

## Editorial: Changing livelihoods, vulnerability and COVID-19 pandemic

Rachana Upadhyaya<sup>1,2</sup>, Anushiya Shrestha<sup>1</sup> and Divya Gupta<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started as a global health emergency, metamorphosed into a crisis affecting all aspects of human life. In South Asia, the waves of ‘lockdowns’ in 2020 and 2021 as a response to contain the spread of the virus, prompted the loss of livelihoods in societies already grappling with chronic poverty, fragile health systems, and pervasive social inequalities (Salman et al., 2022). High migration- both internal and international-, remittance-dependent GDPs, agriculture-based economies with underdeveloped agricultural markets, and weak governance systems converted a health emergency into a full-fledged disaster.

Disaster risk reduction policies and strategies emphasise decentralisation for effective disaster response. Local governments are well positioned to make rapid and tailored responses to disasters due to their proximity to the community, better understanding of the local dynamics and ability to swiftly reach and respond to the public needs (Dutta and Fisher, 2021). The capacity of local governments, including their cross-scalar and cross-sectoral relationships, plays a central role in determining the effectiveness of disaster responses and their longer-term outcomes at the local levels (ibid.). However, their capacity crucial for developing and implementing effective responses highly varies in South Asia as was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing the myriads of challenges of both the communities dealing with the effects of COVID-19 and their local governments trying to mitigate such challenges.

Following the crisis, numerous studies explained how the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns have been particularly detrimental to developing nations of the global south. Gilliard (2019) argues the majority of research initiatives and the literature thereof, have been led by academics from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Such history and trajectory of knowledge production might have created skewed global views of areas that are ‘more dangerous than others’ (Bankoff, 2001, p.25). The South Asia region, despite the progress made, grapples with such a view. The COVID-19 pandemic shifted the narrative to an extent, as its impacts were the same or even more in the global north than in the global south.

---

<sup>1</sup> Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS)

<sup>2</sup> University of Bristol, UK

<sup>3</sup> Binghamton University, New York, USA

Nevertheless, contemporary disaster studies underscore a need for non-western knowledge and indigenous practices of resilience to expand and enhance the understanding of local consequences of global risks (Gaillard, 2019). This emphasis in disaster literature to study 'own disaster from own perspective' (ibid.) is the motivation behind this special issue on '*Changing livelihoods, Vulnerabilities and COVID-19 Pandemic*'. A step towards that much greater ambition, this issue compiles empirically grounded experiences of individuals, communities, and local governments in the South-Asian region trying to navigate their lives and livelihoods during the pandemic. The assembled articles try to examine the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic beyond health emergencies and underscore the underlying differential vulnerabilities to justify differential disaster outcomes. Here, disasters are understood as 'an elastic process [...] which is [...] a historically rooted undertaking rather than a disconnected, local event' (DaRif et al., 2023, p.4).

## **2. Understanding the COVID-19 pandemic through the vulnerability paradigm**

In disaster research, the concept of vulnerabilities has emphasised that it is not the hazard/event/shock that creates disaster, but various societal conditions prior to or beyond the hazard event. Emerged some 40 years ago within disaster literature, such understanding of disasters known as the 'Vulnerability Paradigm' emphasises that the possibility or potential of disaster is 'prefigured' in everyday life (Hewitt, 1983). The vulnerability paradigm, on the one hand, helps explain the differentiated nature of disaster impacts, and on the other, underscores the social rootedness of disasters (Bankoff et al., 2004 as cited in Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2022). Its scope becomes relevant in understanding the COVID-19 disaster in the South Asia region and elsewhere.

In understanding the COVID-19 pandemic disaster, the vulnerability paradigm helps elucidate the right aspects- the political, social, and economic processes that put people at risk (Cannon, 2022). Kelman (2020, p.297) writes '[t]he pandemic was not the only disaster [...]' the worldwide lockdown that followed 'represents further layers of COVID-19 disaster'. The health risks and the stringent measures taken by the governments to curb them ended up compounding the adverse effects on the people. The disaster literature guided by the vulnerability paradigm has identified that disaster occurs at a multi-scalar level, and hazard responses expose and reproduce previously unseen vulnerability as much as the hazard itself (ibid.). With such an overarching understanding of the pandemic and its after-effects, each paper in this special issue underscores how the heightened vulnerability of certain people is not because of their exposure to hazards, but due to the historical marginality, and weak and underperforming governance systems that have turned the lives of people into 'permanent emergency' (Bankoff, 2001, p.25).

