The Politics of Care in Coping Well with Change: Conceptualising and Questioning Care to Move beyond 'Resilience' in Rural Nepal

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Abstract

Care has been described as 'everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher and Tronto 1990). This paper centres the role and politics of care in understanding efforts to promote 'resilient' forests and meaningful livelihoods in Nepal. It considers some of the major socio-ecological changes occurring in Nepal, and how the promotion of 'resilience' approaches in the face of these changes has been critiqued as overly techno-managerial and apolitical. As an alternative, the paper draws on Tronto's (2013) care framework to offer a series of questions that help us understand not only how villagers cope with but cope *well* with change, and to question where responsibilities for caring and resisting certain changes might lie. It is the hope that this paper will enable researchers and practitioners to critically reflect on the role of care in their own efforts to promote 'resilient' forests and meaningful livelihoods in Nepal, and beyond.

Keywords: Feminist political ecology, care ethics, reciprocity, climate change, environmental risk

INTRODUCTION

> *"On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web"* (Fisher and Tronto 1990 p.40)

I have no doubt that most readers of this paper, and of this journal, will care deeply about forests and people in Nepal, and beyond. We are united by our shared sense of care, whether as researchers or as practitioners. It is what drives us to do our work, despite the myriad challenges we face in our workplaces on a daily basis. And this makes sense, given that the quote above highlights that care is at the centre of human activity, which promotes sustainable environments and societies. This realisation is also true of those forests and people that we care about - care is at the centre of rural communities and landscapes across Nepal, ensuring meaningful lives and healthy ecosystems. And yet, care is not something that is typically considered or questioned in projects and policies related to Nepal's community forestry (CF) or the promotion of 'resilience' in forest landscapes and livelihoods. This paper seeks to rectify the lack of attention to care and its relationship to rural 'resilience'

in the face of climate change, environmental risks and socio-political changes.

The paper first considers some of the major socio-ecological changes occurring in Nepal, and how the promotion of 'resilience' in the face of these changes has been critiqued as an overly techno-managerial and apolitical approach to understanding how livelihoods and landscapes cope with change. As an alternative, the paper draws on Tronto's (2013) care framework to offer a series of questions that help us understand not only how villagers cope with but cope *well* with change, and to question where responsibilities for caring and resisting certain changes might lie. It is the hope that this paper will enable researchers and practitioners to critically reflect on the role of care in their own efforts to promote 'resilient' forests and meaningful livelihoods in Nepal, and beyond.

CHANGE IN RURAL NEPAL

It has been said that 'change is the constant' in Nepal (Nightingale, in press) and that crises are endemic (Pain et al. 2024). Whilst change is often considered in relation to the climate crisis, environmental risks and natural hazards, these clearly intersect with social, cultural and political-economic change across multiple geographical scales - from the household to the global. Change is not something that happens only in the present moment either; whilst our attention is often focused on sudden shocks and one-off incidents (such as an earthquake or flood event), changes over longer timeframes and that occur more slowly (such as climate change or out-migration), are equally significant in the current conditions of landscapes and lives of communities. The intention of this section is not to document all of the potentially relevant changes occurring in Nepal; however, I review here those that are typically discussed in relation to CF and rural communities.

Nepal is experiencing multiple environmental changes. It is ranked the 4th most vulnerable country in the world to climate change, and suffers from water-induced disasters and hydro-meteorological extreme events including droughts, storms, floods, inundation, debris flow, soil erosion and avalanches (GoN 2016). Temperatures are rising, glaciers are retreating and rainfall is decreasing; on top of which, Nepal is ranked the eleventh most earthquake-prone country in the world (GoN 2016). These climate and environmental hazards lead to the loss of life and livelihoods, and to projected economic costs of 2-3 per cent of GDP per year by 2050 (World Bank, no date). Rural communities are considered particularly vulnerable to climate change, as the agriculture they rely on is predominantly rain fed, meaning droughts and floods pose a serious threat to food security, as well as physical safety (CKND 2022). Nepal's 2023 National Adaptation Plan unsurprisingly identifies the three most urgent priority sectors in tackling climate change as: i) agriculture and food security; ii) forests, biodiversity and watershed conservation; and iii) disaster risk reduction and management (UNEP 2023). Initiatives to promote 'resilience' to climate and other hazards in these rural environments, have thus often focused on farm and livelihood-based initiatives like growing apples and other commercial crops, in order to reduce poverty, tackle food security and cushion communities against extreme weather (WFP 2023).

Nepal was, until the 1950s, a deeply feudal and rural agrarian society, but since then has been experiencing a series of profound political, economic and infrastructural changes, 'compressed' into a relatively short time frame (Sharma 2021). Road construction has been the focus of much development spending, leading to widespread connectivity between urban centres and once remote parts of the country, enabling increasing mobility of both market goods and people (Sharma 2021). Although the majority of Nepali population

is still living in rural areas, the country is one of the ten fastest urbanising countries in the world. Migration from rural areas predominantly involves men and youth, who leave in search of employment, education and other opportunities in urban centres across the country and beyond. Remittances from migration make a significant contribution to Nepal's economy, standing at around 25 per cent of GDP, but it has huge impacts in rural areas, where populations are aging, 'the feminisation of agriculture' is taking place, and farm-forest relations are changing (Poudel *et al.* 2024; Leder 2022; Tamang *et al.* 2014; Paudel *et al.* 2014). Rural subsistence farming and livelihoods are tied closely to local forests, however, interrelated changes are leading to reducing farm sizes, labour shortages, forest expansion and wildlife encroachment (Poudel *et al.* 2024; Khatri *et al.* 2023). Whilst local ecologies and social structures determine pressures on land and economic consequences in specific rural areas (Sugden *et al.* 2022), access to land and labour at the household level is considered key to coping (Poudel *et al.* 2024).

