

8-1-2012

**Understanding Mountain Poverty in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas by
Kiran Hunzai, Jean-Yves Gerlitz, and Brigitte Hoermann; Reviewed
by John Metz**

John Metz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Metz, John. 2012. Understanding Mountain Poverty in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas by Kiran Hunzai, Jean-Yves Gerlitz, and Brigitte Hoermann; Reviewed by John Metz. *HIMALAYA* 31(1).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol31/iss1/23>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/).

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

learn much about them or get to know their stories and predicaments in this book. Moreover, the particular examples of invasion are not linked or compared in any way to the many cases of riverbank demolition across Asia and especially in India and Bangladesh.

The final chapter returns to the cultural narrative and provides a disappointing discussion of several topics of interest among the resident non-governmental organizations. Although the chapter makes clear that the global reach of the riverscape is twisted and tangled in politics and the hubris of development communities, in several places the discussion appears weak in supporting evidence and the ethnographic journey seems rather pointless. The discussion of visions of pillars appears trivial even though it was an important part of the cultural narrative. On p. 167 for example, the discussion of the river rafting awareness event ended without understanding what citizens think about using the river as a dumpsite. The statements of residents and primary data on their discussions and stewardship activities are thinly applied in the writing and in some places bogged down by repetitions of summary and theoretical statements.

I finish the book without a clear sense of what urban ecology means apart from the position points of several key actors. While the author points attention to the way river degradation is framed, debated and made meaningful, to the range of processes through which degradation is engaged as an ecological problem in time and space, the book ends up overusing the notion of urban ecology. After reading about so many ecologies I just want to get away from the term altogether. This is unfortunate, for these rivers are directly in the interests of human communities, and the broader phenomenon of water stress will impact the provisioning of water for fundamental needs. In this way the book could end on that vital note, since it leaves the reader with unanswered questions that are indeed important. Can an urban river be anything more than a wastewater drain? Should those water supplies be rendered completely unusable for clean water needs? Since restoration is only anticipated at this ending, and not guided in any emancipatory way by another vision, we can only assume that such a possibility is not yet seen. And in the absence of such we carry along with the despair and anxiety of that first riverbank tour.

REFERENCES

Button, G. 2010. *Disaster Culture: Knowledge and Uncertainty in the Wake of Human and Environmental Catastrophe*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Klein, N. 2007. *Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Kelly D. Alley is Professor of Anthropology at Auburn University. Her research focuses on religion, activism, politics, policy and law relating to rivers in India.

UNDERSTANDING MOUNTAIN POVERTY IN THE HINDU KUSH-HIMALAYAS: REGIONAL REPORT FOR AFGHANISTAN, BANGLADESH, BHUTAN, CHINA, INDIA, MYANMAR, NEPAL, AND PAKISTAN

KIRAN HUNZAI, JEAN-YVES GERLITZ,
AND BRIGITTE HOERMANN

Kathmandu: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, 2011. 68 pages.

REVIEWED BY JOHN METZ

This is an ambitious and beautifully presented report which seeks to define and explain poverty in the mountainous parts of the countries of the broadly defined Hindu Kush Himalaya region. The study's challenge is, first, to obtain realistic data; second, to organize it in ways that are reasonably similar across the different countries, and; third, to analyze it in meaningful ways. Obtaining good data is a persistent problem, but the authors have assembled and analyzed information from parallel national surveys in all these countries, except China and Myanmar, and have presented it in a clear and attractive way. I suspect this will be the standard reference on Himalayan poverty for the foreseeable future.

The first chapter, the Introduction, quickly reviews how mountain poverty is considered to be unique and then briefly explains the methodology of the study. The subsequent eight chapters each summarize the results for one of the countries. Chapter 10 provides a regional overview. Chapter 11 presents the main conclusions.

The analysis is an advance on previous studies because it assembles comparable data from the mountainous parts of the countries of the region and incorporates into the analysis community infrastructure and accessibility information. The main problem I encountered is in understanding the methods as they are presented in the document, especially the sources of the raw data. Since outcomes depend on methodology, I will spend some time reviewing it.

Collection of Household Data

The raw data for all the countries, except China and Myanmar for which there are no similar surveys available, came from national living standards surveys, modeled on a UNDP survey. (The authors used secondary data to estimate poverty and other statistics for China and Myanmar.) The living standards surveys use the “cost of basic needs” (CBN) model to measure both food and non-food poverty. Each of the country’s statistical bureaus defined a “poverty line” by selecting a minimum nutritional calorie intake; this entailed choosing a food basket that provides that requirement, and calculating the cost of the basket. The survey then determines how much each household (HH) consumes, converts that to currency units, and compares it to the poverty line. Similarly, to identify non-food poverty, the bureaucracies define a basket of basic goods (housing, clothing, HH utensils) and services (education, health care, etc.) to which HH consumption can be compared.

The CBN implies that HH consumption is converted to currency units, but I could find no explanation in this report of how that conversion was made. I wrote to the authors and

they referred me to the Nepal Living Standards Survey of 2002-3. This comprehensive 74 page document asks a very wide array of questions, among which are how much of 62 different types of food (rice, corn, lentils, eggs, fruit, meat, spices, etc.) HH members eat per month and then how much those foods would cost in the market. These interviewee estimates of foods consumed and of their cost seem to be the way HH consumption is converted to currency units. Similar survey questions on non-food consumption are the basis of the non-food poverty level.

