

# CLIMATE CHANGE, GOVERNANCE AND FRAGILITY: RETHINKING ADAPTATION

Lessons from Nepal

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Cover image: © Jason Miklian. Girl surveys the silt-covered Koshi River floodplain, formerly her family's farmland, as her family loads up a bicycle with possessions after being displaced by the flooding.

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# INTRODUCTION

This paper is a collection of reflections from a field visit to three districts in the middle hills and Terai belt of eastern Nepal (Sunsari, Dhankuta and Morang) which set out to explore the various dimensions of the resilience of climate-affected communities. By sharing the perceptions and insights of community members from these districts,<sup>1</sup> this paper aims to shed light on the complexities of these particular local contexts and flag some of the specific challenges of responding to climate change in fragile and conflict-affected contexts such as Nepal.

It is not surprising that some of the views expressed will be contested, contradicted and contentious, but the research methodology wanted to ensure that as broad a range of views as possible could be collected so that those developing adaptation responses could have a deeper understanding of the complexities around perceptions and realities. It is intended that further analysis will build on these reflections as part of a necessary discourse on rethinking adaptation in fragile states.

**Sunsari, Dhankuta and Morang Districts**



Source: Hégésippe Cormier

## KEY MESSAGES:

- 1. We don't need to wait for climate-change science to start building resilience.** Accurate country-specific data on climate impacts in Nepal and many other countries are still years away. Even so, much progress can be made towards building resilience in communities by strengthening governance structures which can better cope with variability and uncertainty. Given the uncertainties around the impact of climate change – and the political contestation that accompanies this uncertainty – a productive path of analysis is one that focuses on *resilience*. Resilience is a more flexible and useful term than “adaptation”, given that the latter tends to focus on adjustments to actual or anticipated climate impacts. Initiatives to promote stronger and accountable governance and more responsive and effective service delivery mechanisms – provided they are done in a climate-sensitive way – will go a long way towards building resilient communities.
- 2. Addressing environmental dimensions of resilience to climate change alone will not work.** An individual's ability to cope with shocks is determined by a set of linked factors which limit the options which they have. Levels of development, government, equity, trade and the strength of the national economy all affect the ability of an individual or a community to cope. Efforts to build resilience to environmental shocks need to take account of all these linked factors – not just ones which are visibly linked to the environment. This requires two things: firstly, understanding of climate resilience needs to be broadened to include the less directly climate-related yet nevertheless fundamental dimensions of resilience such as governance, physical security and justice; and secondly, a shift in funding streams is required such that eligibility for climate adaptation funding is not limited to narrow and technical interpretations of “adaptation”.

*What we need are livelihood opportunities and roads. Those are our most important needs. Women need to be represented 50 percent in everything – whether livelihood opportunities, discussions – we are equal to men and need to be involved as much as they are.*

**Resident of the acutely flood-prone village of Haripur, Nepal**

<sup>1</sup> The quotations in this paper do not represent the views of the author, International Alert or IfP.

*Our problem is the political crisis and the problems emanating from this.*

**District Superintendent of Police, Sunsari district**

*The biggest issue we face today is the political transformation period. Political transformation means there is no strength to prevent or manage problems. We have empowerment but we don't have responsibility.*

**Employee, Dhankuta Municipality**

**3. Inappropriate interventions are currently the biggest risk to peace and security in communities with weak governance.** Just like any other interventions, responses to climate change have the potential to inadvertently do harm in a fragile context. Such interventions could potentially tip a given situation (back) into instability. Given the large sums of money involved, and the complex ethics of responsibility and justice surrounding climate assistance, particular care must be taken to ensure that interventions are sensitive to the context in which they operate, and that they do no harm to the often delicate social balance. Lessons from the field of conflict-sensitivity need to be applied to climate-change adaptation in fragile contexts to ensure that interventions have a positive impact on peace and stability.