What is understood and experienced by 'the household' is however also changing, with kinship relations and relationships with physical 'homes' shifting (Shneiderman *et al.* 2023), along with intergenerational caring arrangements (Sharma 2021). Changes within 'traditional' family roles are perceived by some older people as 'unjust', as they have state protection and provisions for them (Speck and Muller-Boker 2020), with some older people saying that they 'are not cared for by [our] own children' (Speck 2017, p.434). For over two decades, aged people (i.e., those 60 years of age and over) have been considered marginalised physically, socially and economically in Nepal, with aged women being further marginalised due to patriarchy and gender norms (Subedi 2005). Despite an increasingly ageing population, it is argued however that not enough is known

about older people and how government and other programmes meaningfully address their needs in Nepal (Tausig and Subedi 2022). Others questions what this means for young people born in rural areas in search of 'freedom' (Sharma 2016), and the 'viability' of their lives during times of multiple social and environmental crises (Jeffrey and Dyson 2022).

Emerging from the decade-long civil war, in 2015 Nepal became a secular democratic federal republic state, with a Constitution that promotes equality for all. Historical inequalities and marginalisation are on-going however, with discrimination based on caste, gender, (dis)ability, age, class and geography is a daily experience in both personal lives and professional settings. Hutt (2020, p.145) highlights that there is a 'huge disparity between the well-resourced, cosmopolitan capital, Kathmandu, and the still very basic living standards in other parts of the country'. Whilst current development trajectories have created new forms of risk and precarity across Nepal (Sharma 2021), inequalities have remained particularly relevant within 'peripheral' rural and agrarian environments (Blaikie *et al.* 2005; Blaikie *et al.* 2000), where the ways in which people experience and are affected by political-economic changes and environmental hazards depends upon their intersectional identities. It is well known for example that women bear the brunt of climate change, given that they are the primary contributors to agricultural work, are responsible for household water needs, are the ones to collect fuelwood for cooking, are the primary care-givers within households, and are most vulnerable to disaster risks given social norms and physical capabilities (ICIMOD 2021).

It is clear that change *is* 'the constant' in Nepal (Nightingale, in press), taking place across multiple spatial scales (from within households to the national level) and with

differing temporal dimensions (on a daily basis to generational changes), and all in relation to combinations of impacts from the climate crisis, environmental risks and socio-political shifts, i.e. through 'multiple crises [which] are causally entangled generating collectively higher-level uncertainties' (Pain *et al.* 2024, p.5). Reflecting on the pace of change for a moment; some are sudden one-off events, e.g., a flooding event with significant short-term impacts on individual lives and land, and which typically feature in the media and garner immediate responses from the state and other actors. In contrast to these 'sensational' and 'spectacle-driven' changes, other changes can be slower and take place gradually, and as such may go unnoticed e.g., the 'slow violence' of climate change, with its 'attritional lethality' (Nixon 2013). Slow and sudden changes exist along a continuum of course, and inter-relate in complex ways, e.g., sudden flooding events can cause immediate loss of life or land, but can also cause longer-term mental health issues and anxieties that surface with any new flooding events. The physical and emotional impacts of these changes can thus be negative, but may also be experienced positively, e.g., collective responses and actions to support those impacted by a flood can build a sense of community and of being cared for, and can build practical skills and knowledges necessary to respond to future floods. As such, the ways in which socio-ecological changes and challenges are experienced reflect individual intersectional identities collective responses at household and community levels, and also support offered by the state and non-state actors. We next turn to consider state and other external actor's efforts to help villagers and landscapes to cope with these changes by building their 'resilience', after which we turn to ideas of care in order to understand not only how villagers might cope with these changes, but how they might cope *well* and lead meaningful lives.

'RESILIENCE' IN RURAL NEPAL

'Resilient' landscapes and livelihoods are the ultimate goal of many climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction policies and interventions in Nepal. 'Resilience' is derived from the Latin "resilio", meaning "to jump back" or "bounce" (Shwaikh 2023) and in ecological sciences is a useful measure of a system's ability "to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks" (Walker *et al.* 2004, p.2). Resilience thinking has been extended to social arenas through the concept of 'social resilience', defined as 'the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political, and environmental change' (Adger 2000, p.347). These ideas emerged out of foundational work in 'social-ecological systems' (SES), which contributed much by bringing together ecological and social domains and drawing attention to the dynamic relationships between them, highlighting 'uncertainty and surprise, how periods of gradual change interplay with periods of rapid change and how such dynamics interact across temporal and spatial scales' (Folke 2006, p.253). Folke *et al.* (2010) linked resilience with 'adaptability' and 'transformability' to conceptualise how changes may occur over such temporal and spatial scales, with subsequent work exploring the ways in which community resilience can emerge and promote adaptability (Ross and Berkes 2013). Whilst this work on resilience in social-ecological systems has contributed much, it has been critiqued for its under theorisation of the role of political and economic factors in responding to change, and of its apolitical view of how social change takes place (Cote and Nightingale 2011), as explored further below. Resilience thinking within sustainable development often sees communities as simply

'bouncing back' from moments of shock, as demonstrated for example in the Government of Nepal's National Planning Commission, which writes that 'Resilient communities are capable of bouncing back from adverse situations which confront them suddenly and periodically' (NPC 2011). This paper aligns with the work of Pain *et al.* (2024) in Nepal who argues that 'resilience without transformation…is survival only' (p.5), and thus push to move beyond discourses and programmes of 'resilience' towards thinking and initiatives that promote not just coping with but coping *well* with change, to ensure not just survival, but meaningful lives and livelihoods.

