

Mountain Tourism Development through the Sustainable Livelihood Approach: A Case Study of Dhorpatan Valley, Nepal

Carl Cater, PhD*

Associate Professor in Tourism Marketing, School of Management, Swansea University, UK

**Corresponding author's email: carl.cater@swansea.ac.uk*

Maggie C. Miller, PhD

Senior Lecturer, School of Management, Swansea University, UK

Ravindra Nyaupane, PhD

Researcher, School of Management, Swansea University, UK

Abstract



Geography of Nepal has largely caused serious constraints to physical development works in mountain regions and consequently

has lagged behind those of lowland areas. Topography challenges available livelihood options, and thereby these areas are often defined by higher poverty rates, lower education levels, limited access to services and increasing out-migration. Therefore, it is essential to identify the baseline assets available for mountain communities in order for them to develop. A tool for assessing livelihood assets is the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) which evaluates forms of natural, human, physical, financial, social, cultural and political capital. Tourism can be supported by, as well as potentially augment, these various forms of community assets, but conversely weaknesses in these assets will form a barrier to development. This paper uses the SLA to examine the Dhorpatan valley, a high altitude valley in a mountainous region of western Nepal. Suggestions for future tourism development are identified along with potential challenges.

Keywords: *Dhorpatan, Sustainable, Livelihood, Community, Tourism Development*

Introduction

Nepal, a land linked country situated between the Chinese region of Xizang (Tibet) and India along the Himalayan range, has a population of over 28 million (World Bank, 2014). This nation is understood as a low-income economy. Placed in the 147th position of 189 nations for overall level of socioeconomic development on The United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), Nepal's population survives on incomes below (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Rapid increases in workforce out-migration are the corollary of these impoverished conditions, as well as the nation's poor resource base and low industrial and services output (Bhattarai, Conway & Shrestha, 2005; Nepal, 2003, 2005). This workforce

drain has impacted rural hill regions of Nepal in particular, changing the demographics and socio-economic fabrics of their communities (cf. Nyaupane, Pretious & Khadka, 2019).

Because of their geography, development in mountain regions has historically lagged behind those of lowland areas. Mair (2006) indicates that the biophysical base of a region often dictates the kind of developments that are available, while these places and their economic histories are considered among national, continental and global economies (Mair, 2006). Accordingly, with the right social, political, economic and administrative processes, a region or nation must find opportunities for advancement with whatever resources it has at its command (Panday, 1999).

Situated in the heart of the Himalayas, eight of the fourteen world-famous mountain peaks over 8000 meters tall are located in Nepal. By no surprise, tourism was embraced as the “saviour” – a core development strategy – since Nepal opened its borders to foreigners in 1951, and its rapid growth has transformed the nation in unprecedented ways (Nepal, 2005). These stories of development and progress align with those of other developing countries as international tourism is said to hold much promise. Mair recognizes this as the “conundrum of tourism” and critiques these development strategies for their sustainability – whereby tourism is often positioned as a “way for communities to survive when there are no other opportunities” (2006: 31).

While we too recognize the potentiality tourism may hold for hill regions in Nepal, it is essential to first identify the baseline assets available for mountain communities in order for them to create and develop a local, sustainable economy. A tool for assessing such assets is the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) which evaluates forms of natural, human, physical, financial, social, cultural and political capital. The objective of this paper is to examine the SLA in the Dhorpatan region of western Nepal, specifically the rural communities and villages located in the high-altitude Dhorpatan valley. Prior to this examination we outline the SLA framework, and its application and utility in other regional and tourism studies. After appraising these resources, we extend suggestions for future tourism development in Dhorpatan and identify potential challenges for consideration.

The sustainable livelihood approach

The Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) is an approach to identifying community assets and their development for vulnerable societies (Carter et al., 2015). It emphasizes that “the root of all human development and economic growth is livelihoods – not jobs per se, but the wide, infinitely diverse range of activities people engage in to make their living” (Tao & Wall, 2009: 143). Building upon the original concept of ‘sustainable livelihood’ (SL) as described by Scoones (1998), the SLA is a dynamic lens that highlights “the changes and adjustments people make in their livelihood systems in order to cope under difficult circumstances” (Helmore & Singh, 2001:3). Significantly, this approach stresses that using internal capacities and knowledge systems help the development of rural communities (Chambers, 1986; Lee, 2008).

The SLA model is a useful framework to test the changes wrought by tourism on people’s asset base (Ashley, 2000, as cited in Carter & Carter, 2007). The approach, which aims to reduce poverty in developing countries, makes a systematic evaluation of the variety of assets in a community that might be used and augmented by tourism development (Carter & Carter, 2007), thus the SLA examines a variety of livelihood strategies. Ashley’s (2000) study, for example, offers two perspectives on rural communities using tourism for their livelihood.

