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On Misplaced Narratives of Disaster and Disaster Management: A Review

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Abstract

Time and again, Nepal has undergone various kinds of disasters, leading to devastating losses in both human lives and the economy. These calamitous events leave deep scars of pain, loss, suffering and trauma on those vulnerable populations who are directly impacted. While reappraising the disasters, the impact it leaves for the vulnerable population remains short-lived or gets fades away with time, making it nothing to learn from the tragedy they cause. This expository essay centers on the notion of disaster, which is loosely conceived by many in Nepal. Burrowing Miachael Burawoy's schema of 'Public Sociology,' this essay reexamines disaster by shifting its focus from purely 'natural or technological' to a 'social', thereby engaging a broader audience rather than restricting the discussion to limited academic circles (both social and environmental sciences). By pitching the discussion from the structural dimension of society, the authors argue that the intensity, exigency and fatality associated with disasters are manifestations of societal inequality, structured within 'social processes', rather than merely arising from the natural or technological event. Consequently, it is the marginalized groups who lack resources or a voice to influence disaster preparedness (such as

women, children, the elderly, the disabled and those below the poverty line) and are the ones who suffer the most.

Keywords: Social vulnerability, disaster preparedness, risk perception, structural failures, disaster myths.

Introduction

Natural disasters, often perceived as a consequence of environmental hazards, have stirred excessive fear, posing a significant threat to humanity worldwide. This intensity of fear is bourgeoning, with the booming narrative of 'climate change' and 'global warming'. In response, governments in the Global South have allocated considerable funds and aligned their initiatives with the agendas of international developmental organizations for preparedness and reducing associated risks, Nepal being no exception to this process. Moreover, there has been a tremendous proliferation in academic publications regarding disasters by social scientists in the global south, a domain that was previously dominated solely by natural scientists.

At the outset, the authors of this expository paper would like to inform our avid readers that this essay neither delves into natural disasters in general nor specifically addresses natural disasters affecting Nepal. Rather, the essay aims to offer a contrasting viewpoint questioning the realist approach, which regards disasters as inherently unpredictable 'natural' or 'environmental' occurrences. The authors argue that the intensity, exigency and fatality associated with disasters are manifestations of societal inequality structured within 'social processes', rather than being only the after effect of natural or technological events. In 2023 alone, 399 reported disasters resulted in 86,473 deaths, affected 93.1 million people, and caused $202.7 billion in economic losses (Ballester et al., 2023). These figures emphasize the urgency of rethinking conventional approaches to disaster management. However, here the author's intent is not to fully dismiss the natural or technological framework, but to push for the 'public sociology'[1] scholarship that can comprehensively illuminate disaster-related challenges in Nepal, thereby promoting alternative narratives for both the field of sociology and the larger public.

Disasters may come and go, but the scars they leave on individuals can last for long. To paraphrase the remarks made by Smith and Hoffman, disasters are socially constructed crises deeply rooted in and shaped by structural inequalities and social vulnerabilities, leading to psycho-cultural impacts and complex interdependencies among social, environmental, cultural, political and economic systems (Smith & Hoffman, 2020). Nepal has encountered numerous disasters over the years, like floods, landslides, earthquakes, forest fires, glacial lake outbursts, etc, resulting in significant loss of life and economy. However, the discussions generated in

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[1] British Marxist sociologist Michael Burawoy advocated the idea of public sociology, emphasizing the importance of addressing diverse social issues for wider publics rather than confining debate and discussions to limited academic community (see Buroway, 2021).

academia, media, policy and public sphere tend to singularly focus on technocratic aspects attributing disasters primarily to 'natural' or 'environmental' factors.

This one-sided viewpoint eclipses the human and social dimensions that are integral in understanding these catastrophic events embedded within the social process. A close introspection of the casualties and the subsequent ramifications of consequences of disasters prompt several sociological questions. Who are those individuals and communities suffering the most from disasters? Who are they who are classified as victims? What type of settlements and infrastructure do they inhabit? Do they have prior knowledge to preparedness? What is the level of state's national preparedness policy? How do rescue operations operate and how effective are they? Are evacuations carried out timely and efficiently? How are our policies and strategies formulated and enacted? Who benefits from disaster and aid relief? Are the involvement and the role of developmental organizations truly humanitarian?