## **3. COVID and the South Asian context**

The tumultuous history of the South Asia region has seamlessly transitioned into an equally disorderly present. Here, the colonial history, neoliberal policies, poverty, political instability, and social inequality co-exist with the immense capacity of the people in the region to navigate their lives through everyday risk. When the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a grinding halt in early 2020, the region was only second to the sub-Saharan region in income poverty (World Bank, 2018). Despite 33.4% of people living in extreme poverty (Islam et al., 2021), this region has shown

continuous progress in poverty reduction in the last three decades. While the pandemic and its after-effects have constrained this continuous progress on poverty reduction over the last three decades (World Bank, 2022), the crisis thus created a critical juncture to understand and analyse the landscape of changing lives, livelihoods, and vulnerabilities of people living in the region.

The lockdowns imposed by the governments to contain the virus and save lives, upended the livelihood strategies of the vast majority of people both in urban and rural areas, out of the reach of feeble social protection schemes. In South Asia, more than 80% of the employed population is within the informal sector as 90% of all businesses are classified as informal (Bussolo et al., 2020). With mobility restrictions, it was the informal sector that took the first hit. In India, 44% of informal sector workers were already out of work by April 2020 (ibid.) leaving the labour workers who are mostly migrants without a viable source of livelihood. The plight of the international labour migrants from the South Asian region working in the Gulf were reminiscent of a significant exodus of the past. This migration during the pandemic, prompted by the stringent policies implemented by destination countries, was second in scale to the 1947 migration between India and Pakistan after the partition in 1947 (Ellis-Petersen and Chaurasia, 2020). In addition to the economic hardships, migrant workers also encountered social stigma as potential vectors spreading the disease with their movement. Amid travel restrictions and widespread prejudices, repatriation was difficult. Besides strenuous long-distance journeys, they faced discrimination and hurdles in accessing services even in their 'native' communities (see Rajak, 2023 in this issue).

In Nepal, the largest workforce is engaged in the informal sector and the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) which generate 22% of the Gross Domestic Product (Shrestha, 2020). Close to a million MSMEs closed in Nepal due to the lockdown which also pushed people to seek government assistance for their livelihoods (ibid.). A similar effect was experienced in the agriculture sector due to the complete disruption of the agriculture value chain (Rasul, 2021). Across South Asia, more than 50% of the rural population is engaged in agriculture or agriculture-related livelihood activities (ibid.). Labour intensive nature of agriculture production made the effects of COVID-19 more pronounced for South Asian farmers as mobility restrictions and lockdowns resulted in labour shortages. Furthermore, the timing of outbreaks and the mobility restriction coincided with the planting and harvest season which suffered from shortages of fertilizers and agricultural labour respectively, leading to a complete breakdown of the agricultural supply chain. In Nepal, mutual help and reciprocity at the neighbourhood level helped buffer the immediate impacts of shock (see Adhikari et al. in this issue). Nevertheless, the scant and short-term responses by the governments in the region were grossly inadequate compared to the scale of the problem faced by the people in the region (see Rajak, 2023; Adhikari et al., 2023).

The South Asian predicament, following the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic and associated mobility restriction, is not limited to a health crisis scenario but is indicative of much deeper problems associated with governance and social inequalities. As established by the Vulnerability paradigm, understanding disasters and shocks simply as a natural phenomenon that disturbs the 'normalcy' of everyday life denies the socio-historical causes of disasters and crises (Bankoff, 2001). The plight of the migrants, therefore, presents a pertinent entry point in understanding the root causes of vulnerabilities. Although vulnerabilities are highly dynamic and are changing in response to many different influences, most vulnerabilities remain persistent. They stem from deep-rooted

social marginalisation, indifference, or incapacity of political and official institutions as well as the inadequacy of public services (Twigg, 2015, p.5). The five papers published in this special issue '*Changing Livelihoods, Vulnerability and COVID-19 Pandemic*' not only describe the crisis that ensued with the COVID-19 pandemic but dig deeper into understanding the root causes of the differential vulnerabilities.

The first paper, '*Rural Migrant Labours and their Livelihood during COVID-19 in India*' by Rajak (2023) chronicles the journey of migrant labourers from cities to their villages following the lockdown in India highlighting the double victimisation of labour migrants. The migrants were homeless in the cities following the lockdown and treated as 'vectors of disease' when they returned to their respective villages. With detailed in-person interviews with migrant labours, Rajak (2023) describes the pre-existing vulnerabilities of urban migrant labour in cities- the informal and precarious nature of their livelihoods. Rajak traces the root cause of such vulnerabilities back to the rural villages from where the majority of urban informal workers come from. Caste-based landlessness and change in the rural agrarian practices (replacement of agriculture labour with new farm technology) force the previous farm labourers (predominantly from the scheduled caste, tribes, and OBC<sup>4</sup> groups) into precarious employment in nearby urban centres- the only source of employment. When disaster recovery/mitigation measures fail to account for these pre-existing vulnerabilities, they end up reproducing new vulnerabilities among marginalised populations (Upadhyaya et al., 2022).