*I have heard that lots of money for the floods has gone into meetings and making a report on the floods, and now it is all sitting in a computer. Everything has just floated away down the river.*

**NGO community leader, Itahari, Nepal**

**4. Solutions will not be neat. The people of these districts – and of Nepal as a whole – face interlinked problems with no clear-cut answers.** Frameworks being drawn up will not be able to adequately take account of all the relevant cross-cutting issues that need to be integrated, such as gender, biodiversity, conflict and human rights. Policy responses and institutions responsible must be more reflective and accept this complexity. Rather than attempting to create neat frameworks and then struggling with all the additional issues which need to be “mainstreamed” into these frameworks, more energy should be put into exploring institutional structures which can supersede existing siloed architecture to promote genuinely joined-up working.

## INTERLINKED PROBLEMS REQUIRE INTERLINKED SOLUTIONS

*Disasters are a multidimensional problem. There are social, economic and political disasters, they are never solely natural, they are manmade.*

**Employee, Dhankuta Municipality**

The impacts of climate change and variability are felt through a number of complex and linked factors such as weak governance, lack of capacity to adapt, poverty, inequality, legacy of past conflicts, political instability and ethnic fault lines.

We can't delineate environmental from other dimensions of risk. Regardless of the actual cause of risk, whether it is linked to climate variability or change or other factors, existing vulnerabilities such as unemployment or weak governance will be exacerbated. And communities have to adapt one way or another. In fragile or unstable states, such impacts can have a negative effect on peace and stability if adaptation is not handled in a sensitive and inclusive way.

Some states identified as being most vulnerable to climate impacts are already barely capable of performing key state functions such as ensuring access to basic healthcare or clean water for all. A large part of the reason for such states' vulnerability is not the intensity of the climate hazard they face but their limited governance capacities.

States such as Nepal, which are widely deemed to be post-conflict, are on a precarious path to peace. They face economic and political challenges, with the additional pressure of environmental risks. The caretaker government in Nepal lacks the capacity to adequately respond to existing economic and political strains such as the reintegration of over 19,400 ex-combatants in UN-monitored camps. This could tip the balance towards greater vulnerability to climate-change impact.

Adaptation to climate change is already happening – both at community level and nationally driven. But the latter is rarely done to build resilience in the broadest sense. It is usually initiated within narrow frameworks such as National Adaptation Programmes of Action as per the stipulations of adaptation financing. There is no allowance for linked risks such as security and justice in these frameworks. Yet efforts to build resilience to climate change won't work unless they take account of the other linked factors such as exclusion, discrimination and physical insecurity, which combine with climate change to make individuals and communities vulnerable.

For example, a new government of Nepal pilot project to address energy security and reduce deforestation through promotion of biogas plants is being rolled out in nine districts. The switch to biogas aims to curb deforestation for fuelwood, thereby decreasing risks of soil erosion and landslides. But the pilot implementation was halted in three districts – Saptari, Udayapur and Siraha – due to the local security situation. Such decisions leave these communities doubly vulnerable: both to the lack of sustainable energy sources and because of pre-existing insecurity.

Adaptation programmes geared towards addressing only the physical impacts and which ignore the social and political processes could be even worse than no adaptation at all simply because they could stifle other efforts by communities to build resilience and thus further exacerbate social cleavages. There needs to be more understanding of how adaptation can work in the face of insecurity.

### The Story of Kamal Bahadur Gurung<sup>2</sup> and his Displaced Pahadi (“hill”) Community

[This brief story articulates the particular perception and experience of an individual at a point in time. Much more needs to be done to understand and address the complex interactions between Pahadi and Madesi communities. This is an issue that needs to be dealt with with a high degree of sensitivity.]

I was a farmer in Haripur, Sunsari district. I raised livestock. Buffalo, that is what we do here. We were on land but it was rented land. Now we have even less – we live on government land that is set aside as irrigation land.

In 2005–06, we were forced to leave Haripur by an armed group called the Madesi Tigers, who stole our livestock, beat and abducted people and gang-raped our women. They even killed people.