The subtleties of these inquiries clearly demonstrate explicable as well as complex social layers intricately interwoven into our social processes. Similarly, vulnerability, preparedness and risk perception, all three form an inseparable causativeness of disasters. Vulnerability and risks are not natural conditions rather they are structurally rooted within the social process. Likewise, preparedness models and policies of disasters are hierarchical and predominantly top down. They are designed and enforced by state and development organizations, excluding the community members and their voices residing in risk zones. Public Sociological approach to disasters can reveal the intersections between social systems and the built environment, exposing systemic failures that disproportionately affect marginalized populations. These perceptions, in turn, shape how communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. Marginalized groups often lack the resources or voice to influence disaster preparedness and response strategies, leaving them more vulnerable to the cascading impacts of disasters. Groups such as women, children, the elderly, the disabled and those below the poverty lines face more risks due to systemic inequities in resource allocation, preparedness, and institutional support rather than the general population.

Decoding the attributes of these processes, which are unevenly distributed and influenced by social variables such as caste, class, gender, ethnicity, geography and poverty, in conjunction with the collective measures towards an inclusive framework, we can lay the groundwork for more effective disaster management.

Altogether, this essay is divided into four sections. By showcasing the importance of social process and interweaving the connections between disaster-led consequences and social processes, the first section discusses how social process is integral in shaping and defining the risks and outcomes of disasters. Similarly, the second section reflects on the dilemmas of vulnerable communities by illustrating who they are, the impact of disasters on their lives and the differing circumstances that shape and reshape their experiences depending on their living conditions. The third section presents a conundrum of three key variables: 'risk, preparedness and responses. It questions the effectiveness and efficiency of preparedness and responses in thwarting the risk. The last or the fourth section is an elaboration of third section, which

unpacks the issue of pre- and post-disaster polices driven by hierarchical top-down approaches, while dismissing the essential contributions of community and local emergency members.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodological framework, grounded in critical social theory and enriched by the lens of public sociology. Such an approach is appropriate given the essay's central aim: to interrogate prevailing disaster discourses and reframe them as socially constructed phenomena embedded within structural inequalities.

The primary method employed is a critical review of interdisciplinary literature spanning disaster sociology, environmental studies, development policy, and social vulnerability analysis. Sources include peer-reviewed academic publications, institutional reports, government policy documents, and relevant grey literature. Particular emphasis is placed on scholarship emerging from or focused on the Global South—especially Nepal—in order to address epistemic biases and contextual gaps in mainstream disaster studies.

The essay is further informed by illustrative case examples of disaster events in Nepal, such as the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake and recurrent flooding in the Karnali River basin. While not derived from systematic fieldwork, these examples are analytically curated from secondary data, and community-based documentation to ground the theoretical arguments in real-world contexts. This integration of case-based reflections enhances the interpretive depth and practical relevance of the discussion.

The engagement with Michael Burawoy's concept of public sociology allows the analysis to move beyond academic abstraction, aiming instead to democratize disaster knowledge production by linking scholarly critique with public discourse. This approach is particularly relevant for exposing how technocratic and hazard-centric models of disaster management often obscure the underlying social processes that shape vulnerability, preparedness, and recovery.

The paper incorporates interpretive engagement with documented testimonies, local experiences, and community voices, particularly those of marginalized groups. This aligns with the objectives of critical qualitative inquiry, which prioritizes the unpacking of power dynamics, institutional exclusion, and lived experience in the construction of disaster narratives.

Results and Discussion

Social Process and Disaster

In the larger popular imagination, disasters are often conceived solely as natural events that strike humanity at any time and in any place. This perception is held not only by the common populace, but also echoed by experts across various fields such as, academia, journalism, bureaucracy, planning, policy and others. The image of 'natural' is so deeply rooted in our collective psyche that it completely bypasses social contexts, conditions and hierarchies that are integral to the 'social processes involved in shaping and defining the risks and outcomes of these events. The concept of social process serves as foundational cores of sociology. The authors in this essay emphasize the social process as the arrangement of any society wherein

individuals interact with each other based on their capacities to make choices and take actions. Despite being the building block of sociology, the conception of social process remains forgotten in contemporary sociological discussions. Any form of disaster, such as floods, landslides, droughts and earthquakes, carries deep social consequences, leading to immense pain, loss and suffering. The unfolding tragedy and its subsequent ramifications are significantly afflicted by societal inequalities, human actions and existing governance systems, impinging both preparedness and risk mitigation.

