Multi-level urban risk governance and the injustice of misframing: the case of Khokana, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal

Article

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Abstract

The decentralisation of authority, capability and finance is widely considered to be best practice in urban risk governance. Drawing on the concept of *misframing* from critical justice theory, we analyse injustices arising from the *de jure* decentralisation of risk governance in Nepal, scrutinising multi-scalar urban risk governance and its impact on resilient and equitable urban planning. Informed by qualitative research conducted from 2019 to 2024, we ask: how does the (mis)framing of risk governance affect local actors' capacities to manage risks; and to what extent can inclusive, risk-informed urban planning and policy facilitate just decentralisation? We identify a disconnect between risk management responsibilities assigned to local government, and its capacity to meet these expectations. Proposing a typology of misframing, we provide recommendations for the design and deployment of more equitable and contextually appropriate financial, technological and administrative decentralisation, as a pathway to justice, that can overcome rigid scalar jurisdictions.

Keywords: Unjust urbanisation; multi-scale risks; just disaster risk governance; local government; haphazard urbanisation; decentralisation; localisation; Nepal

I. INTRODUCTION

Decentralised governance involves mechanisms of power-sharing that distribute authority, knowledge, technology and finance across scales and sectors. Across the democratic world, this is championed as a best practice for a variety of reasons. It is argued that decentralisation has the potential to improve multi-level accountability and responsiveness, amplify citizen voices, reduce abuse of power and improve political stability.[1] The practice of what Jones et al referred to as "hollowing out" (i.e. releasing power from) state functions through decentralisation[2] is considered a "quiet revolution" in governance, as Campbell put it.[3] Many countries have incorporated these practices into sectoral development, including in disaster management [4] and urban planning, to ensure equitable and resilient development.[5]

Decentralisation in disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) is practised in at least three ways: upward (government becomes accountable to higher-level institutions); outward (mainstreaming DRRM agendas into sectors to integrate disaster and development

[1] (Faguet 2014, Tselios and Tompkins 2017)
[2] (Jones et al. 2015)
[3] Campbell 2001
[4] (Jones et al. 2015, Tselios and Tompkins 2017, Stablein et al. 2022)
[5] (Fontana et al. 2025)

in practice for better prevention and preparedness); and downward (decentralising DRRM to enable local government to formulate realistic and implementable risk management policies and practices).[6] The downward trend, widely discussed in the literature, has been promoted by many countries since the publication of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015, which contends that risk should be managed and reduced through empowering local government and supporting community-based participatory approaches. [7] Subsequently, the Sendai Framework of Action for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) 2015-2030 recognised the implementation and promotion of local governance as an important tool in reducing risk at the community level.[8]

Still, focusing on the local without a concern for multi-level power imbalances and inequalities could generate what Brown and Purcell referred to as a 'local trap'[9]. Challenges abound where decentralisation is incomplete, meaning where responsibility is decentralised without the necessary resources or power to meet expectations.[10] Within DRRM, studies find that legal and administrative decentralisation without fiscal implications is correlated with worsened disaster outcomes and exacerbated vulnerability.[11] Local governments often lack the financial resources and capacity to deal with everyday risks, so decentralisation (Jones et al. 2013)[12] and a source of conflict and distrust with communities.[13] Institutional inertia and political culture can additionally drive local powerlessness despite ostensive efforts to decentralise, [14] These challenges and weaknesses seem to exacerbate future vulnerability and risks.[15]

Considering the unbounded nature of natural hazard risks and climate change, and the fact that policy and planning at one scale or in one territory can generate consequences in another, championing the paradigm of decentralisation without attention to its operationalisation could be dangerous. [16] Decentralising power *de jure* but not *de facto* (through capacity, finance, and institutional knowledge) could further weaken local governments and hinder the capacity of community-based organisations to tackle risks and reduce the impacts of natural hazard events.

This paper contributes to deepening and grounding the notion of *just decentralisation*[17] by exploring the application of the concept of *misframing* from social justice theory[18] to contexts of localised DRRM and climate adaptation, where decentralisation is guaranteed but not fully realised from the perspective of those experiencing risks on the ground. Misframing is a meta-injustice and refers to the exclusion of actors, knowledge and social

[6] (Jones et al. 2015)
[7] (Pelling 2007, Marks and Lebel 2016).
[8] (UNISDR 2015)
[9] (Mohan and Stokke 2000, Brown and Purcell 2005)
[10] (Pacheco 2004, Batterbury and Fernando 2006, Blaikie 2006)
[11] (Tselios and Tompkins 2017)
[12] (Jones et al. 2013)
[13] (Allen 2006)
[14] (Blackburn 2014)
[15] (Poudel et al. 2024b, Poudel et al. 2024c)
[16] (Faguet 2014).
[17] (Skidmore and Toya 2013)
[18] (Fraser 2009)

structures from certain levels of decision-making (Ibid). While it has been present in the literature for a while, it is still underused as a justice component. This is partly due to the dominance and foundational status of debates on participation, redistribution and recognition in discussions of justice. However, as we argue here, grasping misframing also requires a framework to make sense of the rich empirical material that is required in order to see, challenge and ultimately overcome misframing in decentralisation processes.

This argument entails a multi-level tracing of how injustices are produced and experienced, and draws on work on the politics of scale[19] . This allows us to conceptualise the social constructed-ness of the relative powers and capacities existing at and across different layers/levels of governance, and the political and institutional relationships through which those relative powers are produced and reproduced. This approach to misframing offers a critical lens to support the implementation of decentralisation practices.

In this paper, we ask: (1) *How does the (mis)framing of risk governance affect local actors' (authorities and communities) capacities to manage risks? (2) To what extent can inclusive, risk-informed urban planning and policy facilitate just decentralisation?*

We tackle these questions through a qualitative empirical analysis of the case of Khokana - a southern peri-urban town in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. Like many towns in the global south, Khokana experiences the consequences of unjust decentralisation, where weak capacity and limited resources make it challenging for local actors to address complex multi-hazard risks, often connected to large-scale urban development fostered at the international and national levels.[20] Our research shows how the possibilities for land use change and new development in Khokana have been linked to a process of risk accumulation which ultimately impacted the Ward Disaster Management Committee (WDMC)'s[21] capacities – as well as those of other local-level actors – to take action, thereby exacerbating the vulnerability of marginalised and low-ranked groups[22] and creating a general sense of powerlessness and local distrust.