Previous tourism developments have tended to focus primarily on the contribution to enhancing local employment and income benefits, often to the exclusion of the major social and environmental changes in livelihoods (cf. Wang, Cater and Low, 2016). Under the SLA, however, the focus is on how to enhance development and the contribution tourism can make, while also reflecting on the broad changes to people's livelihoods consequent to development decisions. The approach is a multi-level one and regarded as dynamic for households, community, region or nation (Cater & Cater, 2007).

Initial work on the SLA identified types of asset or capital central to people's livelihoods including: natural, human, physical, financial and social. Based upon these five capitals, a study by Lee (2005) adopted the SLA in his examination of pick-your-own (PYO) farms in Taiwan to improve farmers' livelihoods strategies and to assess policies and institutional processes. However, in a global tourism context, where local traditions form both the uniqueness and identity of communities, Cater and Cater (2007) identified a further asset. This is cultural capital, consisting of the heritage, customs and traditions, which should be considered in any analysis of the characteristics of local livelihoods. Wang, Cater and Low (2010) added political capital to the sustainable livelihoods approach to further explain governance and administrative structures in community-based tourism development. Political capital identifies elements of power and benefit sharing as issues of concern for community stakeholders. Political capital is a critical form of capital found to be affecting all the other forms of community capital in the sustainable livelihood approach.

Forms of capital

The seven forms of community assets under the SLA can be identified as:

- (a) Natural capital: the natural resource stocks upon which people draw for livelihoods;
- (b) Human capital: the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health that are required to pursue different livelihood strategies;
- (c) Physical capital: the basic enabling infrastructure, such as transport, shelter, water, energy and communications;
- (d) Financial capital: the financial resources available to people such as savings, credit and remittances; and
- (e) Social capital: the social resources such as networks, membership of groups and relationships of trust upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihoods;
- (f) Cultural capital: the heritage, customs, and traditions of the community;
- (g) Political capital: the governance and administrative structures.

These seven forms of capital are highly interdependent, as depicted in figure 1. Pictured are the building blocks of the SLA whereby the financial, social and cultural capital constitutes the community foundation. Physical infrastructure and human skills require the underpinning of the financial, social and cultural capital. The top of the heptagon, the natural capital central to nature-based tourism, relies on sustained and sustainable support from all of these forms of capital. If the natural capital itself is eroded, perhaps by external influences, then the viability of other forms of capital in the community will also be in doubt.

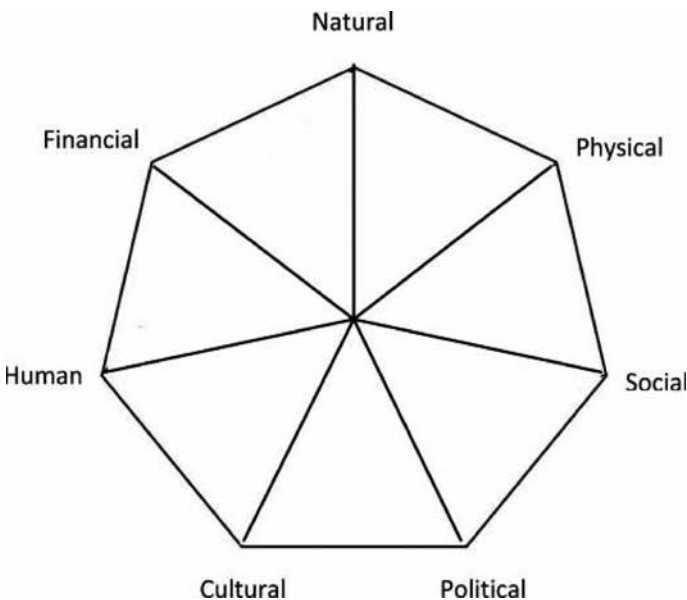


Figure 1: The elements of the sustainable livelihoods approach (Wang, et al., 2016)

Dhorpatan area

The Dhorpatan area is set in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains in western Nepal (see figure 2). Defining the Dhorpatan area is somewhat complicated by a range of administrative structures which overlay one another (see for example Nyaupane et al., 2019). The Dhorpatan valley is part of the Dhorpatan cluster region in Baglung, Gulmi and Pyuthan districts in west