Whilst resilience has become a global buzzword, it is argued that it has a long history in Nepal (Nightingale in press). Nightingale (in press) suggests that the Theory of Himalayan Degradation (THED) (i.e. that Himalayan hillsides were being degraded from an assumed stable climax habitat due to a combination of over-population, poverty and ignorance) (Eckholm 1975), marked the start of international interest in the 'resilience' of Nepal's hills and mountains. During the 1970s and 1980s, responses to THED and initiatives to involve communities in the management of local forests shifted understandings to appreciate the *dynamic* nature and inherent *in*stability of the Himalaya, and to recognise the importance of villagers' relationships with forests and active use of forest resources. Subsequently, through Nepal's globally-renowned community forestry programme, rural villagers have generated livelihood benefits and extensive forest restoration, and have been supported in adapting to a changing climate and responding to other environmental risks. Assumptions remain however that villagers need their 'capacities built' and that they require external knowledge and technical assistance in the form of livelihood diversification to do so. Nightingale (in press) highlights, though that whilst a prior focus on:

'Adaptation implies a need for change and helps to emphasise the problems local people face are not of their own making… [that, the current focus on] Resilience, in contrast, firmly places the burden on local people. If they do not have the right knowledge and skills, they will fall victim to climate related disasters. This logic neglects that for many people, they will not be able to avoid harm or bounce back. Losing all of one's agricultural land to a GLOF [Glacial Lake Out Flow] is not a case of lacking knowledge or skills. It is a simple loss of livelihood resources. Furthermore, the shift to resilience has made climate change interventions more technical, rather than less'.

Technical and technocratic approaches to climate change adaptation and 'resilience' building have been discussed and critiqued worldwide. Eriksen *et al.* (2021) for example review 34 internationally-funded climate change interventions aimed at community adaptation, finding that many inadvertently reinforce, redistribute or create new sources of vulnerability, in part due to inadequate understandings of historical and on-going socio-political processes meaning that the resilience of some is related to and gained at the expense of others. In other work, Eriksen *et al.* (2015) highlight the political nature of such climate change interventions, arguing the need to engage with multiple knowledges of what being able to cope with climate change requires, and shifting discourses and assumptions about who is 'vulnerable' and why (Arora-Jonsson 2011) and what is required in order to transform presumed vulnerabilities. In Nepal, Nightingale (in press) argues that rural villagers are necessarily 'resourceful, observant, creative, and able to embrace change. In other words, they are already resilient to climate change, they are already experiencing climate change; this is not something in the future for them' (p.X). Supporting such academic findings, '*The*

State of Gender Equality and Climate Change in Nepal' (ICIMOD 2021) report finds that whilst the Government of Nepal is committed to gender equality and social inclusion, its efforts to integrate this with regards to climate change have been dominated by technical and technocratic activities. The report argues that whilst;

> *'Policies do focus on addressing the vulnerabilities of women and marginalized groups, they…continue to regard these groups as vulnerable and lacking the knowledge and experience to address the impacts of climate change. This view of women and marginalised groups as beneficiaries or passive recipients of policy formulation and projects, rather than as influencers and agents of change, ignores the critical role that women play in addressing everyday impacts of climate change, denies them agency, and leads to low investments in budgetary allocations for human resources and capacity building [of government staff]'.*

In order to refocus and reframe climate change adaptation and resilience efforts, to make them inclusive of lived experiences, multiple knowledges and on-going daily decision-making and rural practices – as well as the limits of these - Ensor *et al.* (2019) call on researchers and practitioners to 'ask the right questions'. Rather than asking about *climate* change (only), they call on us to ask questions about change in relation to both wider socio-ecological shifts *and* climate change interventions and policies themselves, and to do so through epistemological frameworks better able to explore how change and coping with change actually occurs. Cote and Nightingale (2012) too, argue that the extension of ideas of resilience to social settings 'has important limits, particularly its conceptualisation of social change' (p.475). One approach that is well placed to reveal how people cope with change, is to focus on the role of emotions in

nature-society relations (Gonzalez-Hidalgo and Zografos 2020; Sultana 2015). Reflecting on the emotional geographies of climate change, Sultana (2022) e.g., asks: 'Do we always have to pretend to be resilient, show how we've overcome difficulties, display the positive sides to our humanity, showcase our vitality, make nice – when do our complex realities and emotions matter beyond positive spins of strength and resilience?' (Sultana 2022 p.11). Whilst to be resilient - as an individual, a community, or an ecosystem - is typically to be seen as embodying and exemplifying positive attributes of strength and an ability to thrive in the face of adversity, Shwaikh (2023) highlights its use as a political tool that 'pass[es] the burden of coping…to individuals instead of tackling the root causes' (p.3). She draws attention to resistance to resilience narratives from around the world, connecting responses to disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in the US to responses to political conflicts in Northern Ireland and Palestine, sharing the words of US writer Zandashé l'orelia brown;