Following this introduction, section 2 briefly discusses connections between scale, decentralisation and justice, introducing the concept of misframing and its components. Section 3 describes the research context, design and methods. In section 4, we explain multi-scalar risk governance in Nepal, including hierarchical roles and responsibilities. Section 5 analyses the misframing of risks in the specific context of Khokana, drawing on governments' and communities' experiences and perceptions. Subsequently, we discuss how misframing affects local risk governance and urban planning, answering research question 1. We conclude the paper with policy recommendations for equitable and resilient urban planning, answering research question 2.

II. INTERROGATING DECENTRALISATION AND JUSTICE

[19] (Marston 2000, Swyngedouw 2004)
[20] (Timsina et al. 2021, Poudel et al. 2023)
[21] A ward is the lowest administrative and political unit in Nepal
[22] See section 3 for an account of Khokana's demographic make-up

Justice is increasingly recognised as a critical component of risk-informed urban planning, DRRM, and climate adaptation in cities.[23] Yet, despite this growing rhetorical presence, the term remains under-scrutinised and underdeveloped in everyday, practical urban governance.[24] Justice is often used vaguely, as a general ambition or goal, rather than something that is systematically operationalised and evaluated for learning and change within and beyond institutions.[25]

Mainstream interpretations of justice, particularly those rooted in liberal theory, often adopt a universalist lens.[26] These approaches typically regard individuals as the primary units of analysis and apply principles without attention to historical legacies, social positioning or the often scaled power imbalances that shape relationships between groups and institutions.[27] Also, justice is frequently reduced to matters of (re)distribution – how benefits, resources and harms are allocated across a population. Injustices, from this perspective, become visible through material and/or spatial disparities. Urban scholarship has long critiqued these manifestations, discussing the unequal production and distribution of urban space[28]. In DRRM, this helps explain how marginalised and low-income communities are disproportionately exposed to natural hazards, often occupying precarious or unsafe land due to chronic housing maldistribution, which in turn produce unjust "hazardscapes"[29].

Critical and radical perspectives on justice extend this view by emphasising its procedural and political dimensions. These approaches centre questions of power and agency, highlighting the importance of fair representation, meaningful participation and the recognition of voice in decision-making processes.[30] While this shift is vital, it can also blur distinctions between procedural justice and participation practices, reducing justice to including individuals and groups in discussions[31], rather than interrogating the deeper political structures and institutional arrangements that perpetuate exclusion from consequential decision-making.[32]

This problem extends beyond the well-documented critiques of tokenistic participation.[33] It signals a need to unpack the origins, content and operationalisation of justice narratives in urban governance: based on which understanding of justice is being used, how comprehensively or superficially principles are being deployed and followed and, ultimately, whose interests policy is mostly serving. Without this scrutiny, efforts to integrate justice into urban decision making and DRRM risk becoming overly rethorical, focused on compliance rather than tangible transformation.[34]

[23] IPCC, 2022
[24] (Schlosberg 2007)
[25] (Bulkeley et al. 2014)
[26] (Rawls 1971).
[27] (Soja 2013)
[28] (Fainstein 2016)
[29] (Mustafa 2005, Sultana 2022)
[30] (Young 2016 [1990])
[31] (Cornwall 2008)
[32] (Hamdanieh et al. 2024)
[33] (Arnstein 1969)
[34] (Pelling 2011)

The core promise of justice - be it social, environmental or climate-related[35] - lies not merely in improving participatory processes but in reconfiguring the structures through which decisions are made and how outcomes are enjoyed across different groups. A deeper engagement with justice in a context of decentralised governance hence demands approaches that recognise both material and procedural dimensions ,[36] while also attending to the systems and structures that enable or constrain justice across jurisdictions and scales.

Nancy Fraser's work provides a simple, yet holistic, justice framework that encompasses many of these debates, defining justice as a combination – and articulation - of three interdependent elements: redistribution (economic and material justice), recognition (social and cultural claims), and representation (political voice and inclusion).[37] These must be interwoven, with parity in participation as the foundational principle – where all justice subjects are able to engage as equals in shaping decisions that affect them.[38]

This framework has influenced environmental and climate justice scholarship, which has added further dimensions, including considerations of capabilities and ecological reflexivity.[39] Recent work in climate justice has brought these ideas further into the realm of practice. Parsons et al.[40], for instance, propose a five-part heuristic for analysing justice in climate adaptation experiences: *(1) justice for whom; (2) dimensions of justice; (3) areas of justice; (4) intersectionality; and (5) scale.* This paper takes up *scale* as its main entry point for advancing justice in risk- and climate-sensitive urban planning, in response to an observed disconnect between ostensive efforts at decentralised risk governance in policy, and the actual redistribution of power across scales that this demands.This process, called here 'incomplete decentralisation', has been observed in various contexts, including forest governance[41], community-based natural resource management[42], as well as DRR.[43] However, to date, the justice implications of these processes remain under-emphasised. We recognise that 'complete decentralisation' is most likely impossible in practice, and does not necessarily of itself guarantee just outcomes. Moreover, a binary focus on the completeness or incompleteness of decentralisation risks perpetuating an over-emphasis on procedural rigour over the structural foundations of equity and inclusion. However, it remains the case that incomplete acts of decentralisation bring unique injustices, which should be illuminated and discussed.