Before this, we had no such problems with the Madesi community. The political volatility – specifically the lack of security – and certain political parties supporting local gangs for their political gain made the local gangs more powerful. Around this time we never slept in our houses, we would sleep in the jungle or we would have been killed. They abducted six people and they sent us a letter telling us to leave this place or they would do anything to them.

We reported it to the police but they were no help. They promised us security and told us to go back to our homes, and we believed them. But the gangs came again and took people and killed them, so we had to leave. I used to have a shop and around 60 buffaloes. Eighteen were stolen, some were lost. Normally I could get NRs 25,000 per head for them, but I had to sell them quickly for NRs 8,000 each.

We tried to organise a protection force within our community, but we had only sticks. In all, about 150 households left. Sixteen of these live in the same area as me. Some went to the hills, some to Jhapa and Morang.

In the beginning, ICRC gave us shelter and food. We have received no assistance from the government. We now earn through labour work – even young children and the elderly. We have been asked to return to Sunsari but we do not feel secure enough.

<sup>2</sup> Name has been changed for the purpose of this study.

## COMPLEXITY OF CONTEXT

That development interventions must be context-specific rather than “one size fits all” is often asserted but rarely realised. The reasons for the poor take-up of this widely held norm are largely pragmatic. It will take a lot more time and resources to undertake a thorough context analysis of each local environment for every intervention. However, in fragile states, more than ever, it is crucial to get the contextual analysis right.

*Most INGOs' interpretations of the International Labour Organisation Article 169 [on indigenous rights] do not apply to us because the social structure here is more complex than that definition suggests. It's not so simple that just because you are a Brahmin [high caste] you have all the resources and rights, and just because you are a Janjati [lower caste] you don't. A poor person is a poor person, regardless of whether he is Brahmin or Janjati. For example, there is a poor Brahmin downstream, and a wealthy Janjati upstream, and according to Article 169, the Janjati will have more rights to the water than the Brahmin. Who is an indigenous person and who is not? We are all people. This Article 169 is a UN blunder. It's a misrepresentation of equity; it gives me [as an indigenous person – a Yakha] more power and rights than my neighbour.*

**Local resident and member of the Yakha “indigenous” community, Dhankuta district**

*Donors are bringing projects which are not fitting local needs. Rights should empower people but they have not done so. Awareness of rights is here but there is no accompanying responsibility. Everyone's happy to get funds from donors but, when they run out of donor funding, they come back to us (local government). There is quite a dependence on INGO/donor assistance which seems to take away the responsibilities from local authorities. Regular financing for public info radio stations should be the government's responsibility, but instead it is all NGO funded.*

**Employee of Municipality, Dhankuta district**

*In Nepal, ethnicity is a largely political construct. The local context is socially and culturally complex. It is social and cultural factors which determine economic activity – not ethnicity. These organisations must understand the local reality and they must make central government aware of the local reality.*

**Mahendra Kumar Khamyahang, employee Dhankuta Municipality**

Perceived risks and inequalities based on historical relations or political propaganda are part of the complex mix of interactions of climate impacts. These perceptions can be just as harmful as actual impacts and, as such, require more research and policy attention.

### A Local Community Member's Perceptions on the Koshi Barrage Breach in October 2008

The Indians manage everything to do with the [Koshi] barrage. They decide how many of the 56 gates are opened at any time, and are responsible for maintenance. Even the writing on the door of the "Koshi Barrage Control Room" is in Hindi not Nepali – showing us who is in control.

India has vocally expressed regret for having originally situated the investment for the Koshi Barrage in its current spot and now they are more interested in building a new "High Dam" upstream where the Koshi River flows down into the hills – this has massive energy-production potential for India. Due to this, there is a lack of interest by India in the proper upkeep of the existing Koshi Barrage – which is over 50 years old and very costly to maintain.

