government to implement social inclusion policies, but acknowledged that different donors are poorly coordinated and tend to pursue quick and measurable results. Clearly frustrated with the CCA process, he said: "The government wants 80% of the funds going to the local level but there are no good mechanisms to use these funds at the local level." Our results strongly support their claims that the local level lacks good mechanisms and helps to show why the using existing mechanisms might be doing more harm than good, at least for the most marginalized people.

The tendency to point the finger at the district and VDC level as being the fundamental stumbling block to effective adaptation implementation was not limited to non-governmental actors. Many national-level civil servants in Nepali government offices highlighted the issue of institutional choice at the local level, and argued that more long-term funding for local governments is needed to build the necessary capacity to coordinate and implement the CCA policies. One central government official pointed out, "By bypassing the government, they [donors] take capacity and ability to plan and implement projects away from the government." Most national-level government officials complained about the unpredictable, limited, and short-term funding available for CCA through governmental and donor channels. These statements point to one way that international donors are unable to address vulnerability needs within countries they support. In their efforts to reach the grassroots, many are undermining the long-term ability of the government to address its citizens' needs (Ribot, 2003).

Another barrier to effective inclusion that emerges at the level of policy formulation is that tackling power relations requires deep engagement with context specific political and power dynamics, which in some cases may not be desirable for international donors. As a result, promoting technocratic, apolitical outcome oriented approaches, legitimized through processes of local participation, is a far safer course of action for actors involved in the CCA process. Mohan and Stokke (2008) have shown how national governments find it advantageous to shift the burden of service delivery onto local stakeholders, and strengthen their political base through supporting the delivery of short-term benefits directly to local villages, even if donors are the actual providers of such benefits. Likewise,

humanitarian INGOs and donors avoid promoting social inclusion in order to side step thorny issues of "imposing Western values" or "interfering in internal affairs". At the same time, while apolitical and technocratic approaches may be the preferred approach for many (Eriksen, Inderberg, O'Brien, & Sygna, (2015), some NGOs want to work on long-term projects and have expressed frustration with the timelines imposed by the LAPA process (see also Nightingale, 2015). They are pushed by donors and the government to produce quick and measurable results within a short time frame, without having the time, the tools or the capacity to design projects that place transformational change of social and power relations within CCA as central objectives.

6. Conclusions

The case study of Humla presented here explores how policy objectives intended to foster social inclusion and local participation are diluted as CCA policies are implemented and enacted across scales. The analysis has focused on the mechanisms by which CCA policies fail to contest power dynamics that shape local-level vulnerability patterns. Tracing from the local level to the international-national interface reveals that exclusion of the most marginalized happens at the moments of policy implementation and adaptation actions, and in many cases is driven by the same power relations that shape local vulnerability patterns in the first place.

At the local level, participatory CCA processes serve to entrench existing power relations and social hierarchies rather than effectively challenge them. Marginalized people find committee meetings a waste of time, as they are unable to shape the decisions that are made. While this finding is not new, it takes on new importance in adaptation contexts. The vast majority of adaptation measures adopted focus on technical inputs to improve productivity and access to markets, solutions which are inaccessible for marginalized, food insecure households (see also Nagoda, 2015, 2017; Nightingale, 2017). These findings underscore the fact that CCA forms part of the broader vulnerability context that determines the options people have in the process of adapting to change.

Furthermore, our study has added empirical evidence to the ways that politics in Nepal today serve to exclude marginalized people in programs that explicitly try to avoid political dynamics (Nightingale, 2015; Ojha et al., 2015). Local elites control access to politicians, government officers and NGOs, effectively acting as gate-keepers to participation. Entrenched social hierarchies ensure that marginalized households rarely move into such positions of influence (Das, 2013). These dynamics result in a stabilization of the status quo, promoting technocratic and apolitical approaches to adaptation with CCA programs that exclude the most vulnerable households from processes that are explicitly intended to benefit them. Hence, even though social inclusion is written into national-level CCA policies, the interests of the most vulnerable are overshadowed by the interest of elites that dominate how policy is implemented and enacted at local and national levels.

We also find a strong mismatch between the role allocated to local-level governments by national-level policies, and the abilities of district governments to coordinate to implement these policies. The on-going political instability has undermined the legitimacy of district governments such that officials find themselves unable to function without colluding with local politicians and elites (Byrne & Shrestha, 2014). The lack of effective and legitimate local governments has created an institutional vacuum that is used by political and local elites to assert their interests within the CCA process. As a consequence, barriers to inclusion and incorporating the needs of the most marginalized people into CCA policy imple-

mentation and adaptation actions are generated at scales beyond the village or community.

We therefore argue that an uncritical focus on local participation in the CCA processes may disguise the fact that local and national government and development actors, including NGOs and village-based organizations, are themselves part of a complex system with varying and contradictory interests. By studying the local and national levels conjointly, our study reveals a pattern in which the interests and choices of local elites, NGOs, national political leaders, donors and government agencies interact and work together to dominate the policy process. This comes at the expense of social inclusion goals that are emphasized at the level of policy formulation and even at the level of implementation. Marginalized people are actively included in participatory user committees, but their inabilities to influence those processes are widely acknowledged. By failing to meaningfully include the most marginalized people, CCA programs also fail to provide district and national governments with the information they require in order to address the causes of vulnerability within the villages. Consequently, differential vulnerability patterns remain unaddressed and the interests of local elites prevail.

Of most concern, this case study demonstrates how the same actors, interests and political processes that define CCA policy implementation and actions are also shaping the vulnerability context CCA policies are intended to address. It is a paradox that the de-politicization of CCA approaches at international and national levels (Eriksen et al., 2015; Ojha et al., 2015) in fact contributes to an over-politicization of local-level policy spaces, where local politics expressed through unequal social and power relations play a dominant role in defining how CCA policies play out (Nightingale, 2017). Our results suggest that CCA may even produce new sources of vulnerability. In the Humla case, these new sources include the capturing of project benefits by local elites, the manipulation of new projects for political ends, the threat of violence linked to such manipulations, and further exclusion of marginalized households. In this sense, the strong focus of international CCA programs on participation to build local-level adaptive capacity can be used – intentionally or unintentionally –to avoid addressing the complex socio-political dimensions of vulnerability. Although the case of Humla may be a particular one with its unique historic, environmental and sociopolitical context, it throws into relief the urgent need to take seriously the inherent challenges associated with participatory development in CCA. It cautions us against assuming that "adaptive learning" (Rodela, 2013) or "co-management" (Berkes, 2004) are adequate responses to the challenges of climate change.

Acknowledgments

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