In this paper we use an underdeveloped, scale-driven concept from Fraser's work – *misframing* – to interrogate how risk governance frameworks in Nepal, based on decentralisation, produce and reinforce injustices connected to increased multihazard risks. Misframing is a type of injustice that arises when the boundaries of political community or

[35] (Schlosberg 2007)
[36] (Chu et al. 2016)
[37] (Fraser 2008)
[38] (Fraser 2009)
[39] (Schlosberg, (2007)
[40] (Parsons et al. 2024)
[41] (Pacheco 2004)
[42] (Batterbury and Fernando 2006, Blaikie 2006)
[43] (Blackburn 2014, Marks and Lebel 2016)

governance are drawn in ways that exclude certain groups, places, knowledge or scales from being recognised as legitimate claimants of justice.[44] We propose that a critical interrogation of scale is key here: recognition that the fixing of power and agency within a multi-level governance system is a dynamic social and political process.[45] Scholarship on the politics of scale invites a critical look at the relational space between multi-level social, political and institutional actors, arguing that their relative scales of influence are not fixed but socially constructed[46]. Decentralisation will produce injustices not only where fiscal and institutional capacity does not follow devolved responsibility, but also where responsibility is devolved without a reconfiguration of entrenched power hierarchies and structural inequities[47]. In sum, it takes more than institutional restructuring and policy authority to meaningfully empower local actors to have voice and agency in decision-making. Attention needs to be paid to the ongoing political processes through which responsibility and power become incommensurate.

Existing literature shows that devolved responsibility can become incommensurate with devolved power for various reasons. In the context of DRM, Marks and Lebel[48] point to: (i) failure to decenter finances and human resources; (ii) preoccupation with specific local issues rather than the need to challenge broader structural challenges or drivers of risk; and (iii) isolation of local solutions without proper coordination and collaboration across scales. These factors contribute to a mismatch between the scale at which responsibility is held and the scale at which power is held; and/or a mismatch between the scale(s) at which risk is produced, and the scale at which responsibility for risk reduction sits. In reality, disaster risk is produced at and between multiple scales, thus the solutions need also to be multi-scalar[49]. These issues are by no means limited to DRM: in the context of Amazonian development, Brown and Purcell[50]warn against the reification of the local scale as being inherently most desirable in addressing social and ecological challenges. Cash et al.[51] similarly highlight the complex multi-scalar production of social-environmental challenges, and thus the need for progressive institutional responses across governance layers rather than in scalar isolation.

These accounts are invaluable in problematising decentralisation as a presumed best practice. However, to date, their specific implications from a justice perspective remain underexplored. This requires further examination in the pursuit of just decentralisation. We draw on Fraser's concept of misframing to address this gap, and advance a typology of injustices of misframing, as outlined below.

[44] (Fraser 2009)
[45] (Swyngedouw 2004)
[46] (Marston 2000)
[47] (Blackburn 2014)
[48] (Marks and Lebel 2016)
[49] (Poudel et al. 2023, Poudel et al. 2024c)
[50] (Brown and Purcell 2005)
[51] (Cash et al. 2006)

a. The 'Injustice of Misframing': a proposed typology

(Fraser 2009)In this paper, the concept of misframing is unpacked, advanced and applied to demonstrate how decentralisation, while ostensibly empowering local institutions in Nepal, actually produces new forms of exclusion and vulnerability, particularly when central authorities retain power over structural development projects and resources.

As part of this unpacking, we propose a typology of three overlapping dimensions of misframing , both as a way to analyse data from Khokana and as a general contribution to knowledge in the field. The first dimension is a primary manifestation of misframing and stems from scale-related injustices. The second and third identify where misframing's scalar analytic intersects with procedural and epistemic justice.

A. *Spatial and Policy Misframing* occurs when there is a mismatch between the governance scale at which risk production occurs and the scale at which responsibility and capability is assigned.
B. *Representational Misframing* relates to who counts as legitimate in (decentralised) decision making and governance frameworks – which groups and scales have meaningful representation and participation or are visible in decision-making.
C. *Epistemic Misframing* refers to how knowledge is valued in planning and risk governance, i.e. whether there is equity in how different forms of knowledge are utilised in decision-making. This may be associated with particular scales, e.g. indigenous or traditional forms of knowledge may be more prevalent at the community scale, whilst expert scientific knowledge is prioritised in national or central government.

This framework emerges from a critical analysis of the evidence from Nepal through the lenses of critical justice theory. While not absolute (there could be other manifestations of misframing or different ways of connecting justice concepts to this framework), it exposes the systemic blind spots in decentralised risk governance which also could be manifesting elsewhere. They show how decentralisation can entail responsibility without actual power, redistribution of urban assets without the recognition of diversity, inequality and parity of participation, and action without recognition of the value and legitimacy of pluralistic knowledge systems. This framing helps clarify how risk is created and sustained in places like Khokana. It also provides a foundation for the methodological approach taken in this study, which examines misframing through empirical engagement with actors and institutions at multiple scales. We argue that just decentralisation requires attention across all three forms of misframing.