In her work Disasters: A Sociological Approach, sociologist Kathleen Tierney illustratively present the argument surrounding the debate on 'nature' versus 'social' as, "…disasters are by their nature social events, not merely physical ones…While media accounts and commonsense views of disaster tend to gloss over differences in event severity in a search for commonalities among events, sociological formulations are attentive to such differences because of their social implications (Tierney, 2019: 12-13)". Similarly, Wisner et al. (2004), in their 'Pressure and Release' model, argue that disasters arise from the convergence of natural hazards and vulnerable conditions rooted in social, political, and economic processes. Among the population, it is primarily the marginalized groups that often bear serious implications due to limited access to resources, inadequate infrastructure, and systemic exclusion, which intensify their exposure to hazards. Moreover, the disaster responses and recovery practices are influenced by social dynamics, including community resilience, governance capacities, and social capital. This perspective highlights disasters as indicators of complex socio-environmental interactions, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches addressing underlying vulnerabilities and promoting equity in disaster risk reduction (DRR).

The sociological approach of 'social 'embedded in the social process challenges naïve realist perspectives that perceive disasters as solely natural events outside human agency and social order, showcasing the interplay of various factors that intensify the severity and post-effects of such disasters. For instance, environmental degradation, poverty, unbalanced development, urbanization, climate change, and population growth are identified as "risk drivers" that contribute the intensity and frequency of disaster. The social condition of disasters emphasizes how trigger events (natural hazards) severely afflict the vulnerable populations, with shared meanings assigned to these events. In their thought-provoking work on disaster, Wisner and his associates illuminate the complexities of disaster dilemma and the inherent social processes, asserting that "if people's capabilities were all working properly then there would be few disasters.

Furthermore, the constructivists also paid considerable attention to social processes, highlighting how specific environmental, historical, social, and knowledge constructs influences disaster responses and actions. By differentiating between the social production of disasters and their social construction, critical reframing enables more nuanced dialogue across diverse perspectives, helping bridge theoretical and practical understandings (Sun & Faas, 2018).

This highlights the significance of understanding the societal and human dimensions of disaster from a sociological vantage point, where the events like disaster can only be comprehended by delving into the fundamental social processes involved.

At the generic level, disasters can be typified into two levels: I) natural disasters, derived from nature-produced events, and ii) technological disasters, stemming from human activities. Despite these categorizations, disasters are manifestations of the interaction between social processes and the built environment, leading to both new risks and intensification of existing vulnerabilities.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens stresses the obscure connections between industrial and technological developments, suggesting that while these developments have uplifted safer conditions, they have simultaneously brought forth new risks and challenges. These risks emerge from systemic or structural processes embedded in the relationship between the social process and the built environment. Risks are heightened by the vulnerabilities of the social system, as articulated through processes interacting with nature and the built environment. Disasters, whether natural or technological, are fundamentally tied to disruptions that expose the social system's weaknesses and preparedness.

Adopting a social constructivist approach to disaster management has carries significant practical implications. Rather than focusing solely on physical hazards, this perspective urges policymakers, practitioners, and humanitarian actors to recognize how vulnerabilities are socially produced through unequal access to resources, information, and decision-making power. In practice, this means designing disaster preparedness and response strategies that prioritize community engagement, participatory risk assessments, and inclusive planning processes. It also calls for tailoring interventions to account for local social hierarchies—such as caste, gender, ethnicity, and land ownership—so that policies address root causes of vulnerability, not just symptoms. By integrating the lived experiences and knowledge of at-risk populations, a constructivist approach fosters more context-sensitive, equitable, and sustainable disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies. It challenges technocratic, top-down models by emphasizing that effective preparedness must be co-created with communities, acknowledging that risk perception and adaptive capacity are deeply embedded in social and cultural realities.

In light of these classifications amidst the rising challenges, disasters as social process encompasses three different phases. The first phase, production/reproduction, involves the matrix of social relationships shaping productive processes and interactions with the built environment. Decisions made during this phase, such as those related to technological development and spatial planning, can either mitigate disaster risks or intensify vulnerabilities. This phase also includes the development of preventive measures and social attitudes, which may either strengthen preparedness or hinder responses through neglectful policies and inadequate instruments.

The second phase, emergency, occurs when a disaster directly impacts the social system. This phase reveals the preparedness within the social system and the effectiveness of emergency

management plans. It is a critical moment characterized by societal shifts, improvisation of measures, and activation of solidarity, social participation, and control mechanisms. The disruption creates new social dynamics that shape immediate responses and recovery actions. The third phase, recovery, involves restoring normality while addressing the changes driven by disasters. This phase highlights the importance of rebuilding social structures, fostering resilience, and adapting to new realities. Long-term recovery efforts include revisiting governance systems, strengthening community capacities, and addressing systemic inequalities that contributing to the disaster's impact.