> *'I dream of never being called resilient again in my life. I am exhausted by strength. I want support. I want softness. I want ease. I want to be among kin. Not patted on the back for how well I take a hit. Or how many? Instead of hearing "You are one of the most resilient people I know," I want to hear "You are so loved," "You are so cared for," "You are genuinely covered."'*

In seeking to move beyond techno-managerial and apolitical approaches that promote 'resilience' in rural Nepal (and beyond), the paper centres and explores an ethics of care as one lens through which we might understand how villagers not only cope with, or survive, on-going socio-ecological changes, but how they might cope *well* with them, in order to live meaningful lives and in turn, support healthy landscapes. Further, centring the

politics of care offers opportunities to move beyond the limits of resilience approaches in how they ignore the root causes of changes (such as climate change causing GLOFs which take away villagers' agricultural land, from which they simply cannot 'bounce back'), as it draws attention to questions of responsibility and accountability in acting to resist and respond to certain forms of change.

CENTRING 'CARE' AND A 'POLITICS OF CARE'

As shared in the opening quote of this paper, care is 'everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher and Tronto 1990). The importance of care work for society; that is tending to others, cooking, cleaning, fetching firewood and water is increasingly recognised as essential for families, communities and the wider economy, particularly so because of aging populations around the world, due to cuts to public services and social protections, and as the climate crisis impacts livelihoods and means increasingly living with environmental risks (Oxfam 2020). Care work is also important with regards to nature, for example the stewardship of specific ecosystems and habitats by those who live there, as well as care (or lack thereof) shown towards global environmental 'resources' or commons including the atmosphere, biosphere and hydrosphere. Caring for society and caring for nature is of course related and is often reciprocal, and care is an essential element in the (re)making of social-ecological relationships over space and time (Kimmerer 2024; Kimmerer 2013). There is a politics to care work in nature-society relations; however, given how care/lack of care is connected to processes of marginalisation and inequality, as well as to possibilities for transformation and justice. This demands the centring not only of care but also of the *politics* of care, when considering rural livelihoods and landscapes in Nepal, and beyond. I now explore these things more fully.

Care work is essential for all life on earth, yet is often performed by and at the expense of marginalised people and environments around the world. Globally, domestic care work – whether unpaid or (under)paid – is typically done by women and girls, and by those who experience discrimination based on race, ethnicity, caste, nationality and sexuality (Oxfam 2020). When it comes to conserving biodiversity, it is well known that Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IP and LCs) can be highly successful in stewarding and protecting ancestral and other territories based on 'traditional ecological knowledge' and customary practices (Fa *et al.* 2020; Sze *et al.* 2021; Dawson *et al.* 2021; Pascual *et al.* 2023). A recent statistical analysis of 170 peer-reviewed empirical studies for example, reveals that significantly more positive ecological outcomes are associated with the most equitable forms of governance i.e. those involving equal partnerships with and control by IP and LCs (Dawson *et al.* 2024). Directly connecting conservation and care, Esbach *et al.* (2024) discuss the indigenous praxis of the Cofàn community of Zàbalo in the Ecuadorian Amazon, *tsampima coiraye* or 'care for the forest', and their concept of *purifama atesuye* which represents a 'critical politics of abundance', which they argue stands in direct contrast to Western conservation approaches and their 'colonial assumptions of damage, noble savagery, and the scarcity of natural resources as the driving motivator for environmental stewardship' (p.838). Notions of 'abundance' help us to see care not as a 'burden' but rather as linked to flourishing, and thus the promotion of healthy ecosystems and meaningful lives. In Nepal, where 36 per cent of the population comprise IPs, and where LCs are involved in managing 40 per cent of Nepal's forests, there is clear evidence that IP and LCs promote the care and conservation of not only forests but also biodiversity, water and a range of other 'natural resources' (Oldekop *et al.* 2019; Koirala 2021; World Bank 2024).

Despite the important care work performed by IP and LCs in conserving environments worldwide, they are typically marginalised in conservation decision-making across multiple scales, and are increasingly threatened by the '30 x 30' agenda and other protectionist conservation approaches that can lead to IP and LCs displacement, livelihood restrictions and human rights abuses (Brockington and Igoe 2006; Adams and Hutton 2007; Dowie 2009; Survival International no date). In Nepal, the negative impacts of mainstream conservation on IP and LCs has been recognised for some time (Paudel 2005) and it has been argued that whilst it 'is often held up as an exemplary conservation success story [that] unfortunately, that success has come at a high price for the country's Indigenous peoples, who had lived in and depended on these protected areas for generations' and yet suffer forced evictions, restricted access to food and resources, and arbitrary arrests and other ill-treatment and excessive use of force (Amnesty International 2021).

Whilst care work for society and the environment is often unpaid or underpaid, goes unrecognised and undervalued, and is performed by those who are marginalised within society and suffer on-going inequalities, care also holds positive political and ecological potential and possibilities. Working in situations of armed conflict, Krystalli and Schulz (2022) counter a typical focus on violence and suffering and instead recommend that scholars centre love and care in their research 'as practices and potential sites of politics that shape how people survive and make sense of violence as well as imagine and enact lives in its wake' (p.1). Feminist writer Bell Hooks' (2001) writes on 'love', arguing that love is not only something experienced between individuals or for personal satisfaction, but rather has political significance at the societal level, as it stands directly against patriarchy, racism and all other forms of domination and discrimination.

