

December 2018

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Workshop

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Recommended Citation

Amburgey, Emily. 2018. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Workshop.
HIMALAYA 38(2).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol38/iss2/17>



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Conference Reports

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Workshop

**University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada**

14-17 September 2017

The first international workshop for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grant, *Expertise, Labour, and Mobility in Nepal's Post-Conflict, Post-Disaster Reconstruction: Construction, Finance and Law as Domains of Social Transformation*, took place on September 14-17, 2017 at the Institute of Asian Research and Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada. The event brought together over twenty scholars, practitioners, and activists from across Canada, Denmark, Nepal, and the United States to collaboratively consider Nepal's post-earthquake reconstruction in the context of ongoing political transformation. The event was led by Sara Shneiderman (UBC), along with her co-investigators, Katharine Rankin (University of Toronto) and Philippe Le Billon (UBC). Over the next three years, the multi-disciplinary project will examine how various social, political, and economic factors intersect with Nepal's ongoing state restructuring and the effects of the 2015 earthquakes. The research seeks to build an analytical framework

around the three key domains of construction, law, and finance to bridge both practical and theoretical dimensions of social transformation, state restructuring, and environmental disaster preparedness.

The workshop commenced with opening remarks from Michael Blake (UBC) and Moura Quayle (UBC). Emphasizing that natural disasters have implications for communities across every continent and are made greater in conflict-affected regions of the world, the speakers acknowledged how these disturbances facilitate the need for effective, long-term research and support.

The first panel began with presentations from the three core investigators. First, Rankin emphasized the need to articulate long-term, locally-based planning strategies that highlight the varied nature of state building and earthquake reconstruction within the everyday life of individuals. She stressed the shared desire of everyone in the room to improve post-disaster reconstruction and to define and conceptualize how the project's three areas of expertise can be incorporated within policy-relevant research. Second, Le Billon presented on the intersections of post-conflict, post-disaster dynamics and highlighted the political dimensions of disasters, including the influence of domestic and international responses, the

politicized allocation of aid, and the deployment of risk mitigation strategies. Le Billon proposed that disasters are a window of opportunity for political change, and acknowledged the need to be aware of pre-disaster social and political trends that are accelerated after a disaster strikes. Lastly, Shneiderman problematized the blurry transition between conflict and post-conflict contexts, and emphasized that transformation is an ongoing process. Shneiderman prompted the audience to think about the notion of *expertise*, and the need to understand the relationship between government-employed engineers and their experiences with communities on the ground, so as not to disempower local forms of knowledge.

The second panel, chaired by Stephanie Chang (UBC), focused on theme of "re/construction." Dan Hirslund (University of Copenhagen) began with his work on political activism and youth within the context of the Maoist movement in Nepal. Hirslund spoke specifically about the reconfigurations of class and labor within urban settings, and how labor and politics are dialectically related concepts that frame long-term engagements in post-disaster/post-conflict settings. Next to present was Bishnu Pandey, a structural engineer at British Columbia Institute of Technology, who spoke about the prioritization of safety measures in disaster-

prone regions to mitigate the loss of human lives. Accounting for the difficulties in changing policies, Pandey questioned the effectiveness of current modes of technology supply to villages, and the fact that large numbers of households have not yet started reconstruction. Katherine Hacker (UBC), opened her presentation with the UNESCO trope “Build Back Better,” which has been used in reference to Nepal’s process of reconstruction. Hacker used this phrase to speak in terms of the varying forms of expertise involved in the preservation of art and architecture that differs between community religious experts and international aid organizations. Concluding the panel, Jeevan Baniya (Social Science Baha) discussed various approaches to the project’s three main domains. Baniya encouraged the audience to think about how newly implemented local government institutions can aid in the distribution of aid, and how legal frameworks work at central, district, and local levels of governance.

The third panel included presentations by Russil Wvong from the TRAS Himalayan Aid Society, a Vancouver-based nonprofit organization. TRAS partners with local institutions to improve health and education for children and youth in Nepal, northern India, and Tibet. Following Wvong’s presentation, Ramjee Parajulee (Nepal Cultural Society of British Columbia) explained the difficult process of deciding between donations to various organizations and government agencies in distributing disaster relief funds to Nepal in 2015. Parajulee pointed out the hesitation many Canadian donors have in sending funds directly to the government of Nepal, rather than

through organizations like the Red Cross. Parajulee concluded with a call to action to engage with Nepali diaspora communities in Canada.

A fourth panel was dedicated to graduate students whose research focuses on South Asia. Omer Aijazi (UBC) began with a presentation on his ethnographic work in northern Pakistan and Kashmir, which explores the ways in which survivors of natural disasters resume their lives following large-scale social, physical, and environmental disruptions. Aijazi explained how strained and fragmented social relations as well as various forms of structural violence impact disaster recovery processes. Amber Moore (University of Toronto) discussed her work on the Newar Buddhist *vihara* in Sankhu, Nepal. Moore’s research focuses on localized Buddhist narratives within two Newar monasteries to examine the difficult process of reconstruction. Emily Amburgey (UBC) concluded the panel with a presentation on ethnic identity and state restructuring in Mustang, Nepal, and how identity politics have intensified as local power dynamics in the region shift.

The fifth panel on the domains of finance and law began with a presentation by Ratna Shrestha (UBC). Shrestha proposed the need to strengthen the capability of Nepal’s national banking system in order to stabilize the economy and compensate for the 2% GDP decrease since 2015. Dinesh Paudel (Appalachian State University) spoke about the politics of post-earthquake reconstruction, disaster capitalism, and federal restructuring in Nepal. Speaking particularly to the stability of traditional forms of architecture compared to the newer styles, which had higher rates of destruction during the 2015 earthquakes, Paudel

expressed concern for the creation of new building guidelines that should take these issues seriously. Emphasizing the importance of law in post-disaster reconstruction, Subin Mulmi (Forum of Women, Law, and Development in Nepal) explained the difficulty many individuals now face in gaining access to disaster relief funds without proper citizenship documents. With almost one million people lacking citizenship certificates, Mulmi urged that existing laws have failed to effectively assist local communities and enforce preventative measures. Further problematizing the issue of paperless residents, Cameron Warner (Aarhus University, Denmark) traced how disaster relief money has been sent through informal channels within three Buddhist communities in Nepal, and how paperless Tibetan refugees are selling art to fund their own education and reconstruct religious murals.

The core part of the workshop concluded with a well-attended and engaging public talk by Deepak Thapa (Social Science Baha) titled “Nepal’s Prolonged Transition: End in Sight?” Thapa began by questioning the use of the term “transition” when referencing Nepal’s political and environmental upheaval, and argued that the word had perhaps lost meaning and efficacy given the blurry division between past and present conflict. Nonetheless, Thapa suggested that Nepal is moving in a forward direction as the process of federalization continues with the first local elections in almost twenty years occurring throughout the second half of 2017. The country’s political transformation is meant to pave the way for a more inclusive Nepal, and provide equal space for marginalized groups.

The workshop concluded with two consecutive days of planning meetings between project partners, and a public talk in Nepali at Robson Square in downtown Vancouver with four key speakers (Deepak Thapa, Dinesh Paudel, Jeevan Baniya, and Subin Mulmi). Overall, the three-day event was successful in bringing together scholars, community members, research institutions, and the local Nepali diaspora community to engage in important dialogue surrounding Nepal's future. The immersive workshop served as an important starting point to the three-year project that will continue to explore the multi-layered challenges of responding to natural disasters in Nepal and beyond.

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The author would like to give a special note of thanks to Omer Aijazi (UBC) and James Binks (UBC) for their helpful feedback and contributions to this report.