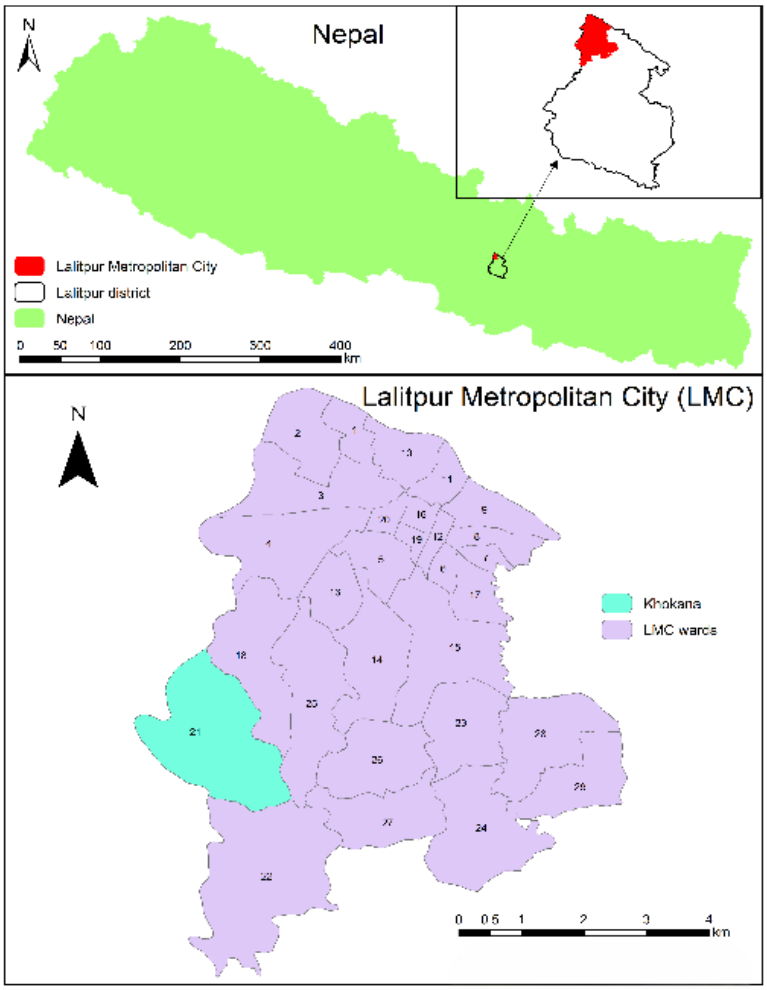
III. METHODOLOGY

Through qualitative fieldwork, we have unpacked the scalar disconnection of Khokana's risk management and inclusive and resilient urban planning. The fieldwork was conducted within the framework of the Tomorrow's Cities Urban Risk Hub (UKRI GRCF), which aimed to reimagine urban planning through risk-informed and future-oriented approaches. Besides undertaking a policy review, we conducted interviews, focus group discussions and

organized workshops. We deployed the snowball sampling method to select respondents, identify internal community differences, and collect primary data. First, to understand local socio-economic and risk contexts, we interviewed members of 22 households, including women, marginalised people, migrants and relatively influential residents. We also interviewed three ward officials and three municipal officials. Collectively, these interviews helped us gain a better understanding of various relations within local government, their individual views on participation, representation and roles in local development endeavours, and their perceptions of the ongoing rapid and haphazard urban development and impacts. Second, we conducted seven focus group discussions (FGDs) with disaggregated groups from within Khokana that included women, people from both marginalised and higher-income families, migrants and *tahara* (temporary settlement) residents, people from a fire risk-prone settlement, those settled near a site for macro infrastructure development, and the members of a Ward Disaster Management Committee (WDMC). We also conducted a participatory hazard mapping including local farmers, ward representatives, marginalised people, migrants and the households with larger land holdings. These FGDs gave us insights into both collective and individual views on ongoing development activities, community participation, exclusion, the role of local government, local risk history and the impact on traditional practices and local agriculture-based livelihoods in the context of urbanisation. Third, in parallel to the FGDs, we engaged with the WDMC members, including those that participated in FGDs, to facilitate ward-level policy discussions.[52] We reflected on these engagements with local government and communities through seven iterative workshops (i.e.with the same format and mostly the same people) with participants who had already engaged in the interviews or FGDs, drawing on the ethos of knowledge co-production .[53] This co-production approach allowed us not only to include locals as an integral part of knowledge production but also created a space to share findings and get feedback from them, yielding in-depth knowledge about multiple vulnerabilities, the sources of risks that the communities were facing, their challenges in tackling risks, and the WDMC's motivation and engagement in local risk management.

[52] (Comelli et al. 2024, Poudel et al. 2024a)
[53] (Ensor and Harvey 2015, Geekiyanage et al. 2021, Ziervogel et al. 2021)

Map 1: Location map of the study area



The data acquired was transcribed, triangulated (e.g. interviews and workshops), categorised, and analysed across the elements of decentralisation (authority, representation, and capability) and the components of misframing (spatial/policy, representational, and epistemic). This process further helped us to refine, add and reanalyse the findings, increasing the trustworthiness of the data and analyses.

This research took place in Khokana (3.2 sq km), located at the southern edge of the Kathmandu Valley (665 sq km), where the Bagmati River exits from the valley (see Map 1). The town has a rich culture, and some of the oldest architecture in the Kathmandu Valley, including temples built in the 14th century. Although Khokana was annexed to Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) in March 2017 as a part of the federalisation process, it retains many rural characteristics, unlke the core city wards in LMC. Administratively, it belongs to ward no. 21 of LMC and has a population of around 5000 (ca. 1000 households). Most residents are *Jyapus* (farmers) of the Dangol and Maharjan castes. They hold most of the land and lead the local economy, politics, culture, and festivals. Members of the marginalized and socially low-ranked Kushle, Shahi, Napit and Kapali communities provide labour to *jyapu* and facilitate their culture and festivals. Along with the *jyapus*, they are

collectively known as the Newar community in the Valley.[54] The third category of local residents are the migrants from other parts of Nepal, who include factory owners, commercial farmers, wage labourers and *tahara* settlers. They lack access to local culture and politics. More than four years (2019 – 2024) of field work engagements in Khokana enabled us to understand this complex environment and to track its urban development and risk trajectories in more granular ways. Below we outline how empirical evidence from Khokana illustrates the different typologies of misframing.

IV. THE CASE OF RISK GOVERNANCE IN NEPAL

In Nepal, historically, the Natural Calamity (relief) Act 1982 was the first of its kind enacted by the government, focusing on disaster management. This was replaced by the most recent DRRM Act in 2017. After the 2015 earthquake, the Nepal government issued several DRRM policies, and designed and authorised DRRM institutions at multiple scales, ranging from central to local, aligning with international agreements such as the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), the Sendai Framework of Action (SFA), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Accord 2015.[55] The decentralisation of DRRM in Nepal over the last 40 years has been characterised as a shift from "relief-centric" to "resilience-centric" policy design[56] (see Figure 1).