Feminist political ecologists have highlighted the political role of care in nature-society relations (Sultana 2015; Nightingale 2011; Gururani 2002), arguing for example that in order to advance climate justice;

> *'we need to re-imagine 'caring for climate' through a 'caring economy' (or what some refer to as the 'solidarity economy'…), and re-embed the economy (and 'sustainability') in social and ecological relationships guided by the principles of cooperation, sharing, reciprocity, and intersectional environmental justice…This means care work must be fundamentally construed as environmental change work and vice versa' (Di Chiro, 2019 p.306-7).*

Di Chiro (2019) argues that to decolonise environmental and climate policy there must be learning from cultures with highly refined knowledge systems and practices of care and reciprocity, and cites the work of feminist scholar-activist Zoe Todd (2016) that;

> *'…reciprocity, love, accountability, and care are tools we will require to face uncertain futures and the end of worlds as we know them. Indeed, this ability to face the past, present, and future with care – tending to relationships between people, place, and stories – will be crucial as we face the challenges of these times' (p.308).*

Working with care and through an ethics of care are seen to hold potential to shift dominant knowledge systems in sustainable development (Harcourt 2023), and to deliver socio-ecological justice (Narayanaswamy *et al.* 2023). This, however, implicates and includes us as researchers and practitioners, in line with calls in Nepal to reflect on our own roles in transforming environmental governance (Ojha *et al.* 2022). We must critically reflect on our own positionalities, engage our emotions, and embody an ethics of care in order to cultivate awareness of the

power dynamics embedded in our work, and to shift those to promote greater social and environmental justice (Ravera *et al.* 2023; Staddon 2022; Staddon *et al.* 2023). Seeing our own vulnerabilities in the face of change and crises as related to (and not necessarily different from) those with whom we work, and linking lived experiences, can help to avoid colonial practices of *othering* in our research and practice (Eriksen 2022). The centring of care and care work is clearly of relevance to those of us interested in understanding social and environmental sustainability; not least because of the political nature of care giving and its relationship to both deepening but also potentially transforming inequalities and injustices. In order to explore and understand the material outcomes and political potential of care and care work in Nepal's rural landscapes and communities, I next present a conceptual framework and series of questions through which we might do so.

CONCEPTUALISING AND QUESTIONING CARE IN COPING WELL WITH CHANGE

Drawing together the various strands of this paper – the socio-environmental changes occurring in rural Nepal, the need to move beyond techno-managerial 'resilience' approaches in responding to these changes, and the material importance and political potential of care and care work – I now present a framework for centring questions of care in our understandings of how Nepal's rural villagers and landscapes are coping with change, and where responsibilities for caring might lie so that they can cope *well* and live meaningful lives and support healthy ecosystems.

Tronto - the eminent scholar of care and care ethics – argues that 'care can serve both as a moral value and a foundation for the political success of a good society. It offers a way to change paradigms, move beyond moral boundaries, and advance towards more just and caring societies. Realising this, however, requires that we analyse how today's society views care and what power dynamics are involved' (Jounou & Tronto 2024 p.269). Tronto's work validates the discussion above of care as a value of many IP and LCs, and as a practice with material outcomes; it also reaffirms the political dimensions of care and care work, as often performed by marginalised communities and simultaneously disregarded and undervalued in economic terms. In response to, and in order to resist, increasing neoliberalism (with its focus on the individual and personal self-interests), Tronto (2013) offers a set of principles or phases necessary for taking responsibility for and promoting care; *caring ABOUT, caring FOR, care GIVING, care RECEIVING, caring WITH.*

This framework has been adopted and adapted by others in various ways (Lemon and Boman, 2022; Groot *et al.* 2018; Brannelly 2016), including in relation to understanding 'green care' practices and practitioners in Finland (Moriggi *et al.* 2020). Moriggi *et al.* (2020) argue that green care is 'a relational achievement attained through iterative processes of learning' between people and nature (p.1). The relational nature and transformative potential of care-centred environmental governance has also been highlighted in the UK, as a way to resist neoliberal and hyper-bureaucratic structures (Giambartolomei *et al.* 2023). Here I use Tronto's five stage framework to unpack and question the role and politics of care in how villagers and forests respond to and cope with change, and how they are supported in that by state and other external actors. I consider each of the five principles in turn next, offering some initial thoughts on what this might mean for rural Nepal based on the literature reviewed above; I hope that future research may provide detailed empirical insights on these. I end with a series of questions that future research might ask in relation to each principle, firstly of rural communities, and

secondly of policies and programmes aimed at supporting them. Whilst the five principles are presented in Tronto's framework as distinct phases, they of course inter-relate in ways that make their neat separation impossible in practice.

i. Caring ABOUT (attentiveness)

The first principle of care in Tronto's (2013) framework is *caring about* i.e. recognising a need for care (Tronto 2010). This phase involves the moral quality of *attentiveness*. Conceptualising *caring about* urges us to ask questions of who or what is – or is not – cared about and paid attention to, both by policy-makers and practitioners and within rural communities.

As established at the start of this paper, we, as researchers and practitioners, arguably all *care about* Nepal's forests and people, it is what unites us. *Caring about* i.e. *attentiveness* to, Nepal's forests and people is also arguably at the heart of government policies and the initiatives of a wide range of state and non-state actors. As reviewed above however, those policies and programmes can be overly techno-managerial and apolitical, and can thus miss the differentiated needs of members of diverse communities, and can even contribute to on-going marginalisation within those, based for example on gender. Recognising the need for care in general does not necessarily mean attention is given to those who have the greatest need of care, which can be construed as a *lack of* care about certain people or environments, such as for example aged people within rural areas of Nepal.