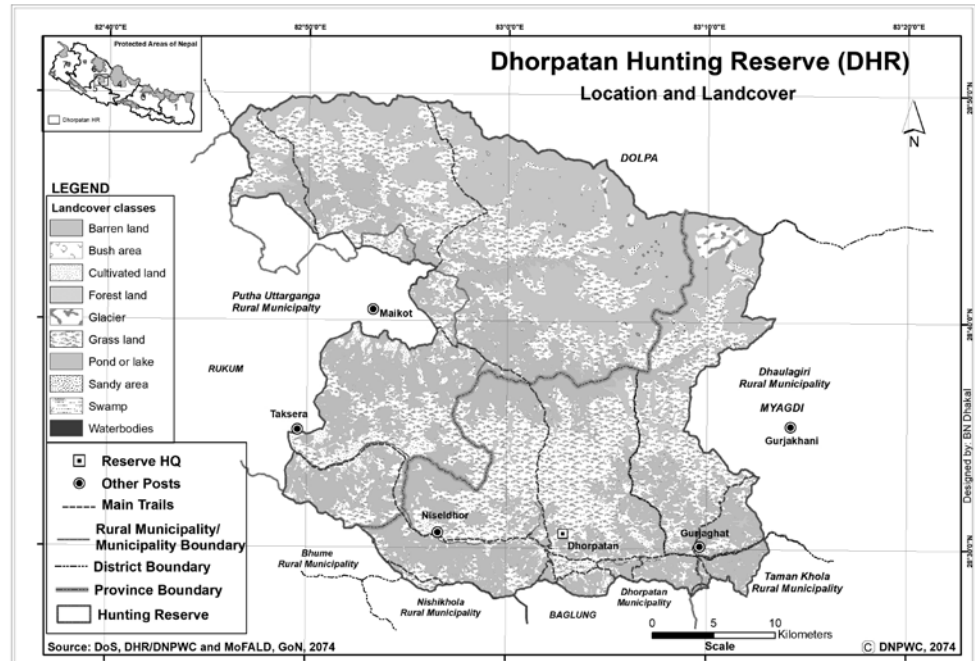


Figure 2: Location and land cover of Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (DNPWC, 2019)

Nepal which comprises six rural municipalities (local government). It is also home to the Dhorpatan-Madane-Gaumukhi conservation corridor initiated by United Network charity consortium (Pretious, Nyaupane & Khadka, 2018). The Dhorpatan municipality is centred on the town of Burtibang and has nine villages (formally referred to as wards). Dhorpatan is a highly rural, hilly area and the average altitude of farming land is between 2000 to 3000 meters. The economy is heavily reliant on subsistence farming supported by limited trade, remittance from migrant workers and foreign aid. Dhorpatan is also overlapped by the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve, a protected area administered by the National Trust for Nature Conservation and the only hunting reserve in Nepal. Gazetted in 1983 and formally established in 1987 it covers an area of 1325 km² in the Dhaulagiri Himal of western Nepal in the Rukum East, Myagdi and Baglung districts. The altitude of reserve ranges from 2850 to 5500 meters above sea level (Panthi et al., 2012). Permit fees to enter the hunting reserve are the main indicator of tourism numbers which are low to date (Figure 3), and indeed have declined from the mid-1990s when an average of 200 tourists visited the reserve (Nepal Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation- MOCTCA, 2019). Tourists tend to visit in the two popular tourist seasons of April/May and October/November (figure 4) when the weather is most suitable.

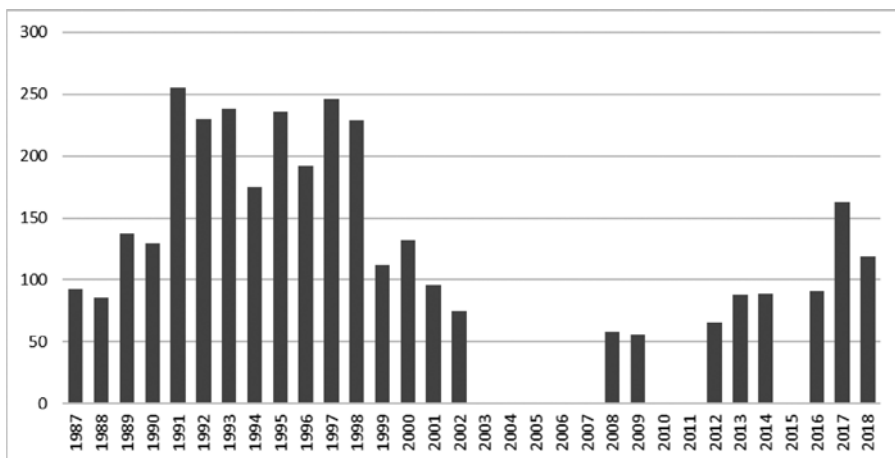


Figure 3: Annual tourist numbers to Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (MOCTCA, 2019)