Since the Indian [government] aren't too engaged in the downstream Bihari village of Birpur, which is most at risk if the barrage is breached, there is no real incentive to put in the kind of investment that is needed to safeguard the aging infrastructure. Lack of Indian interest in maintaining the dam is evident from less frequent patrols by Indian authority vehicles – who would otherwise monitor daily along the embankment.

Many Nepalis in the region felt that the breaching of the barrage was part of a deliberate plan by the government of India to let the barrage break so that they could justify building a new "Saptakoshi High Dam" upstream. Community groups in the hill region where the High Dam will be situated (most vulnerable to flooding and displacement by the construction), e.g. Chatra village, are very actively campaigning against the plans. Plans for the new High Dam are not yet finalised – India has only completed an assessment.

With repairs [to the Koshi Barrage] in 2008, apparently the Indian contractors were hugely exploiting government contracts – for example charging for 500 sandbags but only delivering 100 and selling off the rest. The Nepali workers, becoming aware of this corruption, went on strike – during the monsoon (the worst possible time to strike) ... This contributed to our feeling that the floods were under India's control.

On the day of the floods, India authorised 28 out of 56 of the barrage gates to be opened, although they were aware of the heavy water flow, as they were concerned about flooding downstream in Bihar. Although Bihar was greatly vulnerable, this left the Nepali victims feeling very angry – especially as they received no prior warning.

As well as the economy around selling off materials intended for bridge repair, it was also interesting to watch the economy that grew up around the floods: people built bamboo bridges to cross unpassable paths and charged 50 rupees per person and 100 rupees to cross by boat!

### **Complexity of Responding to the Koshi Floods**

Under the Maoist government, victims of the 2008 Koshi flood were given NRs 50,000 in compensation per household. This is the first time in the history of annual floods in Nepal that flood victims have been given compensation.

*Probably because the government in 2008 was new at the time, they felt they had to show the people and international community that they were going to do something.*

**Resident of Haripur, Sunsari district**

Other flood victims in other districts in Nepal didn't receive anything. Nor did Indian victims in Bihar (who were, in fact, far worse affected). Because Nepal asked for aid, whereas India didn't, Nepali flood victims, despite not being worst affected, received more international assistance too.

The distribution of assistance to certain (Nepali) victims and not others (largely Indian flood victims over the border in Bihar) has lead to problems. For example, there is an issue with the wood-distribution assistance programme where the government was distributing wood for fuel and building to affected communities. In a cabinet decision, the government identified 1,422 flood victims; however, many more later came forward claiming to be victims. At present, there are an extra 400–500 people claiming to be affected by the floods. It has been left to local community paralegal groups to determine who has a legitimate right to fuelwood assistance and who does not – which leaves them in a difficult and compromising position.

Indians that were caught on the Nepali side were given assistance for a month. After the Nepali victims were verified, the Indian nationals no longer received assistance. The "pahadi" community that left the village ahead of the floods due to "Madesi Tiger" persecution did not get any compensation (see case study: The displaced pahadi community).

There are mixed feelings at the local level about the role of India. Contrary to the more commonly held perception of cross-border migration from neighbouring states into India, along the stretch of the Nepali Terai bordering Bihar, there is a widely held perception that Indians are moving over the border into Nepal and buying Nepali citizenship through back-door channels in order to access Nepali flood-assistance packages and jobs.

*During the political troubles in the country, tens of thousands of Indians got Nepali citizenship through bribes. Around 10 percent of those happened in Sunsari. The benefits of Nepali citizenship are employment, better work in India and Bihar itself, better likelihood of going abroad. They also settle in Nepal, or own land in both Nepal and India. Also, criminals can commit crimes in Nepal and live in India.*

**Kamal Tamang, Sunsari district**

Further complexities result from unsustainable precedents around compensation for future events, which are fuelling feelings of inequity among currently affected communities.