The aftermath of the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake in Nepal provides a compelling example of how disasters are deeply embedded within social processes. While the earthquake itself was a natural event, the disproportionate impact on rural, marginalized communities—and the delays in post-disaster recovery—highlighted entrenched inequalities. Many families, particularly those from lower castes, ethnic minorities, and geographically isolated areas, struggled to access government reconstruction grants due to lack of citizenship documents, land titles, or bureaucratic knowledge. In contrast, relatively privileged urban populations were able to navigate the aid system more efficiently. This illustrates how pre-existing social structures—including land tenure systems, caste-based exclusion, and centralized governance—intensified vulnerability and shaped post-disaster outcomes.

This comprehensive understanding of disasters as social processes enables the development of integrated approaches to disaster management, balancing preventive actions, emergency responses, and recovery strategies. Despite these technological transitions and societal transformations, the level of disaster vulnerability has increased concurrently, presenting an additional challenge which has added other dimensions within the social process, particularly in the global south.

Vulnerability and Vulnerabilities of Disaster Perspective

In its most basic sense, vulnerability refers to a condition where one can be easily hurt, harmed, targeted or attacked. The social status and privileges that individuals possess within a society are founded on wide and uneven divide. Sociological studies have identified various factors that contribute to these disparate social layers, like caste, class, gender, ethnicity, race, geography, poverty, squatting and homelessness, to name only a few. As said in the aforementioned section, the pain, risks, losses and sufferings that the individual encountered and endured are not natural and technological, on the contrary, they emanated from the social process and are decided by their lived lives or lived conditions. The people who are considered to be vulnerable are those who lived with their own everyday hardships and are in the lower rung in the society. The places they reside are in itself vulnerable to disasters, led by fear and insecurities. Likewise, they lack options for moving to affordably safe zones and ultimately forcing them to endure repeated miseries and the subsequent trauma they face. Moreover, the degree of vulnerability varies according to social factors, individuals' social positions and the precariousness of their living conditions. Geographer Susan Cutter (1996) categorized various dimensions of vulnerability alongside the associated risk factors as: a.) The physical dimension:

buildings, infrastructure, critical facilities; b.) the social dimension: vulnerable groups, livelihoods, local institutions, poverty; and the c.) the economic dimension: related to direct and indirect financial losses. Similarly, to Blaikie and his associates (1994), "The concept of social vulnerability to disasters emphasizes the unequal capacity of individuals and communities to anticipate, cope with, and recover from disaster events". In their study they primarily shed light on poverty, marginalization, and limited access to resources significantly intensify vulnerability. Likewise, in identifying the specific vulnerable groups Wisner and his research cohorts (2004) identified vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities (PWDs), time and again experience disproportionately severe impacts during disasters (Wisner et al., 2004).

Notwithstanding the social processes, the pressing challenges of climate change, human mobility and the environmental hazards and degradations caused by the global human population cannot be ignored. Global interconnections, including climate change and migration, have further reshaped patterns of vulnerability, emphasizing their dynamic and complex nature. Social and physical environments jointly influence disaster risk and impact, as vulnerability is deeply rooted in historical inequalities and uneven power dynamics within and between societies. While social production[2] approaches challenge the realist notion of disasters as isolated spatial-temporal events, they recognize the existence of natural hazards as immediate triggers rather than root causes of disasters (Sun &Faas, 2018). To sociologist Kathleen Tierney "the social production of disasters centers on how social structures and social processes operate to create the conditions that make geological, meteorological and other physical events disastrous (2019:74).

Again, going back to the issue of vulnerability, it is a critical dimension of disasters, reflecting the interaction between social systems and the built environment. It reveals the extent to which societies are exposed to disasters and the social conditions that magnify this exposure (João & Ribeiro, 2015). This dynamic process influences various phases: social production and reproduction, emergency, and post-disaster reconstruction. During the production/reproduction phase, social conditions may increase or reduce vulnerability parameters. In the emergency phase, a community's preparedness and access to resources shape its ability to absorb disaster impacts. Reconstruction, meanwhile, assesses the social system's capacity to recover from losses and rebuild effectively.

 Different studies have identified the cases of various types of vulnerable people suffering from disasters in distinct precarious settings. For instance, economically disadvantaged households often lack resources to relocate, retrofit their homes, or access recovery aid, continuing post-disaster wealth disparities. Marginalized racial and ethnic groups frequently face systemic inequalities in resource allocation, worsening their vulnerability. Women, girls, and PWDs encounter intensified risks of violence and exclusion from decision-making processes, while

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[2] Sociologist Kathleen Tierney differentiates between the concepts of 'social construction' and 'social production'. In her work *Disasters: A Sociological Approach* (2019), she contends that these terms should not be used synonymously, a practice among many researchers examining the social dimensions of disasters.

older adults contend with mobility challenges, medical needs, and social isolation. Children, too, are vulnerable due to their dependency and exclusion from governance. Similarly, the distribution of vulnerabilities within a society reflects its social organization, structure, and composition. Even in the presence of the same hazard, different groups experience varying levels of risk exposure.