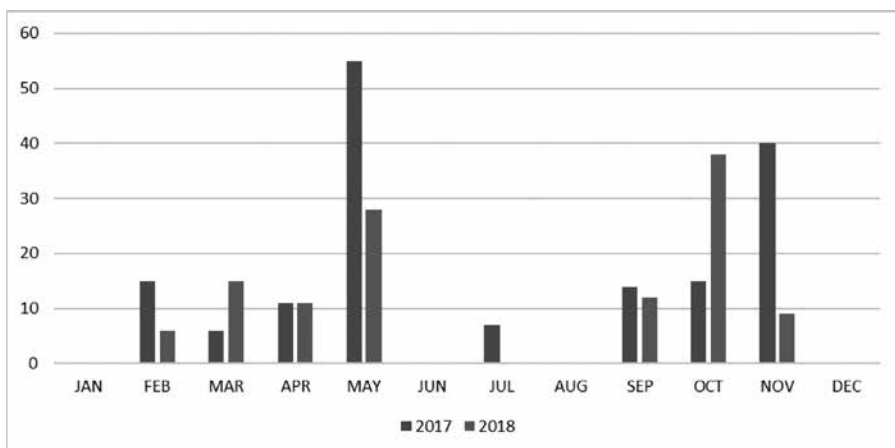


Figure 4: Seasonal number of tourists to Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve Nepal (MOCTCA, 2019)

In 2017, prompted by the non-profit consortium the United Network, the Dhorpatan region introduced the concept ‘Dhorpatan Cluster’ (DC) to establish a regional identity and local approach to conservation and livelihood development (Nyuapane et al., 2019). This cluster is a multi-stakeholder consortium comprising of actors across all three districts in the region. Its focus is on ecology and enterprise, with specific aims to address precarious livelihoods as well as climate change, amidst the changing demographics of rural Nepal.

Integral to the DC are the communities that reside in the Dhorpatan valley – the area with which this paper is primarily concerned. The Dhorpatan valley is a distinct high-altitude valley, defined by the north-flowing Uttarganga River, located some 100km from Baglung and 15km from Burtibang (see figure 5). The valley primarily encompasses former village wards 7, 8 and 9 of the municipality, and has an approximate population of 7000 people. It consists of the following main villages:

- Navi Village (Approximate population 2500, 450 homes)
- Pathathar Village (Approximate population 500, 75 houses, many Tibetan refugees)
- Chhyantung Village (Approximate population 200, 45 houses)
- Bhuji and Vani Villages (Approximate population 175, 37 homes)

The current livelihood activities in these villages are related to agriculture and animal husbandry with a few home stays and small hotel businesses. Additionally, the north flowing Uttarganga river supports small hydropower sites for some villages, and has been recognised as a potential resource for future hydro power development (e.g., National Uttarganga Hydropower Project), and an attraction to be developed for tourism activities. This paper will now explore the community assets in detail.



Figure 5: *Uttarganga River and Dhorpatan valley*

Dhopatan valley livelihood assets

The SLA framework was used to identify baseline assets available to villages within the Dhorpatan valley. To assess and evaluate forms of natural, human, physical, financial, social, cultural and political capital, data and insights were gathered from secondary resources and

first-hand observations. One of the authors has visited the area numerous times and is very familiar with the region and the other two authors conducted a short scoping trip in April 2019 as part of a student field trip. As well as conducting interviews with community members we also held a multi-stakeholder forum to identify challenges in the area. It is important to note that existing research and literature around Dhorpatan valley is scant, making it slightly more challenging to compose a comprehensive picture of its livelihood assets. Our fieldwork was also exploratory at this stage and we do not present individual community members views on assets here. This, of course, highlights opportunities for further research in this region.

Natural capital

Natural Capital is the natural resource stocks upon which people draw for their livelihoods, and is the cornerstone of the SLA approach (Wang, et al., 2016). To a large extent, Dhorpatan's natural capital is governed by its geography as a high-altitude mountain environment. The climate is dictated by this geography, the monsoon season in this area occurs between June and October, but rains may be lighter than areas further south of the mountains, with annual precipitation of <1000 mm (Kandel, 2000). Higher elevations are subject to strong winds throughout the year, and snow usually lasts, even at lower elevations, until early April. During the dry season, the weather is dry and cold, with light snow in midwinter and unpredictable heavier snowstorms into late spring. Because of the surrounding mountains the area receives comparatively less precipitation than other similar areas of the Nepal mid hills.

The Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve is characterized by alpine, sub-alpine and high-temperate vegetation. Common plant species include fir (*Abies spectabilis*), blue pine (*Pinus wallichiana*), birch (*Betula utilis*), rhododendron (*Rhododendron spp.*), hemlock (*Tsuga domusa*), oak (*Quercus semicarpifolia*), juniper (*Juniperus indica*), spruce (*Picea smithiana*), maple (*Acer caesium*), juglans (*Juglans regia*), taxus (*Taxus bacata*) and chirpine (*P. roxburghii*) (Panthi et al., 2012). The reserve supports red panda and also blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*), snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*), goral (*Naemorhedus goral*) serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis*), Himalayan tahr (*Hemitragus jemlachicus*), Himalayan black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), barking deer (*Munticus muntjak*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), rhesus macaque (*Macaca radiata*) and wolf (*Canis lupus*) (Panthi et al., 2012).

The hydrology of the valley is dominated by the north-flowing Uttarganga River, which is unusual as most rivers in Nepal flow south. Balanced weather conditions in the region allow for specialized agriculture, livestock and tourism activities. Because of its altitude, current and potential crops differ from those in lower regions and include more temperate species such as potatoes, *Kodo* millet, cardamom, apples and oranges (Nyaupane et al., 2019). Alpine meadows above the tree line are locally known as '*patans*' and are important for both indigenous animals such as the blue sheep but also for livestock grazing. There are concerns with levels of transhumance activity as some livestock grazing originates from many days away. Panthi and colleagues for example note that "habitat overlap between the red panda and livestock potentially poses a major threat to the panda's survival in the DHR" (2012: 701).

Yarsagumba (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), a parasitic fungus that develops on dead caterpillars is also present in the region and an important export resource. Endemic to the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau, it is one of the most valuable medicinal mushrooms in the world (fetching

up to US\$100,000/kg). Yarsagumba is collected in late spring to early summer after snow starts thawing in the alpine and subalpine pastures. There have been concerns as to the sustainability of harvesting of this fungus, with declining yields observed in recent years, leading to an informal licensing and revenue generation system (Thapa et al., 2014).

Human capital

Human capital is based on the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health that are important to be able to pursue different livelihood strategies (Carter et al., 2015). Subsistence agriculture is the mainstay of the valley economy, and most of the local community skills are related to farming (figure 6). Education provision is poor within the valley, presently there is only one primary school (with limited subjects taught) and one private boarding school, which is run by the Tibetan refugee community in the Pathathar village (figure 7).

The migration from rural remote areas to towns in the district and larger cities is a common phenomenon, supported by remittance money; we discuss this issue more in following sections. Currently, one of the greatest challenges to carrying out any entrepreneurial activity is the lack of a skilled workforce (Nyaupane et al., 2019). This is further challenged by the increasing out migration as many young Nepalese go to the Middle East for work (Baruah & Arjal, 2018), which means a shortage of labor capacities for farming and other local livelihoods. The impact of workforce migration is severe in that it changes the demographics and the socioeconomic fabric of rural communities in Nepal (Maharjan et al., 2013; Pant, 2013).



Figure 6: *Farming in Dhorpatan valley*



Figure 7: *School, Pathathar village*

Physical capital

As described earlier, physical capital includes infrastructure, which is fundamental to enabling livelihoods and development and includes transport, shelter, water, energy, and communication technologies. The remoteness and terrain of the region leads to significant shortcomings in physical infrastructure in Dhorpatan. Roads into the region are unsurfaced, and the only key access point to the valley is via a steep road from the south that ascends from Burtibang, the nearest town. To the east the road ends at Darbang, several days walk from the valley.

Within the valley itself, there are vehicle tracks on both the north and south sides, although these are in a poor state of repair. There is no fixed link between these two axes, as the river flows along the middle of the valley floor.

Vehicles must therefore ford the river at shallow points which vary according to conditions. There are three fixed foot bridges in the valley (which are also accessible by bicycle or small motorbike), however one of these lacks ramps to access (See figure 8). A wide number of footpaths link the various settlements in the valley, but these are seemingly neither planned nor well maintained. An airstrip was in use for some years, but this is in a poor state of repair and is currently not used for fixed wing aircraft operations (figure 9). Transport infrastructure has long been recognized as a major challenge in Nepal, as noted by Blaikie in prior notes;



Figure 8: Footbridge, Navi village



Figure 9: Abandoned airstrip, Dhorpatan valley

The failure of motorable road provision, as the major form of infrastructural development funded by external investment, to generate a significant or systematic response in terms of agricultural output or diversification, in a context where processes in the wider political economy were not conducive to a capitalist transformation of agriculture. (Blaikie, 2002:1256)

Energy provision is facilitated by a hydroelectric power scheme which serves the north side of the valley. Excess water from this scheme is fed into a water powered grain mill, a facility built with the support of USAID. There have also been recent developments to explore green energy development in the region, in particular solar energy. Enterprise infrastructure for agriculture is also a key challenge, mainly the lack of modern farming machinery and connections to markets (Nyaupane et al, 2019). This applies to service sectors as well. As mentioned above there are plans for a very large hydropower scheme in the region. This will involve the construction of a 200m high dam to provide a 821MW plant at the cost of US\$1bn (Kathmandu Post, 2019). Construction of access roads and changes to hydrology will undeniably have significant positive and negative impacts in the area, but will also submerge a large portion of the valley itself, hence altering livelihoods dramatically.