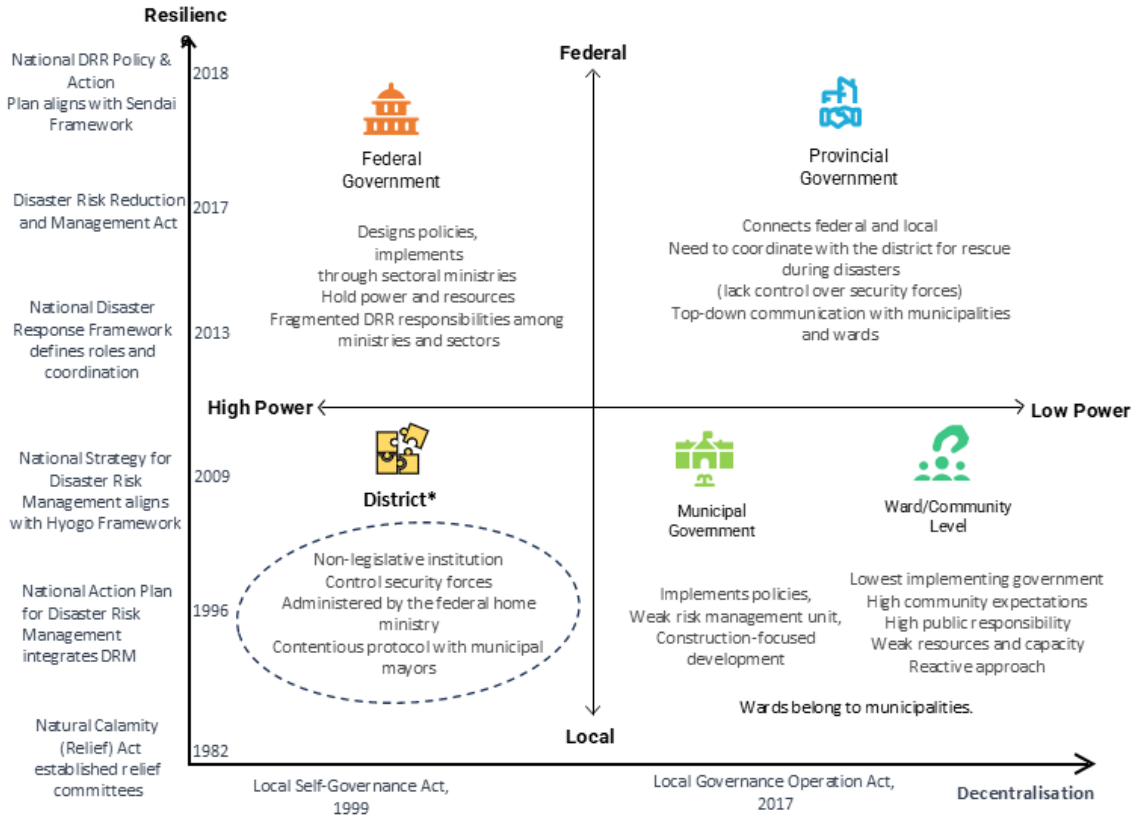
The federal government is mainly responsible for designing Acts and Regulations, implementing them through federal ministries, and taking overall responsibility for managing disasters all over the country. Provincial and local governments follow the instructions and prescriptions provided by the federal government, although they also have the authority to design locally specific policies aligned with the Constitution of Nepal 2015. Accordingly, the Constitution assigns responsibilities to all three levels to manage risks. So, theoretically, there is no room for questioning their *de jure* shared responsibilities for disaster management.

Figure 1: Risk governance in Nepal: decentralisation-resilience dichotomy

[54] (see also Nepali 2015)

[55] As noted above, the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) 2005-2015 called for risk reduction to be implemented through local empowerment and community-based participatory approaches (Pelling 2007, Marks and Lebel 2016). This decentralisation agenda was further reinforced by the Sendai Framework of Action (SFA) for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (UNISDR 2015).

[56] (Poudel and Blackburn 2020)



* In the DRRM sectors, the *district* is not a legislative body, is not ruled by elected representatives, plays a limited role in public service delivery and has yet to be fully integrated into the federal system. Nevertheless, the Province and Municipality must coordinate with the district when they require security forces for rescue and relief operations during disasters—a process both levels of government regard as a bottleneck to effective DRRM. The dotted circle indicates the administrative and structural differences from the present federal system.

Provincial governments are newly established entities under the federal system in Nepal. Their primary role is to connect federal and local government responsibilities for disaster management. As such, they are responsible for coordinating, facilitating, monitoring, and implementing DRRM initiatives, and also mainstreaming DRRM in development planning by including mitigating and preventive measures. But the Provincial Disaster Management Committee (PDMC) suffers from a reactive approach to DRRM and the communication between provinces and municipalities (and their wards) is primarily top-down: the province demands data from wards on casualties and losses, informs wards about budget allocations and expects recommendations for forming user groups for different community-level activities, such as resource and risk management, with limited involvement of wards in decision-making processes. The PDMC has no authority to mobilise security forces (Nepal's army and police) during disasters without coordinating the district administration.

The district's role, as outlined in the DRRM Act 2017, is mainly focused on disaster response activities, particularly those that are life-saving and coordinating recovery efforts. Although the district itself does not have operational responsibilities and must rely on municipal and ward levels for risk management actions, the District Disaster Management Committee (DDMC) serves as a vital link between the federal, PDMC, and local governments for facilitating DRM processes (IOM 2020, OPM 2020). The district is not a part of the local government, and it is not a legislative body. Nevertheless, while many municipalities in

Nepal seem to have close ties with the DDMC, a contentious protocol conflict between the Chief District Officers (CDOs), who lead the DDMC and security forces , and the mayors, who rank higher in the government protocol, has hindered some municipal leaders from attending the committee meetings. This has shrunk the possibilities for materialising creative coordination between municipalities and districts.

Ideally, according to the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) 2017, municipal level government has the mandate to implement the 2017 DRRM Act and other policies that align with local contexts and legislative frameworks and to manage risk through the Municipal Disaster Management Committee (MDMC). The LGOA 2017 specifies that municipal governments also have the authority to relocate risk-prone settlements (traditionally a role for federal government) and are empowered to create local laws, mobilise funds, mitigate and respond to disasters and manage recovery efforts. However, municipal governments often struggle to translate these policies into actions due to resource, finance and knowledge constraints.

The ward/community-level risk management operates through the WDMC (DRRM, 2017). The district and municipality do not actively engage in DRRM-related meetings at the ward level, nor do they provide feedback to WDMCs, although they ask for information from wards for various planning and development purposes. Wards do not directly communicate with province or district. As municipal subordinates, they go through the related municipality. This lack of involvement leads to minimal support and guidance for ward-level disaster preparedness, resulting in a reactive approach centred on an annual disaster fund (provided to each ward including Khokana) of around NPR 200,000 (about US$1455).