For example, the 1995 flooding of the Karnali River in Kailai district, which resulted in the displacement of nearly 600 households from the Chaugudi customs office area. These families—many of whom were already living in precarious conditions without legal land ownership—lost their homes and livelihoods overnight when the river changed course and engulfed their settlements. Despite the scale of the disaster, only 150 households were later resettled in a refugee camp in Tikapur-1, Jyotinagar. Many others remained excluded from compensation and housing schemes due to the lack of legal documents or political voice. This case starkly reveals how vulnerability is structurally produced, with landlessness, marginalization, and exclusion from institutional support intensifying the long-term impact of disaster events on already disadvantaged groups. This diversity highlights the importance of viewing disasters as integrally social processes, where vulnerabilities constitute a fundamental aspect of their dynamics.

Analyzing social vulnerabilities requires a comprehensive framework, such as socio-structural and socio-cultural components. Structural factors include age and sex distributions, family composition, education levels, neighborhood networks, and socio-professional structures.

 Sociocultural variables—such as risk perception, cultural attitudes, access to information, and participation in safety and civil protection programs—play an important role in shaping vulnerability. João and Ribeiro (2015) argue that these components collectively inform an interpretative analysis of vulnerability, providing valuable insights into how social groups and communities experience and respond to disaster risks. Without a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions and criteria of vulnerability across societal, cultural, historical and political contexts, any efforts towards disaster preparedness and response will be meaningless. Even during the post-disaster, initiatives undertaken by the will likely be unproductive and meaningless, failing to harmonize both the state and communities in need.

 Risk, Preparedness and Responses

Disaster preparedness involves actions designed to safeguard lives during catastrophic events such as earthquakes, floods, hazardous material spills. It also includes measures to protect property, contain damage and disruption, and facilitate post-disaster recovery and restoration. While traditionally focused on improving emergency response and coping capabilities, there is growing recognition of the importance of preparing for recovery as and basic component of preparedness.

The ability to prepare and respond effectively depends upon the agential capability, be it the state or the society, to operate efficiently in managing and mitigating risks to prevent casualties. Many individuals are uninformed and lack basic literacy, leaving them vulnerable to the daily dangers that could affect their lives. Without understanding the circumstances and the

conditions in which people live, simply allocating funds won't led to effective preparedness and better response. From a psychological perspective, disaster preparedness comprises the knowledge, skills, and capacities initiated by governments, response and recovery organizations, communities, and individuals to effectively anticipate, respond to, and recover from the impacts of likely, imminent, or ongoing disasters (Paton, 2019).

The evolving emphasis on preparedness emanates from the realization that just informing people about risks does not necessarily motivate them to take comprehensive actions. This recognition has encouraged deeper exploration into the social and psychological factors that shape preparedness behaviors, such as gaining knowledge, developing response capacities, and equipping individuals with resources to manage hazards effectively (Paton, 2019).

Disaster preparedness extends beyond immediate actions and is best understood as an overarching goal rather than a singular program or phase preceding disaster response. It is a continuous, integrated process involving diverse activities and resources, covering sectors such as training, logistics, health care, and institutional development (IFRC, 2000). It is essential to prioritize fulfilling certain basic necessities first. Key elements include establishing and testing early warning systems, evacuation planning, public education campaigns, capacity building, and formulating emergency response policies and operational plans. These efforts collectively enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and emergency response mechanisms at the community, national, and global levels.

Wisner et al. (2004) describe disaster preparedness as a set of measures aimed at reducing the adverse effects of hazards, including loss of life, property damage, and livelihood disruptions. This includes conducting risk assessments, developing hazard maps, and raising awareness through public campaigns, workshops, and school education. The UNISDR (2015) reinforces this perspective, emphasizing the role of education, training, and community engagement in building preparedness. Moreover, preparedness is also embedded within the societal collective values and cultural traditions and is shaped by the interplay of social structures, cultural norms, and collective behavior.

A compelling example of context-sensitive and socially grounded disaster preparedness in Nepal is the implementation of the Community-Based Early Warning System (CBEWS) in flood-prone areas along the Karnali River Basin. This initiative illustrates how participatory approaches, rooted in local knowledge and social networks, can significantly enhance risk awareness and response capacity, especially among vulnerable communities.