Health provision is limited, there is a small maternity post near to the old airport but there are no other significant facilities. Infrastructure is a key issue for the entire region, although there are developments externally that may improve access over time. The mid-hill highway construction is ongoing, although this itself is a barrier to transportation. The north-south Kaligandaki corridor (Nyaupane et al, 2019) is east of the Dhorpatan region and may develop further as well. Internet accessibility is improving in the region, and there is mobile coverage for the valley on certain networks (e.g., Nepal Telecom) (figure 10).



Figure 10: *Mobile coverage in Dhorpatan valley*

The fragility of the built infrastructure in the valley was demonstrated in November 2018 when a large fire damaged 30 houses in Navi village (Kathmandu Post, 2018). Fortunately, many of the residents had migrated to lower levels for the winter and most of the houses were empty. Nevertheless, there was significant damage to property and assets (for example stored grains), an estimated cost of Rs 32.8 million was lost.

All touristic activity will require accommodation infrastructure such as lodges or hotels, which are currently very limited (Nyaupane et al, 2019). As well as a campsite near the park office (figure 11), there is one guesthouse near the site of the old airstrip that is suitable for the trekking market (shared facilities) (figure 12) and some homestays. However, a mountain bike guide from Pokhara noted that their simple level of culinary provision was not suitable for international tourists requiring complex and high energy food for active pursuits. There is scope, in addition to the usual opportunity for trekking to expand into more diverse adventure-based tourism activities such as mountain biking, paragliding, horse riding, snow skiing and bungee jumping. However, these activities require the development of infrastructure, for example trails and shops. Certainly, the agenda of Dhorpatan cluster itself and other developments in the region might push for the improvement of better connected public infrastructure (Nyaupane et al., 2019). Limited infrastructure poses significant challenges not least production and distribution systems to support agricultural markets and trade.



Figure 11: Campsite, Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve



Figure 12: Guesthouse, Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve

Financial capital

Financial capital involves the financial resources available to people such as savings, credit, and remittances, the latter being particularly important in Nepal. There is limited formal financial infrastructure within the valley. Although commercial banks are expanding their branch services, this does not seem to be well developed in the Dhorpatan valley itself. Money may be accessed through remittance, micro-loans and local cooperative banking. For instance, in 2015, the French charity Amis de Dhorpatan was formed to help farmers in the Dhorpatan valley to grow and sell locally farmed potatoes. Local community owned entrepreneurial ventures as well as investment partnerships such as these are created with an intention to “ensure growing returns and an increasing salary to the producers from one year to the other...” (Amis de Dhorpatan, 2020).

Although entrepreneurial activities have substantially increased in recent years it has failed to create sustainable wealth in the community. It is also typical for organizations, whether for-profit or non-profit, to collapse and become bankrupt within years of their founding. Most businesses in the Dhorpatan Cluster region are small grocery retailers connected to the basic trading system in Nepal (Nyaupane et al., 2019). There are limited cottage industries: dairies, livestock and handicrafts, and a few others are providing basic services such as IT and banking.

Currently one third of Nepal’s GDP comes from remittances (money sent back to family/relatives in Nepal) from overseas workers (Shrestha, 2018). This money is usually spent on land and house purchases which lead to the commercialization of land (Sunam & McCarthy, 2016). The consequences of remittance money on subsistence farming are lack of financial support and a shortage of labor-force and it also affects other precarious livelihoods. Similarly, it appears that the Tibetan community within the valley are also supported by remittances from outside (a new temple is under construction from foreign funds).

Social capital

Social capital involves resources such as networks, membership of groups, and relationships of trust upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihoods (Tao & Wall, 2009). Trust in private business as well as the NGO sector has traditionally been very low in Nepal, thus generally it is a challenge to achieve social, environmental and economic goals despite positive intentions of actors (Nyaupane et al., 2019). At present, NGOs do provide diverse support to the community, including healthcare, education, livelihood, youth empowerment and so forth, while the local government should predominately be responsible for the function of providing services to the public and delivering infrastructure, welfare and other programmes. However, overall there has been a history of poor governance, ownership and running of a multi-stakeholder cluster as well as a lack of local supporting industries and networks. Moreover, none of these organizations (public, private, non-profit) create uniquely local products or services (Nyaupane et al., 2019).