Within rural communities and landscapes, people may *care about* and are *attentive* to a whole range of things; from families and friends living near and far, to the provision of education and health facilities, from access to land and labour for subsistence farming, to the use and management of local forests, from the impact of sudden flood events, to the 'slow violence' of climate change, and from the vital financial flows from remittances, to the ability to acquire the latest technology and engage in 'modern' lifestyles. As reviewed above, the composition of rural communities and experiences of the household are shifting in response to out-migration and the global capitalist economy (among other factors), with age an increasingly significant factor in what individual villagers may care about with regards the sorts of things listed above.

ii. Caring FOR (responsibility)

The second principle of care in Tronto's (2013) framework is *care for* i.e. taking responsibility to meet that need for care (Tronto 2010). This phase involves the moral quality of *responsibility*. Conceptualising *caring for* urges us to ask questions of who does – or does not – take responsibility in caring and care giving, for a range of people and environments.

Whilst *caring about* something or someone is arguably easy, as it simply involves *attention* but no actual care giving, *caring for* that thing or person involves stepping up to deliver on our attention to their need of care. *Caring for* in terms of policies and programmes aimed at supporting the care needs of rural communities and landscapes as they face on-going socio-ecological changes, means more than drawing *attention* to those needs, but rather for example providing sufficient financial and human resources in order that the work of *caring for* them can actually be delivered, both in the short-term but also long-term. A *lack* of *care for* rural villagers may be experienced for example when government acts, such as the Constitution and processes of federalisation, are not delivered upon in practice, meaning (as discussed above) that whilst urban centres enjoy 'modern' amenities and access to health care and education for example, these remain lacking in rural areas, and thus for the majority of Nepali citizens.

As reviewed above, responsibilities and opportunities for providing care for family members are shifting, with those 'left behind' in rural villages responsible for the everyday *caring for* family – and friends and farms and forests, whether in fact they *care about* them or not. With rural populations aging, *caring for* human and non-human others, is increasingly the responsibility of those who are older, whether they have the capacity to deliver that care or not. Of course, *caring for* others can take many forms, both physical, financial, emotional and spiritual (as explored next), meaning that family members who have migrated can *care for* those in their household through the sending of remittances and through trips back to villages at particular times of increased care needs. Importantly, it may be argued that migrants are *caring for* their families by sacrificing their own needs and desires, to move for work (often for extended periods of many years), that will allow them to send much needed financial capital that is unobtainable in rural settings.

iii. Care GIVING (competence)

The third principle of care in Tronto's (2013) framework is *care giving* i.e. the actual physical work of providing care (Tronto 2010). This phase involves the moral quality of *competence*. Conceptualising *care giving* urges us to ask questions of what form *care giving* takes, how it is manifested and how well it is practiced by a range of different actors.

The physical work of *care giving* by the state and non-state actors can be seen in the form and content of policies and programmes developed, and in the practices adopted by policy-makers and practitioners. Current approaches that promote 'resilience' in rural areas, as discussed above, often focus on specific market-based livelihood diversification initiatives, such as growing apples, or involve the building of villager 'capacities' and technical knowledge. Such techno-managerial and apolitical approaches have been critiqued due to the lack of awareness of and attention to the already existing abilities and knowledges of those already living with a range of environmental risks, including climate change. The ways in which on-going relationships of *care giving* existing in rural communities and landscapes are thus invisibilised by the focus on technical capacities in such initiatives. At the same time, the giving of care through for example healthcare provision or pensions from the state, are often seen as insufficient in supporting rural household needs, particularly at times of sudden crisis such as following an earthquake or landslide.

As mentioned above, the physical work of *care giving* within rural communities and households can take many forms, from the daily provision of cooking and cleaning by those close by, to the sending of remittances by those who have moved far away. The physical work of providing care to forests, farmlands and animals is very much the responsibility of those who remain in rural areas however. It is widely recognised that with shifting rural demographics, the work done by Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) is changing, with reduced capacity and interest in many areas for active forest governance. The reduced use of forest resources and provision of care to forests, for example through the lack of maintenance of fire breaks, results not only in changes in forest structure and composition, but also in the reduction of local embodied knowledge of the sustainable use and harvesting of forest products, and of the forest territory itself. Practices of *care giving*, and changes of these, have consequences not only for those human or non-human others who receive that care, but also impact the care givers, and their epistemic, material and emotional relationships with local environments.

iv. Care RECEIVING (responsiveness)

The fourth principle of care in Tronto's (2013) framework is *care receiving* i.e. the evaluation of how well the care provided had met the caring need (Tronto 2010). This phase involves the moral quality of *responsiveness*. Conceptualising *care receiving* urges us to ask questions of how is the reception of care experienced, and how well or not it is felt to respond to the need for care in the first place.