The CBEWS was developed in response to the chronic flooding risks affecting marginalized populations in the Terai region, many of whom face systemic barriers to accessing formal state-led disaster management services. The system equips communities with locally managed river gauges, rain sensors, and communication tools (e.g., sirens, SMS alerts, and local FM radio announcements) that enable real-time flood monitoring and early warnings. Local task forces, composed of trained volunteers—including women, youth, and persons with disabilities—are responsible for disseminating alerts, coordinating evacuation efforts, and providing first aid and logistical support.

The effectiveness of this community-led system was demonstrated during the 2017 monsoon floods, when at-risk settlements in Bardiya and Kailali districts successfully evacuated vulnerable groups before the floodwaters arrived. Unlike conventional top-down approaches, the CBEWS fostered community ownership, trust, and adaptive capacity, all of which are rooted in strong social capital and shared cultural values. These attributes allowed local actors to respond swiftly and collaboratively, even in the absence of immediate state intervention.

Moreover, the success of the CBEWS underscores the critical role of localized preparedness strategies tailored to the lived realities and social structures of at-risk populations. It challenges the dominant technocratic model of risk governance by affirming that effective disaster preparedness must be co-produced with communities—not merely delivered to them.

This case highlights how disaster risk reduction is not just a technical or institutional challenge but a deeply social process. When communities are engaged as active agents in preparedness and response, they are better positioned to reduce vulnerabilities and strengthen resilience in the face of recurring hazards.

The concept of social capital, as theorized by Putnam (2000), plays an important role in enhancing collective preparedness. Strong networks of trust, reciprocity, and collaboration among individuals and institutions enable communities to respond effectively to disasters. Likewise, Tierney (2007) and Dynes (2006) emphasize the need to view preparedness as a collective phenomenon rooted in social systems and institutions rather than isolated individual actions. Unequal access to resources and information often dictates the level of preparedness within communities, leaving marginalized groups—including women, children, the elderly, and socially excluded communities—more vulnerable to disaster impacts (Wisner et al., 2004). Addressing these inequities through inclusive planning, social cohesion, and equitable resource distribution is essential for fostering resilience. Similarly, Aldrich (2012) validates that communities with higher levels of social capital show greater resilience and faster recovery, underscoring the importance of fostering strong social ties in disaster preparedness efforts.

This clearly demonstrates that, the effectiveness and longevity of preparedness rely on the unity and cooperation of the community members, rather than solely on the actions of the state or external entities. From a sociological perspective, the community's cultural elements and initiatives regarding contribute significantly to the collective values that foster resilience.

Therefore, risk perception emphasizes the interplay of social structures, cultural norms, and collective experiences in shaping how individuals and communities understand and respond to risks. Unlike purely individualistic or psychological models, sociological frameworks emphasize shared knowledge, institutional trust, and resource accessibility as critical determinants of risk perception. For instance, Anthony Giddens' theory of modernity highlights how awareness of "manufactured risks," such as those arising from technological advancements and environmental degradation, is mediated through social discourse (Giddens, 1990). Similarly, Beck's concept of the "risk society" stresses the collective nature of risks and how societal inequalities intensify their perception and impact on marginalized groups (Beck, 1992). Thus, risk perception extends beyond individual perception, including historical,

political, and economic contexts. Risk perception is integrally multidimensional, shaped by social, cultural, and individual contexts. It challenges the technocratic notion of universal risk quantification and management through standardized frameworks. Cultural norms and collective beliefs significantly influence how risks are prioritized.

Institutional trust is another significant factor. Sociological studies indicate that individuals rely heavily on social networks and community norms to interpret and respond to risks. In contexts with low institutional trust, informal knowledge systems and local expertise take priority over formal scientific assessments. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, public sentiment expressed on social media platforms like Twitter significantly influenced risk perception and response behaviors, demonstrating the interplay between societal emotions and individual assessments (Dyer & Kolic, 2020). Indigenous knowledge systems, including traditional building techniques and agricultural practices adapted to natural cycles, reflect cultural values that enhance resilience. Religious and spiritual beliefs further inform how communities interpret and address risks, providing emotional and moral frameworks for coping with disasters. Likewise, interpersonal discussions and collective memory reinforce shared cultural values and societal norms, further influencing risk awareness and preparedness. Xie et al. (2023) found that social conversations significantly shape individuals' understanding and assessment of risks, reflecting deeper cultural and societal dynamics.

