

When climate change disaster strikes: The Case of Bategada village in Chure rural municipality, Nepal

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Nepal is a small economy sandwiched between world powers India and China with unique geophysical features that also expose it to multiple natural hazards.

With a population of around 30 million, Nepal is ranked fourth on the Global Climate Risk (Eckstein, et al. 2019 as cited in UNDRR, 2019) and 73rd on the Global Hunger Index with a score of 19.5 in 2020 (Global Hunger Index, 2021).

The Nepalese government is not blind to the country's vulnerability to climate change. Thus, it has been exerting efforts over the past 10 years to align policies on disaster risk reduction and management to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Despite these, however, Nepal remains highly susceptible to geological and climate-related disasters due mainly to its diverse topography and weak economy. It also suffers from a low awareness of disaster risks, exacerbating the country's overall vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change.

Study area: Bategada Village

Illustrative of the adverse effects of climate change is the village of Bategada in the southeastern part of the Kailali District's Chure municipality, which is deemed a fragile landscape. Its location below the hills and above the *Tarai* plain makes it especially vulnerable to both floods and landslides. Most of the people living here on 13.6 hectares (20 *Bigha*) of land are from the Magar ethnic group, with each family living on land that used to be designated as forestland ranging from 1 *Kattha* to 18 *Kattha* (0.034 to 0.612 of a hectare).

Due to its remote location, it is difficult for the estimated 50 households in the area to access social services. It is five kilometers away from the nearest education and market hub, for example, and it is often cut off from the nearest village during the monsoon season when the river rises.

Its location has also made the land tenure situation of the community insecure. For one, while geographically the village is under the Chure rural municipality, the Gauriganga municipality is actually more accessible. Because of the lay of the land, it takes the residents three days to walk to the Chure offices, while Gauriganga is only five kilometers away. However, with the administrative rules and the continuing debate over boundaries, the Bategada people's livelihood has been affected, particularly on raising livestock.

The government authorities had failed to consider the community's needs and realities before drawing up the demarcation line separating the two local levels and this has made the formalization of their land rights over their land a daunting challenge.

As the village is isolated and remote, their representation in the meetings at municipal or ward level has remained rare. Therefore, their voices have remained largely unheard.

Fortunately, the Government of Nepal formed a Land Issues Resolving Commission (LIRC) in April 2020 to formalize the land rights of the landless and informal people across the country.

Chure rural municipality has recently signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the LIRC and the people in Bategada village involved in this process through accomplishing the forms for the land distribution and land right recognition.

Out of the total 50 households, 50 percent of the families registered themselves as landless and other 25 households registered as informal settlers at the local level for their land rights to be recognized by the LIRC.

Disaster Event Experienced in the Community

The people, however, did not always live in Bategada village. Before the devastating flood and landslide hit them in 2008, they used to live in Khairala village in Ward No. 2 of the Chure rural municipality.

Their life there was not that much more prosperous economically but the quality was so much better because they had their own ancestral land and long-established community ties/social networks. Moreover, the land they owned in Khairala was much productive and much closer to the market, school, and road system. Therefore, the people had greater mobility then than now.

A community member said in an interview: *"We had our lands registered there, though the plots were small. It was more productive than the land here, which is so small that it does not produce enough to meet the food needs of the families."* To augment their livelihood, which is mainly livestock raising and agriculture, many workers migrate to neighboring Indian cities to seek jobs.

The residents were forced to move in August 2008, when the village was hit hard by a flood and landslide that eventually destroyed all of the arable land. The landslide also washed away three houses and damaged the others, resulting in the displacement of 50 families. The heavy rain that continued for about a week adversely affected the entire life and livelihood in the area that had long been vulnerable to climate change.

Following the devastation caused by the disasters, the hardships of the already vulnerable indigenous community increased as most were left with no home, livelihood and, most importantly, land.

Landlessness changed their socio-economic status as suddenly they lost their most valuable asset. It did not help that the local and national government officials were largely blind to their difficulties so they were mainly left to help themselves.

The local government could have helped them significantly by formalizing the land tenure of the displaced families but 13 years later, they are still waiting to secure their rights over their land. With the lack of such a tenure instrument, the meaningful rehabilitation of the communities remains incomplete.

That is because to claim public services like electricity, road, school, health post, agricultural inputs, the community requires a land ownership certificate as proof of residency. Since they do not have these land certificates, they have remained unable to receive basic public services and facilities.

Left either partially or homeless and landless, the safety of the physically vulnerable groups including infants, children, pregnant, and lactating women became challenging for them.

One of the interview participants said, *“For the first five days after the landslide, we did not know what to do. But people began to send children, women and elderly to the homes of neighbors and relatives”* where they may find the better care and shelter.

Amid the devastation, some of the members of the community began to look for another place where they can settle and start discussions with the local leaders and administration about their rehabilitation. As the local officials seemed reluctant to help in their relocation and rehabilitation, they ventured on their own.