It is perhaps a little hard to judge how well policies and programmes aimed at supporting rural communities and landscapes through on-going socio-ecological changes are received and experienced, as seldom are project 'beneficiaries' asked about their perceptions of participating, or about how well project procedures and outcomes align with their own needs. When communities' experiences and opinions *are* sought, it tends to be by those initiating or associated with the project itself, and through a fairly constrained range of tools and methods which struggle to capture an honest reflection or meaningful evaluation of how the project had met their needs, both materially and symbolically. Such community consultations are all too often at the end of projects too, rather than at the start, which is when people would be better able to reflect on past experiences, assess current needs, and then feed into the design of future projects. Potential opportunities to hear people's evaluations of care or support they have been given, would be when they have the chance to vote for elected members of local or national government, when they vote for and reward those from whom they have received positive experiences of care, and conversely when they may show their displeasure by not voting for those whom they perceive not to have cared for them or their needs. Other opportunities to understand experiences of *care receiving* come in the form of public protest, when people are driven to demonstrate against experiences of injustice and marginalisation, which we may

see here as essentially about the reception of a *lack of* care.

Within rural communities, the experiences of and responses to *receiving care* are perhaps more obvious. Care can be experienced in the receiving of food given to a hungry neighbour, or the reception of remittances sent by faraway relatives for example, both of which may engender a positive material response (i.e. the satiating of hunger, or funds necessary for accessing local health facilities), but also an emotional one, where by the recipients may feel cared for, attended to, remembered and loved. Experiencing a perceived *lack of* care can generate a very different range of feelings and responses however, including in relation to the environment. With changing farm-forest relations and forest expansion in rural areas across Nepal, comes increasing human-wildlife conflicts in the form of crop predation by monkey, porcupine and deer. Due to a perceived *lack of* care on the part of the state to do anything meaningful to tackle these conflicts, some villagers have been known to set retaliatory fires in local forests; this response demonstrating clearly the anger they feel at being *un*cared for. Giving and receiving care are clearly relational experiences, connecting people and the environment, with consequences for both.

v. Caring WITH (reciprocity)

The fifth and final principle of care in Tronto's (2013) framework is *caring with* i.e. where caring needs to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality and freedom for all (Groot *et al.* 2018). This phase involves the moral quality of *reciprocity* or *trust and solidarity*. Conceptualising *caring with* urges us to ask questions about the politics of care including: who performs care work, what forms of care work are made in/visible, who does not do the care work for which they are responsible, how can those not providing care be held accountable, and what forms of

resistance to injustices are possible through practices of reciprocity and solidarity.

The example mentioned above, of the giving of food to a hungry neighbour, who receives it as a material and emotional gain, can also evolve over time, and be responded to and replicated when the giver of food themselves experiences hunger and the neighbour who received their gift of food now becomes the giver. This reciprocal *caring with* is the basis of the moral economy, evident in many subsistence communities around the world, at least until their disruption by the capitalist economy. This reciprocity is the basis also of 'resilience', whereby villagers are better able to cope with situations of food insecurity through the receiving of care given by their fellow villagers. Whilst not a perfect system (and one which can for example recreate caste-based injustices by excluding particular castes from these reciprocal relationships), this form of *caring with* is not typically visibilised in efforts to promote 'resilience', nor is it the focus of policies or programmes. All too often, community-based 'participatory' initiatives are in fact top-down efforts to impose pre-determined targets and obligations onto community 'beneficiaries', in relationships that demand compliance rather than seeking to build trust or solidarity with communities and their own knowledges and ways of working.

As rural communities are aging, *caring with* necessarily entails reciprocity amongst older villagers, with age rather than necessarily caste or gender, being increasingly significant in relationships of care. As reviewed above, whilst older people can feel 'left behind' in rural areas and a burden to their younger relatives, this simultaneous sense of a lack of care but yet a need for care, provides a common lived experience from which to build strong relationships of reciprocity. Whilst migrant family members may do all they can to send financial resources to elderly rural relatives, they still expect the state and other non-state actors to support them through the provision of healthcare and pensions that allow them a healthy and meaningful life. Holding these actors to account for a perceived *lack of* care to aged rural populations, however, is hard, as the elderly are already marginalised within society and face age-based injustices. It may also be hard for them to hold other community members accountable when they see them not taking responsibility for necessary care work, for example, when younger people are not interested in the 'drudgery' of farming or work in the forest. Working together however, through mutual support and solidarity, may be the best option for rural communities in coping with change.

The questions and issues raised above by conceptualising care according to Tronto's five stage framework, are by no means exhaustive, they are just the start of thinking through what the centring of care might mean in attempts to understand how rural communities and landscapes are coping in the face of constant change, and what might be done to respond to the needs identified in this way. In order that researchers and practitioners can put these concepts of care to use in their work, a series of questions are offered in Table 1. These are intended as a way to help draw *attention* to care i.e. to recognise the need to *care about* care, as well as a way to *care with* through our work that centres justice and equity.

Table 1: Questions of care that may be asked to better understand how Nepal's rural communities and landscapes are coping with change, and where responsibilities for caring might lie (following Tronto's (2013) five stage ethics of care framework)