The second paper on this issue by Raut and Rajouria (2023) also emphasises how vulnerabilities reflected as preexisting marginalities are reproduced through and during a crisis. Situating their argument within the study of differential access to local water and sanitation facilities, the authors evidence how marginalities associated with gender, caste, and class identities hinder equitable local water access. Such preexisting marginalities create differential vulnerabilities as demonstrated through the COVID-19 pandemic experience as people from marginal castes and lower-income groups faced a higher risk of infection owing to their dependence on shared water sources. Raut and Rajouria (2023) recommend strengthening local collectives (like water user groups) and fostering greater role and accountability of the local government in water resource management for an equitable distribution of local resources.

The third paper, by Pokharel et al. (2023), and the fourth by Khatri et al. (2023) in this issue explore in detail the role of the governance system in crisis (or risk) management. With cases from various municipalities and rural municipalities in Nepal, both papers evidence the indispensability of a decentralised approach in disaster management as stressed by disaster scholars (Paudel et al., 2020). Pokharel et al. (2023) discusses the important role played by the local government units in disaster management and highlight the critical challenges they face for an effective intervention. The local disaster management is constrained by limitations in infrastructure, finance, knowledge and skills at the local level. Similarly, Khatri et al. (2023) investigated the 'governing capacity' of local government units in the context of COVID-19 pandemic management. Drawing on the cases of eight municipalities and rural municipalities from Nepal, the authors identify risk governing capacity at the local level. The ambiguity of roles (between federal, provincial, and local governments), feeble institutional mechanisms for disaster governance at the local level, and capacity to access and mobilise resources (financial and human resources, knowledge, and infrastructure) were found to

---

<sup>4</sup> Other backward caste

be the key factors determining/hindering the disaster governance capacity of local government bodies. The authors argue that devolution of power alone is not a main criterion of local risk governance capacity; rather it would need well-functioning institutional mechanisms capable of making and implementing decisions while also mobilising the resources and their access locally.

The effects of feeble local institutions with limited experience and capacity to manage crisis is also evidenced by the fifth and final paper of this issue by Adhikari et al. (2023)- '*Small-scale commercial farming in Nepal during the COVID-19 pandemic: Impacts, responses, and lessons for a resilient future*'. In the context of changing livelihood, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns severely affected farmers transitioning from subsistence to commercial farming systems, with increasing dependency on the market. With already elevated levels of fiscal deficits and public debt, governments of the South Asian countries found themselves having limited fiscal space to mount major relief and stimulus packages needed to mitigate socio-economic impacts (UNESCAP, 2021). In such a scenario, the case of Ravi-Opi, a village in Nepal shows how neighbourhood kinship/ '*chhimeki*' relationships/networks play a vital role in dealing with crisis, especially when the government-led responses are scant or non-existent. When the local structure breaks down, coping capacities are found in the local kinship and community-based organisations. *Chhimeki* (*neighbourhood*)-level support, although provides 'buffering capabilities' and a degree of 'adaptability', does not ensure 'transformability' which is vital for the sustainability of small-scale commercial farming. Recognition and strengthening of such local coping strategies as evidenced by Adhikari et al. (2023) can help reduce future vulnerabilities.

#### 4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the disaster that ensued presented itself as a critical juncture to understand the root causes of vulnerabilities in South Asian societies, especially to understand the effect of the pandemic beyond the health crisis. It has raised questions on the capacities of the health care systems across the South Asian region, and the region's preparedness for shocks and disasters. It also raised questions on disaster governance capacities of both federal and more importantly the local governments. Most importantly, it raises the question of development in the region, that is, how the nature of development serve as the root cause of vulnerability in the region? The pandemic has exposed the underbelly of the 'progress' made in the developing nations of South Asia, and as a silver lining, has helped identify different kinds of fragilities in the societal systems. The five articles in this issue emphasise the pre-existing social, political, economic and governance/institutional fragilities that determine how crises are turned into disasters. Amidst a global calamity, the papers in this issue show that the roots of resilience lie in the community, and mitigation efforts devised at the local level. Collectively, the papers in this issue converge on the idea that disaster mitigation can be effectively achieved only through addressing pre-existing inequalities. And, when there are institutional inadequacies in crisis management, ad hoc strategies for mitigation take shape through local networks and kinships at the community level which contribute to the resilience of communities. The networks and capacity at the community level, although fundamental to the resilience of communities, have limitations (Shrestha, 2020), particularly as the impacts of disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic transcend scales and sectors.