Analytical Model

Although it is not explicitly stated, food poverty and non-food poverty are the dependent variables that are to be explained by several groups of other variables. These are “Access to Basic Facilities,” “Accessibility,” “Assets and Liabilities,” “Household Characteristics,” and “Socioeconomic Status” and are delineated in Table 1 below. The authors use the data from these groups in multivariate regression analyses to explain food and non-food poverty, using factor analysis to combine the various measures of “Basic Facilities” and of “Accessibility” into two single indices for the regressions.

Infrastructure	Household Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Access to Basic Facilities b. Availability of improved sources of drinking water c. Availability of electricity d. Availability of toilet facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Assets and Liabilities b. Area of land owned c. Land fragmentation d. Number of livestock e. Loans obtained
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Accessibility b. Distance to next paved road c. Distance to next market centre d. Distance to next bus stop e. Distance to next bank f. Distance to next cooperative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Household Composition b. Female head of household (HH) c. Dependency rate d. Percentage of HH members in non-agricultural profession
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Socioeconomic Status b. Ethnicity c. Education of head of HH d. Percentage of literate HH members > 5 years old

Table 1. Analytical Framework for Overall Causes of Poverty
Source: page 3 of document

Presentation of Results

The country chapters are very attractively presented with color photos and with maps, diagrams, and tables set off from the text in complementary colors. Most chapters include the following: tables and graphs of percentages of people in poverty, divided by rural and urban parts of the mountains, plains, and entire country; summary tables of the mean percentages of the independent variables listed in Table 1; a table with percentages of total population in quintiles of per capita consumption; and pie graphs of the contributions of the independent variables to HH poverty. That Eastern Bhutan, Uttarakhand, and Himalayan West Bengal are much more impoverished than other mountainous parts of their countries is noteworthy. The authors suggest that the more important Determinants of Poverty should guide project interventions, so I assembled the results of those analyses into Table 2 below.

Evaluation

This is an impressive report. My concerns are with the primary data of the country surveys and with some aspects of the analysis. Questions about raw data arise from my experience as a Peace Corps agricultural extension agent in Iran many years ago. I worked in the villages while my colleagues in the agricultural office sat around drinking tea, so when the Ministry sent an agricultural census to them, they had me fill in the forms with my guesses about livestock numbers. Nepal's 74-page survey instrument must take an hour to complete — did the enumerators really visit all the 3900 HHs? Even more disconcerting are the data quality impacts of the civil wars in Afghanistan and Nepal and the turmoil in Pakistan and Myanmar during the years these data were being collected. However, these are all we have and they deserve to be analyzed.

Country (%<Poverty)	Access to Basic Facilities	Accessibility	Assets & Liabilities	HH Composition	Social Status
Afghanistan (42%)	13%	8%	28%	48%	3%
Bangladesh (46%)	10%	NA	11%	46%	33%
Bhutan (23%)	20%	5%	30%	2%	43%
China (NA)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
India W. Bengal (58%)	12%	15%	17%	48%	8%
India Uttarkhand (48%)	16%	17%	27%	29%	11%
India Rest of Himala- ya(34%)	29%	12%	22%	30%	7%
Myanmar (NA)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Nepal (40%)	21%	11%	26%	7%	35%
Pakistan (32%)	4%	17%	6%	42%	31%

Table 2: Determinants of Poverty in Hindu Kush Himalayan Region
Source: Chapters 2-9 of report

The results of the analysis of the determinants of poverty also raise questions. There are correlations that need to be explained by identifying causes, and that remains a challenge. To clarify the patterns I have bolded the top two factors in each case in Table 2. Here are some questions that strike me.

- HH Composition is the top Determinant in 6 of the 8 cases with data, but the authors explain that two of the components of HH Composition act in opposite directions: “percent of female headed HH” negatively correlates with poverty, presumably because absent men are remitting money, while “dependency ratio” positively correlates.
- Liabilities and Assets are the second most important in five cases. Because the HH sampled are largely subsistence farmers, I would expect this to be the dominant cause of poverty everywhere, but it isn’t important in Pakistan or Bangladesh.

- Accessibility doesn’t appear to be important, contrary to common wisdom. The authors explain that it often intensifies the impacts of other determinants, but this reveals one of the weaknesses of this type of analysis: it doesn’t include synergistic interactions between variables.

Conclusion

This is an impressive integration of data from these eight countries, which are presented in an attractive and easily understood manner. It is easy to find flaws in an ambitious project like this, but I must compliment the authors and ICIMOD for pulling this together. As I said earlier, this will be the standard reference on HKH poverty for some time to come.

John Metz has done research on farming systems, forest use, and forest ecology in central and western Nepal. He is currently writing about Himalayan climate change as an environmental crisis narrative.

Subscribe to the ANHS List Serve

The Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies maintains a list-serve through Yahoo Groups to further the business of the Association. Members and non-members are welcome to join. The web page for the list-serve is at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Himal-research/>

The list-serve has two purposes:

- (1) To enable the Association to rapidly disseminate news, information, and Association business to the membership.
- (2) To provide a forum for members to post requests, inquiries and information pertaining to research and teaching about the Himalaya to the association at large.

To subscribe to the list-serve, send an email to:

Himal-research-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

If you wish to unsubscribe, send a message to the following address:

Himal-research-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

To post messages to the list-serve, use the following address. When replying to messages, note that the default option will send your message to the list-serve at large. If you only wish for certain people to see your message, you must enter their email addresses individually in the address header and delete the list-serve address.

Himal-research@yahoogroups.com