Finally, the community people decided to move to Bategada, which was isolated and remote but still good enough with its virgin land, forest, and pastures for the 50 families to adjust together to a new life and location.

Adverse effects of the disaster on the community

The devastating floods and landslide of 2008 adversely affected practically all aspects of the community's life as detailed under the following four categories.

Livelihood

The massive 2008 landslide displaced 50 families who had no choice but to move from their home in Khairala village to Bategada, an area classified as forestland.

Bategada is so remote that it is hardly reached by any institutions that can help ease the hardships of the residents, who rely mostly on subsistence farming. Unfortunately, they do not earn enough from farming in the area so many have had to augment their income by going elsewhere to work or raising livestock.

Compared to their previous home, there is little hope of advancing because of the dire lack of development activities and income opportunities. In their previous home where they had secure land tenure, they could engage in orange and vegetable production with excess crops sold in nearby markets.

Social

Forced to transfer, the families saw their social lives upended.

In Khairala, they had a wide social network, which they no longer have in Bategada. They have no easy access to schools where their children can get good education unlike in their previous home. Facilities like health and market are non-existent. They have to walk at least for five kilometers to reach the nearest health-post and market, as there are hardly any roads. They were able to establish a trail to take them to the market but this lone access to the outside world is cut off during the rainy season when the Thuligad River rises.

Then because of the lack of income opportunities, almost all of the male youth of each household leaves for seasonal migration to nearby urban centers. That puts an extra burden on the women, children, and the elderly who are left behind to fend for themselves.

Ashok Magar, the local head teachers, said that the food situation is dire in the village as the output of the households' farms is hardly enough to feed them for the next three to seven months, making them chronically vulnerable to hunger.

Then there is the fact that they are strangers in the area. Moreover, although they are still some distance from the nearest community, they are pressured at times to leave the place. Since they are in what is considered forestland, other people do not like to see human beings in the forest that they want to protect as part of the community.

Unfortunately, the local government does not have any policy or even vision or intent to help these displaced families. Thus, they are still suffering from the effects, therefore, of that devastating landslide and still waiting for meaningful rehabilitation and reintegration.

Tenure Security and Land Use

In Nepal, as in many other countries, land is the source of an individual, family or community's social, economic and political power, as well as identity. Therefore, legally-recognized ownership over land is vitally important. Unfortunately, with the 2008 landslide, 50 households lost their land tenure security.

Many of the families owned the land in their previous home in Khairala. However, in Bategada, they have become informal settlers as they do not have legal ownership over the land they have been cultivating.

Practically overnight, the 50 households that used to be landowners suddenly became landless and homeless because of the devastation caused by the landslide on their property in Khairala.

It has been 13 years since the disaster but the government has not taken any concrete steps to address the land tenure problem of these victims, merely mouthing words of commitment that appropriate actions are forthcoming.

When asked, the Mayor of the Chure rural municipality said, *"We are very much concerned on how to provide the public services and facility to the community in the Bategada, which is very much disconnected from the mainstream development that is being happening here. Landslide and flood have continuously been affecting many other places of this rural municipality too. Since the Bategada village is situated in the landscape, which is very far and has no good connections with the road that has further limited our capacity to address the problem."*

Discussions with the community revealed that the people have been living with the constant fear that *"they might be forcefully evicted at any time from this land"* as they do not have any formal document to prove that this land belongs to them. The ongoing dispute over the boundaries of the two local levels i.e., Chure rural municipality and Gauriganga municipality, adds to their fears of eviction.

Complicating the already knotty issue is the desire of some local builders and business people with strong political ties to take advantage of Bategada area's rich natural resources.

Bategada village is surrounded by the forest and pasturelands. It has stone and sand resources that the rival local governments want to exploit. However, the Bategada community is against the wanton extraction of the stone, sand, and the trees for lumber. Because of this stance, they

become targets of powerful people who are lobbying against their having formal land rights so that they can be driven out.

The remote location of the village has regularly been cited as the main obstacle to their securing land rights. But perhaps the real reason is that vested interests want to get their hands on the natural resources of the area.

Fortunately, the LIRC has embarked on a nationwide campaign to ensure the land rights of the landless including *Dalits* and Informal settlers, thus providing the local people the means to fight for their land rights.

National Land Rights Forum (NLRF) played a crucial role in this initiative, paving the way for the community to register their land claims that will be evaluated and eventually decided upon by the LIRC.

Environment

The natural environment makes the area vulnerable to the worst effects of climate change. Consequently, it will be easy to expect that the people living there will be vulnerable because they have chosen to stay in a forest area.

However, it should be noted that the local people have been vigilant and become stewards of the local environment. They protect the forest and the land and have opposed the excessive extraction of the stones and sand from the Thuligad River and the nearby forest.

However, extended periods of drought and heavy rains have caused landslides and floods that seriously damage the land.