In sum, while national disaster management policy in Nepal has gone a long way towards decentralisation, there are various functional barriers to the practical decentralisation of power and agency, and some acts and regulations which create ambiguities about roles and responsibilities. As we describe below, there is also a fundamental mismatch between the multi-scale processes of risk creation, driven by national and international development pressures, and the fixing of responsibility for risk management at local scales. In other words, whilst responsibilities are decentralised to local government, wards and communities, the drivers of risk creation exist at sites and scales inaccessible to those groups. This constitutes an injustice of misframing.

V. THE MISFRAMING OF RISKS IN KHOKANA

a. Spatial and policy misframing: haphazard urban development and the creation of risks

Rapid land use changes, macro infrastructure provision and a lack of intentional engagement with informality in planning are key drivers of multihazard risks in Khokana. The way these decisions stem from uncoordinated levels of governance creates a mismatch between the scales at which risk is produced, experienced and managed or potentially addressed, revealing spatial and policy misframing.

As documented by Poudel et al.,[57] Khokana has experienced significant urban change over the past three decades – characterised as 'haphazard urbanisation'. Land use changes in Khokana since the 1990s have five clear spatial expressions. First, the historical city centre started expanding outward, with a growing number of new unplanned constructions in risk-prone and/or poorly serviced locations, initiated by both locals and migrants. This process accelerated after the 2015 earthquake. Second, the construction of *taharas* became widespread, mainly in previously agricultural land. Although some *taharas* were constructed by the local earthquake victims for temporary residence, low-income households, wage labourers and migrants have also constructed these temporary settlements for residential and small-scale commercial farming purposes. Third, factory owners have bought or rented land, where they run their businesses. Fourth, land plotting is increasing mainly for residential purposes, so land speculation is growing. Finally, road construction by both municipal and federal governments has accelerated the development of new infrastructure (houses, hotels, restaurants) on both sides of the roads. A significant proportion of agricultural land has been converted into residential areas and covered by construction and development activities (Photo 1). Many new and informal constructions are not following building codes (especially those in the core settlements and *taharas*) and are becoming difficult to map and regulate due to their fast growth and the lack of risk-resilient planning.

Photo 1: Expanding Khokana village (top left) bordering modern housing (lower left), and construction in the agriculture field (centre valley) and up to the Bagmati river (beside the hills in the horizon). The canal on the front is called the Rajkulo, i.e., the royal canal.

[57] (Poudel et al. 2023)

These land use changes, particularly the loss of agricultural land, impact traditional livelihoods and Khokana's ability to deal with the flow of monsoon waters, given reduced infiltration and more rapid surface run-off. This has contributed to a significant increase of flood/inundation risk in Khokana, which compounds the increased landslide and earthquake-related risks facing new unregulated development. Some areas in southern Khokana have experienced both landslides and flooding, in addition to the continuous lateral erosion by the Bagmati River. Agriculture land and expanding *tahara* settlements near the royal canal and its tributaries have already started experiencing inundation during monsoon. These growing impacts affect mainly marginalised groups, migrants and cultural sites such as Shikali temple and the cremation ground located near the river. These everyday risks lack adequate attention from planners and infrastructure development agencies.

Khokana is characteristic of the mismatches between the scale of risk drivers and risk manifestations.This mismatch is a strong indicator of spatial and policy misframing, in which complex and mulit-scale risk drivers are far removed from everyday experiences. These drivers are a function of decisions, roles and responsibilities created through hierarchical government structures whereby authority is decentralised without due consideration to the need for pragmatic coordination between governments, and without equal access to resources, knowledge and technologies (see section IV). Several large projects are currently being funded by the central government with little or no consideration of potential and emerging risks, and the municipality itself is constructing a ring road around the Khokana settlement with little attention to landslide risks.[58] These investments in development and construction have further attracted migrants and small and medium-sized businesses, triggering land speculation, construction in risk-prone areas (e.g., the edge of the Bagmati river), and encroachment on cultural and religious sites. These changes foster gaps between land use changes, housing choices (loss of farmland, growing *taharas* and informal housing) and risk management. Decentralised disaster risk management is limited because the ward, with its weak capacity and limited resources, is tasked with addressing multi-scale and multi-hazard risks, but without a strategic role in local risk management policy and urban planning. Moreover, the municipality and wards lack dedicated and independent disaster programs and a team. *"We're burdened with multiple responsibilities, including providing drinking water, managing sewer systems, assisting earthquake victims, and handling various disaster-related tasks. These diverse obligations spread our resources thin, hindering our ability to excel in any one area"*, a municipal authority member said. Such disjunctions between risk understanding, policy design and resource allocation - i.e. policy and spatial misframing - continue to reproduce vulnerabilities through urbanisation.

b. Representational misframing: conflicts with excluded and discontented communities

While the local government in Khokana publicly advocates for inclusivity and equal participation in policy and planning, in practice, underlying systems, biases and power

[58] (Poudel et al. 2023)

dynamics keep marginalised groups excluded from – or misrecognised in - critical decision-making related to risk. This goes beyond the instrumentalisation of local voice in policy and planning. Local communities are misframed by the failure to involve them in higher level macro visions that significantly impact their everyday lives. They are also blamed for the impacts of natural hazards, as was evident in discussions with a migrant male, who sought support from the ward to manage the flood water that enters his house during monsoon. Authorities dismissed his request, saying *"How can you complain of inundation after building a house near the royal canal?"*

Other local groups also expressed frustration with the ward, citing poor road conditions, drinking water problems and inadequate healthcare facilities, among other problems, A female health volunteer expressed her disappointment: *'Despite multiple requests for repair and maintenance, the sub-health post remains in disrespair with roof leaks ruining stored medicines'*. According to these local groups, their needs and requirements are often 'less prioritised' and 'neglected' in higher-level political or economic planning, exacerbating their vulnerability to disasters.

Community members highlighted inadequate leadership in the WDMC and the ward government to support local DRRM efforts effectively. Budget constraints and overburdened responses to day-to-day service delivery represent a major barrier to well-framed DRRM practices at the community level, as a disaster expert highlighted in 2024. During an FGD in 2021, WDMC participants said that factors contributing to WDMC dysfunction included the lack of meeting agendas and clear disaster management plans, which diminished their motivation and the effectiveness of rescue materials. The lack of knowledge transfer has also weakened the ward's capacity to act within their own jurisdiction. An informant highlighted this: *"Although there are search and rescue materials stored in three places* [in Khokana] *I doubt if the equipment works properly as there are no training or refreshment programs for the members".* He added that, in addition to the budget and human resource constraints, the institutional memory on DRRM training and management practices is missing.