In response, the Dhorpatan Cluster (DC) was created to operate in the GGA of Western Nepal. This multi-stakeholder cluster (e.g., Community, enterprises, NGOs, government units) is a fairly new asset to the valley, and the region at large. Focused on ecology and enterprise, one of the current DC projects underway is the ‘Dhorpatan Mountain bike Development Project’ which supports running of a shop, events and skills development. Additionally, as described earlier, local community owned entrepreneurial ventures as well as international partnerships were initiated to support the region (cf. Amis de Dhorpatan,

2020). Further the Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI) introduced a 'one village one product' (OVOP) scheme in the region (and broadly in Nepal), which has been partly successful. The commercial farming of cardamom in the southern region of Dhorpatan is one positive but a limited example.

Cultural capital

Local traditions form both the uniqueness and identity of communities, thus cultural capital, consisting of the heritage, customs and traditions should be considered in any analysis local livelihoods assets (Cater & Cater, 2007). Dhorpatan valley has a mix of cultures and castes including Bishwakarma, Magar, Nauthar (Chhetri), Chhantyal, Thakali, Bhotias (Tibetan refugees), and Brahmin. People are dependent on traditional agricultural practices in the southern part of the hunting reserve. In the northern, higher-elevation parts of the reserve; animal husbandry and trans-boundary trade are the major sources of livelihood (Aryal 2008; Aryal & Kreigenhofer, 2009; Aryal et al., 2010).

Religious sites are important in the valley, as described above a new Tibetan Buddhist temple is being constructed in the Pathathar village. At the eastern end of the valley is a Bon temple from an earlier religious sect and there is a Hindu Uttarganga Baraha shrine on the south western slopes of the valley. On the road from Burtibang, just prior to the pass that enters the valley is a religious site located around a small lake (figure 13). This is popular with local pilgrims and visitors who may visit the site for picnics and to escape the summer heat at lower altitudes.



Figure 13: Hindu religious site on Burtibang-Dhorpatan road.

Political capital

Political capital suggests that there is an empowering role of resources used by actors for the realization of outcomes that advance actors' perceived interests (Wang, et al., 2016). Political structures are deeply entrenched in Nepal and often form a significant barrier to livelihood

development. As Nyaupane and colleagues highlight “the political cadre culture is prevalent everywhere in cities, towns and rural villages... socio-economic life is segregated, dominated and driven by political affiliation and favor as much as certain regions are known to be the ‘belts’ of certain political parties” (2019: 10). This political structure forms a barrier to development, but at the same time it is important to recognize and work within existing constraints and opportunities frameworks.

Tourism potential in the Dhorpatan valley

Despite these challenges, we believe that the Dhorpatan valley offers significant potential for tourism development. Although the Dhorpatan ‘brand’ is widely recognized, there has been little done to promote tourism in the region to date. There have been a small number of promotions in the form of big festivals (mahotsav) organized by charities or communities. Such festivals originate from the national culture of organizing events to promote places and destinations and bringing people together. In addition there are regular Hindu ritual festivals as well and these may last several days. Whilst such occasional destination festivals have been able to attract visitors from near and far, the impact is almost immediately lost due to their temporary nature. One of the reasons behind such temporariness is that these destinations Dhorpatan (Baglung) and Gaumukhi (Pyuthan) are very remote and challenging to access. Secondly, and related to the first point, these rural destinations are not well connected to other known national destinations, for example the Annapurna Conservation Area (Nyaupane et al., 2019).

As a mainstay of the Nepalese tourism product, trekking tourism offers opportunities for communities of Dhorpatan to develop further (cf. Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Bhattarai, et al, 2005; Nepal, 2003, 2005; Singh, 1980; Singh & Kaur, 1986). Trekking has a long history in the region, principally as an access point to the Dolpo area north of Dhorpatan. Dolpo was mentioned and made popular in the cult book *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen (1978), a journalistic account of his attempts to find the animals among the blue sheep herds which are extensive in the region. Matthiessen, however, is less than praising for the Dhorpatan region, visiting in late autumn rains he describes Dhorpatan as “a sort of purgatory” (Matthiessen, 1978: 61). Yet the continued popularity of this adventurous volume amongst trekkers and outdoors people may be a useful opportunity to promote the area, similar to the ways in which books like John Krakauer’s (1997) *Into Thin Air* and James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizon* (1933) contribute to the tourism imaginaries of other parts of Nepal (Miller, 2017).