Flooding and landslides are not only destroying the lands in upstream but also turning the agricultural land into unproductive riverbanks. Such losses could be minimized with the support of the local government and other development partners working in this sector.

Interventions in response to climate change

Climate change-induced events such as the floods and landslides that hit the community in 2008 adversely affect the overall social, environmental, and economic sectors of Nepal. And while the link between climate change with land tenure is “complex and not always discernible” (Quan and Dyer, 2019), it is nevertheless present.

Natural resources are the main source of the Nepalese economy. This makes the people highly vulnerable to changes in the climate, as these will ultimately affect their livelihood.

Nepal's government is fortunately aware of this fact and has undertaken a series of climate risk management policies and strategies at the national, district, and local levels (Patra and Terton, 2017). However, these have not been cascaded to all of the villages such as in the Bategada community, where resource management practices to respond to climate change are virtually non-existent.

Nepal first participated in climate change related activities in 2004 through its initial national communication to the UNFCCC Secretariat (Ministry of Forest and Environment, 2020). Since then, Nepal has advanced in both policy and practice at the national level.

Nepal, for instance, unveiled Local Adaption Plans of Actions to localize the climate change adaption in 2011, and adopted the Climate Change Policy in 2019. However, the Bategada community has not activated any of these initiatives to adapt to climate change and mitigate future risks.

The Government of Nepal together with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations also developed the “Building a Resilient Churia Region in Nepal” (BRCRN) project with an objective to *“enhance the climate resilience of the ecosystems and vulnerable communities in the Churia region through integrated sustainable rural development and natural resource management approaches”* (FAO, 2019).

This project is aligned with the country's national development plans, climate change policy, its international commitments, and Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This project is expected to benefit 750 community-based organizations directly (FAO, 2019).

Lesson and Insights

The links between land tenure and the capacity of communities to adapt to the effects of disasters are always indirect and therefore very difficult to identify as they manifest in multiple forms.

In Bategada, all the households are using land according to community consensus. However, their land rights are yet to be legally recognized even after using that land for more than a decade.

Because of that lack of the formal land rights, people in this area have been unable to exert effective political pressure to affect municipal level decisions and demand development interventions for their community. Consequently, the community is trapped in the vicious cycle of landlessness, poverty, and food insecurity made worse when faced with natural disasters.

The lack of a land certificate also bars the community from claiming basic public facilities such as electricity and agricultural inputs that can contribute to the community's disaster resilience.

As most residents of Bategada village are indigenous peoples, they face widespread discrimination and exclusion from policy discussions. At the same time, their livelihoods are threatened with the continued degradation of the land and other natural resources because of the government's failure to recognize their needs, including their land and resource rights.

In this context, the adaptive capacities of the community people continue to be eroded, making them more vulnerable to the adverse impact of climate change and associated disasters including floods and landslides.

There is therefore a greater and more urgent need to establish and institutional rights of people such as those in Bategada over land, to give them an added tool to adapt to climate change.

There should also be a broader coherence and common understanding of the land tenure needs of disaster-affected communities. For example, in the case of Bategada, land and forest laws are contradicting, as forest laws do not allow registration as private land, which therefore puts the Bategada community in limbo.

It should also be understood that disaster-related displacement results in migration, thus requiring policy provisions on migration, rehabilitation, relocation, and reintegration of communities who are affected directly by the adverse effects of climate change. ■

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

CSRC extends its sincere appreciation to the following individuals who participated at various stages in the preparation and finalization of this case study:

- Ashok Baral Magar, Head Teacher, Sarswati Primary School, Chure-4, Bategada
- Purna Bahadur Tarami, Chairperson, Chure village Land Rights Forum - Bategada and District Member of Nepal Rastriya Magar Federation
- Man Bahadur Nepal, Local Land Right Activist
- Chameli Sinjali Magar, Women Land Rights Activist
- Laxman BK, Chairperson, District Land Rights Forum (DLRF) - Kailali
- Dhan Bahadur Roka Magar, Chairperson, Chure rural municipality, Kailali
- Nar Bahadur Tamang, Ward-Chairperson, Ward-5, Chure rural municipality, Kailali
- BB Raj Soti, Chief Executive Officer, Chure rural municipality, Kailali

Similarly, CSRC would like to thank the following organizations for their inputs and support:

- Chure Village Land Rights Forum, Bategada-4 Chure rural municipality, Kailali
- Village Land Rights Forum, Bategada-4 Chure rural municipality, Kailali

- Chure rural municipality, Kailali
- National Land Rights Forum (NLRF)
- NES-Nepal/Land Governance Working Group (LGWG)

CITATION

Joshi, D. R. and Basnet, J. for Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC). (2021). *When climate change disaster strikes: The Case of Bategada village in Chure rural municipality, Nepal*. CSRC, Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC), and Land Watch Asia (LWA).

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