The Jhangar are a marginalised, landless community who largely live in slums around Inaruwa that have been affected by 2010 monsoon floods. They are presently demanding compensation for flood impacts to their livelihoods, having heard how the Haripur and Sripur flood victims received 50 lakhs each. Local governance and police officials are very concerned about the additional burden on resources and security problems that might arise around these expectations not being met.

## RETHINKING ADAPTATION

For good or for ill, Nepal is considered a fragile situation by a range of international donors. The concept of state fragility was established by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development in a milestone report in 2001. The concept was intended not as a pejorative indictment of the state, but to establish a set of ten principles to improve donor engagement in specific challenging contexts.

Adaptation in fragile situations needs to be rethought and redefined recognising a number of crucial issues:

- Fragility means that the state faces significant challenges to protecting the lives and livelihoods of all its citizens.
- Most of the conventional development tools used or demanded by the international community cannot apply in fragile situations.
- Fragile situations challenge the distinction between “normality” and “exceptionality” which have so far guided state-building and organisation of society.
- Climate-change adaptation plans set very ambitious targets and checklists for what governments “must do”, with little relevance to what states “can do” in fragile situations.

The policy areas that will be most affected by climate change and which could potentially put additional strain on the state–society relationship are water, agriculture, energy, health, migration and urbanisation. Matters are further complicated in fragile states where political and economic elites are organised in such a way as to give themselves privileged access and control over resources and opportunities. Climate-change impacts could incentivise or even virtually compel elite groups to further tighten their grip on resources and/or manipulate adaptation funding to their own benefit through patronage and clientelism, with contracts for adaptation projects providing both licit and illicit money-making opportunities.

Inappropriate interventions around climate change by the international community could provide an opportunity for political and economic elites to strengthen their positions in a fragile situation, thus increasing the risk of instability and possibly conflict. Ill-informed climate-change adaptation policies and interventions that do not take into account the broader socio-political and cultural contextual realities can unwittingly reinforce existing tensions, engendering greater poverty, inequality and conflict, rather than build resilience. In some situations, the implications of mal-adaptation could be worse than the impact of climate change itself.

*The INGOs and organisations that were here to help in the immediate aftermath of the floods have now all drifted away leaving expectations that the local government cannot meet.*

**NGO community leader, Itahari, Nepal**

## PRAGMATIC DISBURSEMENT MECHANISMS

At present, policy discussions focus on how much money should be available for adaptation and how that money will be controlled. It pays scant attention to the complexities of adaptation, the need to harmonise it with development, or the dangers of it going astray in fragile and conflict-affected states and thereby failing to reduce vulnerability to climate change. And, at the other end of the spectrum, NGO attention is focused on community-based adaptation initiatives. There is very little attempt to broach the middle ground connecting the top-down and bottom-up.

States in the fragile category need to plan adaptation in ways other than purely top-down, while acknowledging that bottom-up approaches alone will also not suffice. Top-down planning fails to grasp micro-level vulnerabilities, the intricacies of community relations and tensions, and focuses more on national interests. Further, in communities where there is deep mistrust for central government – for example, in Nepal where actors in the current administration were party to the recent conflict and when there is a history and legacy of government marginalisation of particular identity groups – top-down government-managed adaptation assistance might come across to local communities as an unwanted and potentially harmful imposition.

On the other hand, in fragile states, local communities alone cannot take on the responsibility for providing basic needs and services for themselves. Community-based adaptation is strongly promoted by many development actors as an effective means of ensuring context-specific interventions but care must be taken to not usurp the legitimate role of the state. If communities take over roles which ought to be done by the government in return for the tax revenue they receive from citizens, the social contract is weakened. There is a strong correlation between the perception that a state isn't upholding its side of the bargain – i.e. spending taxes on provision of basic needs and services such as security and roads – and the incidence of political instability.

Certainly, adaptation needs to be locally informed through bottom-up processes, but some level of top-down leadership is also required. Dogmatic pursuit of the former at the expense of the latter could be problematic if it reinforces a system whereby the national government receives taxes and yet is not expected to provide basic services pertaining to climate resilience. Ensuring an accountable and legitimate government is vital for peace. Interventions should bolster governance, not fuel corruption or bypass state systems and create a para-state system run by NGOs.