Dhorpatan is also part of the lower Great Himalaya Trail (GHT) which is a long-distance trail crossing the entirety of Nepal, west to east. A recent development has been the less-known Guerilla trek in the west, officially launched in 2012, a heritage trail built in the Maoist conflict heartland. This follows the route and location of significant battles in the civil war of the 2000s. Dhorpatan valley was a training ground for Maoist who stormed the town of Beni in 2004, and is part of the trail which leads from Sulichaur (Rana & Bhandari, 2018). Despite the development of these walking products numbers are still small in comparison to the more popular trekking areas of the Annapurna, the Langtang and the Khumbu.

In 2019, our own scoping visit and collaborative explorations with staff from a Pokhara mountain bike company identified potential for mountain bike trails in the region. However, there is currently no local bike hire supplier, with quality equipment closer than Pokhara (at least 8 hours drive). However, it is likely that Dhorptan would also face competition from

much more attractive high-end mountain bike regions. For example, fly-in, fly-out mountain bike tourism is now well developed in lower Mustang, which has the supporting infrastructure that this niche expects.

Although being an internationally known hunting reserve, actual numbers of these niche tourists are very low, approximately 25 per year (DNPWC, 2019). The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) has allocated 26 blue sheep as an annual quota for hunting in DHR. The quota was never fully utilised in any year between the period of 1980 to 1998, and after this period hunting declined during the civil war. There is still potential for this market with local involvement as Karki and Thapa (2011) note:

Involvement of local people in the management of sport hunting is essential. Therefore, to increase their stake, the Reserve and the outfitters should initiate schemes that provide financial support to the concerned local communities. They should also assist local communities to use funds appropriately both in conservation as well as in income generating activities. (2011:30)

However, it is also important to note that the hunting title in the protected area designation and brand (Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve) is a significant deterrent to international tourism. It would be sensible for the reserve to adopt a conservation nomenclature rather than 'hunting', as this would allow hunting to continue while simultaneously affording other forms of tourism to be developed and marketed.

Whilst Dhorpatan's adventure tourism appeals to foreign tourists, there is perhaps greater potential for domestic tourism in the region. As discussed above, festivals and other products such as concerts, cultural/religious events and sports competitions could be targeted at local youths and tourists (Nyaupane et al., 2019). These, together with heritage trails in the southern region of the cluster, offer rich experiences for local tourism. Many of these may also appeal to international markets, as there is no product that is purely for locals or purely for foreigners, thus they can be blended according to consumer demands.

Finally, there may also be opportunities for agricultural tourism. The Dhorpatan cluster region is rich with good quality high-altitude farming land at between 2000 to 3000 metres, which presents opportunities for specialist crops (such as buckwheat, cardamom and *Kodo* millet), as well as fruits such as oranges and apples. The French charity Amis de Dhorpatan working in the Dhorpatan valley has identified potatoes grown there to have special culinary qualities, with the potential for export (Amis de Dhorpatan, 2020). Finally, agricultural tourism associated with farming and other local professions, is also one of the potential product areas we identified during our 2019 site visit.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Dhorpatan valley faces significant development challenges, whereby local entrepreneurial activities and livelihood options lag behind other parts of Nepal. In part this may be due to remoteness of hill regions themselves and the decade long civil war, but more poignantly is the limited financial, human and political capital as well as the poor state of physical assets that continue to challenge the communities who reside in Dhorpatan valley. However, the 2017 general and local elections in Nepal, and the resurgence of local NGOs and their various projects, signify hope – a sign towards greater economic and social progress in Dhorpatan's future. Moreover, national tourism campaigns (e.g., Visit Nepal 2020 Life Time Experiences) pave the way for both domestic and international tourism to be supported

by, as well as potentially augment the high levels of environmental, social, and cultural capital that already exists in the Dhorpatan area.

While this shiny promise of tourism begins to be touted within the valley, these types of development will require local collaboration, dialogue and some sort of consensus among the various stakeholders in the region (Nyaupane et al., 2019). There is clearly a need to further research the issues faced by residents in the region and provide research that more accurately portrays their individual views on their assets. Ongoing research intends to conduct more detailed work with community stakeholders, such as mapping exercises (Cater, 2012) to identify community aspirations. Furthermore, these stakeholders and communities are urged to conceptualize tourism as part of the solution, not the savior (Mair, 2012). Here, tourism becomes one of the sustainable and alternative livelihoods that may afford local economic activities that can offer opportunities (skilled and well-paid jobs) that enable migrating youths to stay in Nepal, and disrupt increasing out migration trends. This proposition of course needs additional research. Yet our sustainable livelihood approach has, perhaps, played a small part in helping us begin to address such critical sustainability challenges.

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