Together, these insights point to representational misframing, reflecting the political construction of scale with weak and tokenistic participation of both communities and the ward. Despite ostensive policy and structural commitment to local representation and empowerment, local experiences and needs lack effective representational channels and the tools and support to operate effectively. This contributes to conflictive engagements between local actors and the blaming of marginalised groups for risk and disasters.

c. Epistemic misframing: weak local government and institutional inertia

Although the local government (i.e. municipalities and their wards) is empowered on paper to create local laws, mobilise funds, mitigate disasters, respond to them and manage recovery efforts, there are several practical constraints regarding how differentiated knowledge is valued and framed in decision making.

First, the local DRRM Act is supposed to provide the structural basis for developing and enforcing localised disaster management strategies. The municipal government, however,

without appreciation of local risk history and knowledge, designs local risk policies that imitate federal policies and structures. Therefore, according to a retired professor in 2024 "*Municipalities often struggle to translate these policies* [and their embedded knowledge] *into practical actions, although integrating these policies is essential to overcoming this challenge despite obstacles such as budget and resource limitations*". According to LMC's DRR focal person, discussions during meetings with the federal and provincial governments do consider municipal DRR preparedness and research. But when allocating the budget, politicians are unwilling to act on these insights, and DRR at the lower level rarely gets prioritised. These failures in knowledge deployment represent a missed opportunity to take account of local risk experiences and traditional risk management efforts.

Second, according to a retired senior DRRM officer of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), a significant barrier to inclusive federal risk governance is the persistent reliance on ad-hoc decision-making instead of protocol-based action. He said, *'Our government still relies more on committee-based mechanisms for decision-making rather than formal institutional frameworks'*. He contends that this approach encourages the exclusion of a diversity of knowledge that could prevent risk. He added that, without the institutional structures and systems in place to support larger and more comprehensive development or governance initiatives, there may be gaps in how resources are allocated or how decisions are implemented across scales.

Third, the fragmented DRRM knowledge and institutional structure is a critical concern. In a workshop, a government officer emphasised the need to authorise a single dedicated ministry to oversee DRRM planning and governance. Currently, responsibilities are scattered across multiple ministries and departments, especially in sectors like drinking water, roads and disaster management, which leads to competition for programs and budget allocations and complicates coordination among agencies. This hinders coherent planning and effective implementation and devalues local preparedness, community knowledge and risk histories in favour of engineered and macro infrastructure development.

Fourth, the power-holding mentality of the central government hinders the recognition of knowledge across scales. A government official working at the community level said that communication between provinces, municipalities and wards is primarily top-down. This hierarchical thinking persists at all levels. For example, federal authorities think provinces have weak capacity; provinces consider municipalities to be weak in terms of handling budget and technologies, and municipal officials think wards lack capacity (e.g., technical, human resources, expertise). A municipal official said that the ward lacks the authority even to open its own bank account, so they have to approach the municipality for reimbursement of expenditures, and to deposit local taxes into the municipal bank account.[59] The municipality disperses the budget to all wards through annual policy and program decisions, which have a high chance of overlooking community/context-sensitive planning. This incomplete fiscal and capacity decentralisation further limits the role of wards and

[59] (MoFAGA 2017 [Article 12.C.33])

communities in decision-making and in tackling local risks and haphazard urbanisation, echoing observations in Jamaica by Blackburn[60] that perceptions of local government weakness can become self-perpetuating.

These observations are consistent with epistemic misframing, with the decentralised system operating in a way that devalues local priorities and local knowledge on risks. Resources are allocated according to assumptions (often from other scales and agendas) about local needs and priorities, mandated by the centre rather than enabling local governments and communities to set their own agendas. The wards thus face problems in translating knowledge to action due to capacity and resource constraints, and a lack of epistemic recognition, despite having juridical authority for conducting impactful actions in some instances.

VI. DISCUSSION

In Nepal, the decentralisation of urban planning and risk management institutions is visible and formalised in various policies at all scales of government (federal, provincial, district, municipal and ward) in a *de jure* sense. However, our analysis demonstrates a mismatch between the scale of risk production and the scale of risk management (spatial and policy misframing), the exclusion or weak participation of marginalised groups from critical macro-level decisions that lead to risk accumulation (representational misframing), and coordination gaps and limited transfer of knowledge and technology across scales (epistemic misframing). These injustices, we argue, stem from a poor realisation of multilevel governance, thus constructing and perpetuating weak capacity among the ward, the WDMC and local communities. This magnifies disaster risk in various socio-economic, spatial and cultural realms.

In Khokana, land use changes, haphazard urbanisation, in-migration and larger infrastructure projects are driving exposure to risk,without effective awareness building, social protection and multi-hazard risk mitigation through planning. The consequences of those changes are not fully understood yet. However, our research notes that the changing urban and social morphologies are displacing traditional agriculture practices, affecting local livelihood earnings, and threatening cultural sites, thus creating further vulnerability to disasters. Local communities and wards are expected to manage environmental impacts, despite lacking financial, technical, and administrative capacity. Pragmatically, the power of financial planning and decision-making lies with the higher tiers of the government, bypassing wards and resulting in a process of incomplete decentralisation. This mismatch reflects a core aspect of misframing: the allocation or ascribing of responsibility without actual power. These processes represent an ongoing and active reproduction of a politics of scale whereby power is retained at the centre while local actors remain marginalised.

Migrants, lower-caste groups, and *tahara* residents in Khokana are often excluded from higher-scale planning processes, limited access to basic services, and even blamed for risk creation. They fall through the cracks in multi-level governance systems that define

[60] (Blackburn 2014)

legitimacy through formal residence, land ownership or caste hierarchies. These exclusions are not accidental; they are produced by legal, spatial and cultural framings that determine who counts as a legitimate stakeholder in macro-scale development decision making. Such representational misframing leads to risk accumulation at the local community level, entangling and complicating risk management and multi-level resilient urban planning.