*There is a communication gap between local knowledge and donor funds and implementation. There is a lack of coordination between NGO activities and need for regular reporting. Donors cannot integrate at the local level unless the local authorities step forward to coordinate processes that already exist. There needs to be collaboration between government organisations, NGOs and Community Based Organisations. There is also a role for the private sector and government collaboration with biogas and solar infrastructure contracts.*

*The mechanisms are there but local authorities need to be governed strongly. Processes are clear but practice needs to be improved. This will take time. There is a Local Self Governance Act, but we need more communication between NGOs, Community Based Organisations and local government to enhance effective governance. District Development Committees should be strong but they depend on political support for their funding. Local government bodies are not elected. Their appointments are political and this means they are short term, changing with political changes.*

*NGOs, Community Based Organisations and the private sector should be capacitated on how to be involved in development, because they are the groups and mechanisms through which local government implements.*

**Local resident and NGO worker, Dhankuta district**

## COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP IS NOT A SILVER BULLET

There is now widespread acceptance that rural communities should play an important role in the management of their natural resources, particularly forests. However, more localised natural-resource management should not also entail a withdrawal of state-level regulation and oversight. The fact that the users of the resources are also involved in their management does not necessarily mean that management will be sustainable and in the best interests of all. It is important to understand that the efficacy of community-led resource-management programmes will be influenced by the specific characteristics of the communities and the natural resources themselves.

Community forestry initiatives in Nepal have developed a reputation as a successful example of participatory forest development and management by communities. Begun in 1978, the handover of community forests intensified after the success of the pro-democracy movement in Nepal in 1990, particularly following the promulgation of the community forest policy under the revised Forest Act of 1993 and Forest Regulations of 1995. In principle, forest-user groups better represent the interests of those who are dependent on the

resources than central government bureaucrats do. These decentralisation policies are widely regarded as a success among the development and donor community, despite there being little evaluation of or information on the impact of these policies on livelihoods and community resilience.

Preliminary surveys for this snapshot show that the reality of local ownership is not such a simple story of promoting sustainable and equitable management. The fact that control is in the hands of local people rather than central government officials does not inexorably mean that local people will not make decisions on the basis of short-term self-interest and profit.

*[Forest-user groups] plant trees and don't protect them. How can a forest grow if you just plant trees and don't protect them?*

**Resident of Dhankuta district**

*The main problem is lack of visionary leadership. Politicians don't understand protecting the environment and how that impacts the future. People won't grow the right trees or plants if you just tell them to plant trees. There needs to be some governance and regulation of the process.*

**Resident of Dhankuta district**

In Sunsari and Dhankuta districts in the south of Nepal, forests are more valuable and accessible than in the hills, and illicit felling of timber is widespread and well organised. A healthy demand for cheap timber, both locally in Nepal and over the border in India, coupled with dwindling incomes from agricultural livelihoods, such as rice and corn production, point to a growing market for illicit timber which will require legislation and enforcement at a level that community groups may not be able to uphold.

Furthermore, different resource-user groups, such as forestry and water users, will have different and potentially conflicting interests. They will make decisions according to their interests, and may not acknowledge the knock-on consequences of their actions on other resource users. In certain circumstances, some level of government oversight might be necessary to ensure equitable and sustainable use of resources.

**Resident of Dhankuta District on Community Forest Management**

I have lived and worked in this area and seen 28 years of development. Over the years, water patterns have changed. The monsoon is not on time, and it didn't used to rain so long and hard in a short period of time. Plants have died due to this, and it must be climate change. Population growth is also a major factor. But another factor is our own management of resources.