Principle of care (and: moral quality)	Questions to be asked of: Rural communities and landscapes	Questions to be asked of: Policies and programmes
1. Caring ABOUT (*attentiveness*)	• What and who is cared about within rural settings? • What and who is *not* cared about within rural settings? • How is care and attentiveness different for individuals within diverse communities?	• What and who is cared about within policies and programmes? • What and who is *not* cared about within policies and programmes? • How is care and attentiveness to differential needs and to lived experiences demonstrated in these?
2. Caring FOR (*responsibility*)	• Who takes responsibility for care work in rural settings? • Who does *not* take responsibility for care work in rural settings? • How do responsibilities differ between those living in or away from rural areas?	• How do policies and programmes demonstrate their responsibility for care work in rural settings? • Which policies and programmes demonstrate a *lack* of responsibility for care work in rural settings?
3. Care GIVING (*competence*)	• How is care giving manifested within rural settings – through what forms of physical work, financial resources and emotional support? • How well is care giving learnt about and practiced by different members of diverse communities?	• How is care manifested within policies and programmes – through what forms of physical, financial and other provision and support? • How well is care giving learnt about by practitioners, by drawing on lived experiences and needs of villagers?
4. Care RECEIVING (*responsiveness*)	• How is the reception of care experienced by rural communities – materially and emotionally? • How is the reception of care experienced differently by individuals in diverse communities? • How is a *lack* of care received and responded to within rural settings?	• How do policy-makers and practitioners seek to understand rural communities' experiences of receiving policy/project-based care? • How do policy-makers and practitioners respond to communities' actions expressing frustrations at a perceived lack of care by the state and others?
5. Caring WITH (*reciprocity*)	• What practices and relationships promote reciprocity and sharing? • Who is and who is not involved in reciprocal relationships in rural settings? • How individuals within diverse communities are held accountable when they do not care about or give care when needed?	• How might policies and programmes seek to understand reciprocal caring relationships in rural settings? • How might policies and programmes seek to promote reciprocal caring relationships with and within rural settings? • How might policies and programmes be held accountable for a lack of trust in and care for diverse rural communities?

Highlighting the inherently and intimately political nature of care, Tronto asserts that 'care does not belong in the private sphere, is not natural, and cannot become a commodity. Rather, care is something for which we are collectively responsible' (Jounou and Tronto 2024 p.270). To conclude this paper, I summarise what centring and questioning care, as something public, as something that can be cultivated through embodied actions and emotions, and as something relational, reciprocal and for which we are jointly responsible, means for understanding and supporting rural villagers and landscapes in Nepal, and how we as researchers and practitioners can lean into the responsibility for care that we collectively hold.

CONCLUSIONS: CONSEQUENCES OF CARE AND CARING FOR NEPAL'S RURAL FORESTS AND VILLAGERS

It is the hope that this paper will generate an interest in and enable researchers and practitioners to critically reflect on the role of care in their own efforts to support healthy forests and meaningful livelihoods in Nepal, and beyond. In order to do so, I have highlighted some of the major socio-environmental changes occurring in rural Nepal, I have reviewed literature that suggests a need to move beyond techno-managerial 'resilience' approaches in responding to these changes, and as one way to do that, I have engaged with scholarship which draws attention to the material importance and political potential of care and care work. I then presented Tronto's (2013) five stage framework for understanding the ethics of care, and offered a series of questions that can help us centre care in our understanding of how Nepal's rural communities and landscapes are coping with change, and where responsibilities for caring might lie.

Drawing on ideas of care and Tronto's (2013) framework enables us to recognise, better understand, and potentially to visibilise the role of care in how rural communities are coping with change, and what coping *well* entails. This is important, given that change is the constant in Nepal (Nightingale, in press) and as researchers and practitioners interested in how people respond to change, we must be asking 'the right questions' (Ensor *et al.* 2019). Scholars of care, including feminist political ecologists, see questions of care as the 'right ones' to be asking, as they view care not as some private or passive act, but rather as public and political practices which offer potential for more just and transformative futures (Harcourt 2023; Di Chiro 2019). Asking questions of care allows us to surface who and what is/ is not cared about, who takes responsibility in caring for others, what the work of giving care actually involves, and what it means to those who receive it. Importantly, these questions surface the political and ecological consequences and possibilities of care, for example, through calls for accountability when those deemed responsible do not give care, and in how care work is acknowledged. This centring of care and caring highlights the importance of reciprocal relationships and solidarities. It also decentres specific moments of 'change', such as an earthquake or landslide disaster, and instead centres the role and politics of care in how rural communities and landscapes are coping with *ongoing* social *and* environmental changes, operating at multiple spatial and temporal scales.

Centring questions of care also brings to the fore our own relationships and responsibilities with regard to Nepal's rural communities and forests. This paper started with fact that we all 'care' about them, but that we do so in different ways and with different outcomes, given we are all positioned differently and so the outcomes of our work are of course diverse. One of the central outcomes of

centring questions of care is that it becomes obvious that *we* are a part of – not separate to – these (rural) webs of care and caring. Rather than 'Othering' communities and places we work with and for, we should recognise and visibilise our own (caring) relationships to them, and consider ways in which our relationships of care/uncare might be no different from theirs (Eriksen 2022). We may wish to adopt feminist and care-centred research methods and policy approaches that recognise, visibilise and engage with care and caring (Brannelly and Barnes 2022; Harcourt *et al.* 2022). This will not only help us to better recognise and promote meaningful lives and healthy ecosystems in rural Nepal, but can also challenge the systems and structures that dominate us all, and that hamper efforts for global sustainability and meaningful lives.

Sultana (2022) argues that 'Dominant discussions around climate change tend to make it seem apolitical, as a physical phenomenon to be fixed with technology and finance, instead of a restructuring of relationships to ecologies, waters, lands, and communities we are intimately, materially, and politically connected to' (p.10). This paper has centred care and the politics of care as *one* way of understanding shifting relationships amongst rural villagers and forests in Nepal in the face of climate and other changes, with the aim that these relationships might be restructured through our efforts as researchers and practitioners, into something more caring and just.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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