Finally, dominant frameworks of urban planning and risk management in Nepal often rely on technical or engineering-based models, which reduce hazards to physical threats and ignore the social, political and everyday dimensions of vulnerability.[61] Additionally, the decentralisation of risk governance is top-down, designed to meet the national need through guided formats and the fulfilment of data required by the higher governments.[62] Consequently, as our fieldwork shows, local knowledge—about land use, cultural sites, *tahara* settlements, or past disasters—is often marginalised in favour of 'expert-driven planning', which mimics protocols from elsewhere without adaptation to context. Also, the prioritisation of construction-focused over risk-sensitive infrastructure development by elected authorities, overlooks everyday risks and local needs. These authorities portray investment in risk reduction as a waste of money, and focus on construction with vested political interests to influence voters through material gains. This limits the ability to design responses that are rooted in actual risk dynamics on the ground.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper expands the evidence base for injustices associated with decentralisation in the context of disaster risk governance, and advances the conceptualisation of misframing through a three-part framework that enables its identification on the ground. The framework is flexible and its application in different contexts might lead to other configurations and concepts. In the context of Khokana, we demonstrate how the three overlapping categories of misframing - spatial and policy, representational, and epistemic – interact with urban planning and disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) functions at different scales. Khokana and Nepal more generally are by no means unique in struggling to realise the potential of decentralisation. Anchored as it is in the meta-theory of misframing, our framework is likely to apply equally in other global south nations where risk management is not aligned with resource and knowledge sharing, and lacks coordination among authorities and actors at different scales.

Theoretically, the framework connects misframing with other critical justice dimensions - procedural, spatial, and epistemic - while reinforcing the role of *scale* and *multi-level governance* as crucial factors often underplayed in justice theory. Its contribution lies in showing how decentralisation reforms, when poorly aligned across entrenched, cross-scalar power imbalances, can themselves become generators of injustice. The realisation of complete decentralisation does not automatically translate into justice. However, the intentional framing of risk across scales and the equitable distribution of authority, knowledge and resources can begin to reduce exposure and vulnerability through targeted policy and planning.

[61] (Poudel and Pelling 2024)
[62] (see also Russell et al. 2021)

It is important to note that the injustices of misframing, interconnected and mutually reinforcing, are both a product and a driver of incomplete decentralisation of risk governance in Nepal. The result is that, despite ostensive and long-standing commitment to decentralisation at national level, genuine local agency and empowerment for risk reduction at the local level remain severely limited.The paper advances scale as a key lens on how injustices arise through decentralisation processes, showing the disconnect between responsibility framed at one scale, and the holding of power at another. Further research is warranted on the place-specific politics of scale, i.e. social-political relations at and between different scales and actors, which actively reproduce the disempowerment of local actors and hence undermine efforts at decentralisation. More specifically, we call for further research on the scalar politics giving rise to spatial and policy misframing.

From a practice perspective, these findings point to several directions for urban risk management in Nepal – and in other contexts of DRRM decentralisation policy and/or practice. First, there needs to be an enhanced recognition that processes of disaster risk creation are complex, multi-scalar and intrinsically interconnected with urban development trajectories.[63] Accountability for this needs to sit at all scales of government, with genuine recognition at the national scale that risk creation is as much a product of high-level urban development strategy as it is a 'local problem'. Progressive, risk-informed urban planning tools and approaches – which integrate both localised knowledge and state-of-the-art scientific advancements – can illuminate these complex cause-effect chains, connecting the root causes and drivers of risk to the appropriate actors and scales, making a genuine shift from reactivity to short-term threats towards long-term resilience. Risk-sensitive thinking needs to be inherently embedded into urban development decision making at all scales.

Second, functional reforms are needed in the workings of decentralised risk governance institutions so that mandates and specific connections between groups and institutions can be clear to all. Although progressive, Nepal's current decentralised risk policies are vague and contain ambiguities regarding roles, responsibilities, resource sharing and coordination across levels of government, sectors and actors (see fig. 1). The 2015 constitution of Nepal directs local or municipal and ward governments to handle DRRM independently to the greatest extent possible, with provincial and federal governments stepping in to support or lead only when local capacity is insufficient. However, this intent is not clearly reflected in the DRRM Act 2017, and furthermore local governments are not sufficiently empowered by knowledge, finance and technology to uphold constitutional mandates. The community-level disaster management committee (i.e., the WDMC), moreover, has no strategic role in decision making and urban planning, and local actors are not adequately trained in risk reduction and management. Tackling haphazard urbanisation-induced disasters - which are multi-scalar and driven by external factors such as migration, development and economic forces - therefore becomes an additional burden to local governments. A pragmatic sharing of finance, technology and human resources with local government - alongside authority, context-sensitive policy guidelines, functional participatory space, and a coordination

[63] (Poudel et al. 2023)

mechanism in local policy design - needs to be embedded in decentralisation to reform local risk governance accordingly.

Third, and connected to the points above, there is a need to more explicitly recentre local voices, experience and knowledge within urban planning at all scales, particularly within macro-level decision-making forums. This could be achieved through champions, committees or other institutional arrangements that guarantee sufficient recognition and representation. Encouraging a diversity of actors, knowledge, data and technologies can help planning processes overcome epistemic injustices and better frame problems, needs and aspirations in a cross-scalar, integrated manner. Local knowledge - grounded in everyday experiences and traditional cosmologies - should be valued equally alongside scientific or technical expertise within urban planning and decision-making spaces. This argument has been extensively made in the literature.[64] However, in practice, there remains a considerable gap. The application of the framework proposed in this paper suggests that misframing can serve as a useful lens to illuminate, start conversations about, and address scale-related injustices in planning practice.

This paper has drawn on injustices of misframing to demonstrate that inclusive, risk-informed decision making requires more than decentralisation – it requires a mindful and meaningful framing of environmental challenges, policy, voice and knowledge so that risks can be understood and tackled across scales. It calls for future research that enhances the misframing framework. Crucially, this work should further explore the intersection of injustice with the politics of scale that fix and (re)produce power and responsibility at particular levels and agencies, in ways that perpetuate local vulnerability.

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[64] (e.g. Gaillard and Mercer 2012, Donovan 2016, Ramkumar 2022)

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