We have to encourage people to conserve our resources. Some community user groups have misused their resources. For example, in Raniban and Hiley villages in Dhankuta district, a forest-user group decided to cut down some very old trees in their area and sell them. Within a year, the river water flow downstream went from 170 cubic metres per second to 40 cubic metres per second. I am part of a water-user group that suffered due to this. It's not as though they didn't know this might happen – it didn't affect them, and so they didn't care. Was there any conflict due to this? It was their right to use their resources as they saw fit. But it will affect their environment in the end.

The state is not able to control the use of resources, and this is happening in all communities. When the Forest Office was in charge, rangers protected the forest. In those days it was said, "It is easier to cut men than the forest". The forests were recently handed over to communities to manage. This is necessary, but government should make sure awareness [of forest preservation and biodiversity] is there as well. In addition, boundaries of user-group resources are not clear.

People have lost their traditional knowledge, their sense of personal ownership. Forest-user groups plant trees and don't protect them. How can a forest grow if you just plant trees and don't protect them? People have begun to misuse resources. There is too much freedom and too little responsibility. Poverty is also a factor. People want an immediate return, instead of a better long-term gain.

A deeper understanding of the social contexts and livelihood opportunities is required for effective community resource-management programmes. In particular, there needs to be an understanding of:

- the impacts of community resource-management processes on other common and private resources;
- the livelihood effects of community resource management, including the formation of resource-management user groups and how these vary between different groups and communities;
- the impacts of community resource-management policies on the resource itself; and
- how the institutional context influences the ways in which community resource-management programmes are implemented.

## CONCLUSION

Adaptation to risks related to climate change requires rethinking in order to meet the specific challenges of fragile states on the road to peace such as Nepal.

There is a need for an understanding of the conflict potential of both climate and environmental change and of the policy response to climate change. Responses to climate threats in the coming decade may stimulate major shifts in the way international aid is managed. These shifts could have a positive impact on development and peace, but there is also a real risk that the changes pose an obstacle to sustainable peace and security.

With the increase in large-scale adaptation funding, the Nepal government will need support to effectively utilise funds, and oversight mechanisms must be strengthened. In some situations, direct access to large-scale adaptation funding, combined with low capacity within government, will limit the ability to effectively use it. It is possible that funds could be diverted into the hands and pockets of one faction or another in the political elite. With public awareness of these funds coming in, people's expectations for support – for example, compensation for flood victims – are rising, and, where they are not met, we are likely to see an increase in protests and political instability.

In Nepal's Koshi basin, recent experience shows that, with the current climate of political instability, community protests are easily hijacked by political and criminal gangs who promote violence for their own ends. Misuse of funds may thus be the primary factor exacerbating instability.

If responses to climate change take account of the broad dimensions of what makes people resilient – not just drought-resistant crops and embankments to protect them from floods but also the interlinked factors of livelihood options, good infrastructure, social inclusion and effective governance – there is a good chance that responses to climate change could yield a double dividend: increasing resilience to both climate change and conflict. Failure to take account of the linkages, however, could result in the billions of dollars of funding for adaptation actually becoming part of the problem.

More broadly, the definition of conflict at the heart of the inquiry into climate security should not be too state-focused. Preliminary evidence on climate pressures points to local-level conflicts which have the potential to be politicised and nationalised under certain circumstances. It is therefore necessary to move beyond traditional frameworks of analysis based on interstate conflicts to understand the dimensions of community grievances and potential for escalation.

Any study of the conflict potential of climate change also needs to include a normative dimension, as the politics of climate change – and importantly responses to climate change – are imposing new demands for equity and justice on global, regional and national systems.

Finally, a more fundamental question – which addresses the core tenets of development and thus cries out for investigation – is why certain societies faced with environmental change have survived and even thrived, and why others have collapsed into vulnerability and conflict. This is essentially a question of aid effectiveness – understanding how some states have built resilience while others are still floundering. Addressing this question would require a comparative analysis of the resilience of different societies and the different paths taken to get there. Answers to this question may call for a wholesale shift in how we think about building resilience and indeed development in fragile contexts.

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