Despite the significance of these shared cultural aspects, the hierarchical structures rooted in inequality increases the perception of risk. Social stratification further intensifies risk perception. Marginalized groups—including low-income communities, minorities, and socially excluded populations—frequently experience heightened risk due to structural inequities and environmental injustices. These groups are more vulnerable to hazards such as environmental degradation or economic instability while possessing fewer resources to mitigate these impacts. Their perceptions are intertwined with distrust in institutions and skepticism toward risk management strategies, reflecting their lived experiences of exclusion and vulnerability. Marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and lower-income communities, perceive risks differently due to systemic inequities in accessing resources, information, and decision-making power. These disparities highlight the need for inclusive, equitable, and culturally appropriate interventions.

Top-Down Approaches of Disaster Management

The importance of a community driven approach engrained in shared cultural values for emergency management or enhancing preparedness and responses, as discussed earlier, is eclipsed by the states and international organizations predominant hierarchical top-down methods and actions. During every crisis, bottom-up approaches are frequently overlooked. Local emergency members themselves are primary pathfinders. Moreover, both pre-disaster and post-disaster polices are also guided and dictated by these approaches, often discounting the specific local context and realities. Historically, there is a tendency of myths and misconceptions in disaster management, many of which are propagated by media narratives and centralized decision-making frameworks. One persistent myth is the interpretation of

affected populations as passive victims, characterized by antisocial behaviors such as looting and panic during crises.

However, studies discloses that solidarity, cooperation, and community-driven responses are far more prevalent during such periods. These misrepresentations can lead to the design of disaster management strategies that neglect the agency and resilience of local communities, propagating inefficiencies and undermining recovery initiatives that are directed by an authoritative framework. Consequently, critics vehemently denounced centralized disaster management frameworks that prioritize top-down decision-making and expert-driven solutions, often to neglecting the invaluable insights of local knowledge and the importance of social cohesion. Such approaches treat disasters as isolated events, failing to recognize them as socially embedded phenomena, and frequently ignoring the root causes of vulnerability rooted in systemic social, political, and economic inequities.

Furthermore, critics also pinpoint that top-down approaches in disaster management, led by centralized authorities like governments or large developmental organizations, are known for their capacity to deliver rapid, large-scale interventions driven by one-size-fits-all solutions, often neglecting the special needs of vulnerable populations. These limitations arise when standardized policies and outside experts fail to align with the socio-cultural and economic realities of affected communities, thereby weakening their long-term resilience. Community-based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR) and participatory approaches emphasize local knowledge, inclusivity, and empowerment, fostering trust and enhancing community capacities. Effective strategies in these models include collaborative risk assessments, culturally sensitive interventions, and decentralized decision-making, which tailor responses to specific vulnerabilities and strengths.

The importance of community-driven approaches rooted in shared cultural values for enhancing emergency preparedness and disaster response is often eclipsed by the dominant hierarchical, top-down methods deployed by state and international agencies. In nearly every crisis, bottom-up strategies—where local emergency members act as the first responders—are overlooked or inadequately supported. Both pre- and post-disaster policies tend to be formulated and implemented through centralized authority, often disregarding local contexts, lived experiences, and traditional coping mechanisms.

A salient example of the failure of this model was observed during the post-2015 Gorkha Earthquake reconstruction process, where the state-led, uniform reconstruction grant system excluded many marginalized households due to rigid documentation requirements and centralized procedures. Such approaches, while efficient in scale, often fail to account for deep-seated social inequities and the structural vulnerabilities of the communities they intend to serve.

 To build a more inclusive and sustainable disaster management framework, it is essential to recognize disasters as socially produced phenomena and foster collaboration between centralized authorities and grassroots initiatives. This shift is critical for reducing vulnerabilities and meeting the multifaceted challenges of contemporary disasters. It is

essential to understand the community's essence and sentiments, address the gaps that sustain inequality, actively listen to their voices and enable them to participate in making risk management and preparedness policies.

Policy Recommendations

Drawing from the sociological critique of disaster conceptualization and management in Nepal, the following recommendations aim to reorient disaster governance toward inclusivity, equity, and contextual sensitivity:

- Embed social vulnerability assessments into all phases of disaster policy—formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation—at national and local levels.
- Institutionalize cooperation among sociologists, environmental scientists, technocrats, and policy-makers to transcend hazard-centric frameworks and capture the social dimensions of risk.
- Transition from hierarchical, top-down approaches to participatory, community-led disaster risk reduction strategies that reflect local knowledge and capacities.
- Mandate the involvement of local emergency committees, representatives from marginalized communities (e.g., Dalits, landless groups, women, persons with disabilities), and indigenous knowledge holders across all stages of disaster planning and response.
- Establish legal frameworks that acknowledge and protect the rights of socially excluded populations in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts.