The interconnected nature of the pandemic elucidated the interconnectedness of the South Asian region- characterised by the flow of people/labour and goods across porous borders. The five papers in this issue demonstrate the context specificity of disaster outcomes and vulnerabilities, nonetheless, underscores the similarities of the processes that turn hazards into disasters. For instance, Rajak (2023) emphasises local employment generation. While it is imperative to generate local employment to curb rural-to-urban migration, and related risks and stigma associated with it, the local economy in South Asia, as seen in Adhikari et al. (2023) relies on agriculture. It was one of the sectors majorly disrupted due to the pandemic and related restrictions. Furthermore, the prevailing structural discrimination and the lack of basic infrastructure services (as seen in Raut and Rajouria, 2023, and Adhikari et al., 2023) are impediments to a resilient rural livelihood. The infrastructure deficit combined with the lack of ability to access resources extends to the local government (see Pokhrel et al., 2023 and Khatri et al., 2023). Despite the centrality of their roles in managing local risks, local authorities have limited capacity, both at institutional and personal levels. As such, this issue shows the importance of understanding the pandemic as more than just a health emergency and calls for a more nuanced examination of the myriad of ways in which the social, economic, and political disparities and institutional discrepancies interconnect and exacerbate disaster outcomes. Understanding such deep-seated entanglements and interactions that exist before and beyond a hazard event can help expand socially inclusive and commercially viable livelihood opportunities and generate a propitious pathway towards a resilient rural economy in South Asia (and beyond).

## References

- Bankoff, G., 2001. Rendering the world unsafe: 'Vulnerability' as western discourse. *Disasters*, 25 (1), pp.19-35.
- Bankoff, G. and Hilhorst, D. eds., 2022. *Why vulnerability still matters: The politics of disaster risk creation*. Routledge.
- Bussolo, M., Sharma, S. and Timmer, H., 2020. COVID-19 has worsened the woes of South Asia' informal sector. *World Bank Blogs*, [blog] 7 December, [Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpointvertyinsouthasia/covid-19-has-worsened-woes-south-asias-informal-sector> ]
- Cannon, T., 2022. What must be done to rescue the concept of vulnerability? In: G. Bankoff and D. Hilhorst, eds. 2022. *Why Vulnerability Still Matters*. London: Routledge. Ch.1.
- Dutta, A. and Fisher, H.W., 2021. The local governance of COVID-19: Disaster prevention and social security in rural India. *World Development*, 138, 105234.
- Ellis-Petersen, H. and Chaurasia, M., 2020. India racked by greatest exodus since partition due to coronavirus. *The Guardian*, 30.
- Gaillard, J.C., 2019. Disaster studies inside out. *Disasters*, 43, pp.S7-S17.
- Gorman DaRif, M., O'Loughlin, L. and Rastogi, P., 2023. Writing South Asia in Disastrous Time. *South Asian Review*, 44 (1), pp.2-6.
- Hewitt, K., 1983. The idea of calamity in a technocratic age. In: *Interpretations of calamity*. Routledge. Ch.1.

- Islam, T.T., Newhouse, D. and Yanez-Pagans, M., 2021. International comparisons of poverty in South Asia. *Asian Development Review*, 38(1), pp.142-175.
- Kelman, I., 2020. COVID-19: What is the disaster?. *Social Anthropology*, 28(2), p.296. [Available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12890> ]
- Rasul, G., 2021. Twin challenges of COVID-19 pandemic and climate change for agriculture and food security in South Asia. *Environmental Challenges*, 2, 100027.
- Shrestha, A., 2019. Which community, whose resilience? Critical reflections on community resilience in peri-urban Kathmandu Valley. *Critical Asian Studies*, 51(4), pp.493-514.
- Shrestha, P.M., 2020. Without immediate support, small and medium enterprises on verge of collapse. *The Kathmandu Post*.
- Salman, H.M., Syed, J., Riaz, A., Sarfraz, Z., Sarfraz, A., Bokhari, S.H.A.A. and Ojeda, I.C., 2022. An epidemiological, strategic and response analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Asia: A population-based observational study. *BMC Public Health*, 22(1), p.457.
- UNESCAP, 2021. COVID-19 and South Asia: National strategies and sub-regional cooperation for accelerating inclusive, sustainable and resilient recovery. UNESCAP SSWA Paper 5, New Delhi. [Available at: [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/South%20Asia%20Covid-19%20Paper\\_5.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/South%20Asia%20Covid-19%20Paper_5.pdf) ]
- Upadhyaya, R., Filippi, M.E., Christie, R. and Ensor, J., 2022. Understanding vulnerabilities through an intersectional lens in Khokana, Kathmandu. [Available at: <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/39517?show=full> ]
- Twigg, J., 2015. Disaster risk reduction. [Available at: [https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/resource\\_document/DRR-Good-Practice-2015.pdf](https://acfid.asn.au/sites/site.acfid/files/resource_document/DRR-Good-Practice-2015.pdf)]
- World Bank, 2018. Poverty and shared prosperity 2018: Piecing together the poverty puzzle. [Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-and-shared-prosperity-2018> ]
- World Bank, 2022. Coping with shocks: Migration and the road to resilience. [Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/sar/publication/south-asia-economic-focus-fall2022> ]