- Tailor early warning systems, preparedness drills, and risk communication strategies to local socio-cultural contexts using appropriate media and dissemination channels.
- Make context-specific vulnerability mapping an integral part of municipal and national disaster planning.
- Recognize social cohesion, trust, and collective action as critical to resilience, and allocate resources for community-based planning, training, and institution-building.

Reform reconstruction policies to be inclusive and accessible by reducing bureaucratic barriers, enabling flexible documentation, and incorporating community consultation in design and implementation.

- Integrate disaster education into school curricula and adult learning programs, emphasizing civic responsibility, critical thinking, and inclusive preparedness.

Localize global DRR frameworks like the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) , prioritize localized implementation grounded in social justice, contextual realities, and equity-based indicators.

Conclusion

Prior to the early warnings, on April 25, 2025, a deadly devastating earthquake measuring 7.8 on Richter scale struck Nepal, resulting in the deaths of over 9000 people, injuring thousands more and causing damage to approximately 600000 structures. Similarly in September 2024,

Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal unexpectedly witnessed violent flooding, resulting in the tragic loss of around 200 lives and disrupting the everyday normalcy. Various geological reports have warned Nepal about the looming threat of perilous large-scale Glacial Lake Outbursts, already in 1980s. These predictions were validated when calamitous outbursts took place in Thame, Solukhumbu district, causing extensive damage to all kinds of infrastructures. The unfolding disasters currently affecting Nepal it highlights the country's vulnerability to future disasters. Despite this alarming clarion call, the Nepali population remains uncertain and uninsured about the effectiveness of preparedness and rescue efforts from the concerned relevant authorities. Looking at the records from 2015 to the present reveals a myriad of large and small-scale disasters that Nepal has experienced over this time. Whenever a disaster occurs, it stirs uproar among different dissenting factions, particularly from those who remained safe and unharmed, and they temporarily advocate for the cause of those directly affected. Nevertheless, this solidarity subsequently turns short-lived and ephemeral. It is only those who suffer and bear the brunt of tragedy. The aftermath of all kinds of disasters illustrates the intricate dynamics between the state and citizens in the part of the world we live.

Following the 2015 earthquake, the term 'reconstruction' became a buzzword and was widely used and endorsed by various stakeholders. In the name of reconstruction, there was a substantial flow of financial investments from the development organization aiding for those who were affected by the disaster. Paradoxically, the government allocated only three lakhs' rupees per individuals for rebuilding their houses, with many unable to even access these funds due to the loss of legal documents amidst the disaster's wreckage. Three lakh rupees is merely a drop in the ocean and insufficient for rebuilding the house today. Allocating this meager amount in the name of reconstruction is like rubbing a salt in the wound of earthquake victims. It is not only the case of earthquake victims, in every disaster those who is hit hardest left scrambling from pillar to post, desperately seeking for the compensation they were promised. Several reports, reportages, academic and popular publications have depicted disasters and disaster-related issue merely as a natural event, bypassing the critical social factors and implications that accompany them. In assessing the disasters, we often focus on the intensity of the disasters, the number of casualties and the death tolls. This perspective has been so deeply entrenched in the collective psyche of many, who tend to view disasters through the prism of natural and technological events and factors. However, People are least interested in those who died, the circumstances surround their death, the household member's social and living conditions, and meaning and burden of the loss of a household member to those who remain. In doing so, the vulnerable populations, their lived lives, aftermath consequences and the trauma they went through within the household and society are often dismissed and ignored. This evidently illustrates that disasters are reflections of societal inequalities and systemic vulnerabilities, complexly tied to societal structures and human actions, rather than isolated events. They materialize from the intersection of natural hazards and socially constructed vulnerabilities, driven by systemic inequalities, governance, and cultural practices. The level of suffering higher and varies among the marginalized groups such as women, children, and

persons with disabilities, face disproportionate vulnerability due to systemic exclusion and limited access to resources.

By embracing Burawoy's concept of 'Public Sociology,' this essay at least tried to illuminate the flip side of disaster that is missing in our sociological discussions. The arguments broached herein may serve to kindle future debates, encouraging equitable consideration of disaster studies that integrates natural as well as social dimensions. Without grasping the underlying subtleties that separate the two, effective disaster management remains elusive. Failing to contextualize and disregard the social dynamics and layers of vulnerability, attempts to preparedness and risk perception will be utterly ineffective and useless.

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