

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

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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 through 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 ascribed to local government, and their 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 which 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 rationales. 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 (Faguet 2014, Tselios and Tompkins 2017). Therefore, the practice of “hollowing out” (i.e. releasing power from) state functions through decentralisation (Jones et al. 2015) is considered a “quiet revolution” in governance (Campbell 2001). Many countries have incorporated these practices into sectoral development, including disaster management (Jones et al. 2015, Tselios and Tompkins 2017, Stablein et al. 2022) and urban planning, to ensure equitable and resilient development practices (Fontana et al. 2025).

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 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) (Jones et al. 2015). The downward trend is widely discussed in the literature and has been promoted by many countries after 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 community-based participatory approaches (Pelling 2007, Marks and Lebel 2016). Subsequently, the Sendai Framework of Action for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) 2015-2030 has recognised implementing and promoting local governance as an important tool in reducing risk at the community level (UNISDR 2015).

Still, focusing heavily on ‘the local’ without a concern for multi-level power imbalances and inequalities could generate a ‘local trap’ (Mohan and Stokke 2000, Brown and Purcell 2005). Challenges abound where decentralisation is ‘incomplete’, meaning where responsibility is decentralised in principle without the necessary resources or power to meet expectations (Pacheco 2004, Batterbury and Fernando 2006, Blaikie 2006). Within DRRM, studies find that legal and administrative decentralisation without fiscal implications is correlated with worsened disaster outcomes and exacerbated vulnerability (Tselios and Tompkins 2017). Local governments often lack the financial resources and capacity to deal with everyday risks, so decentralisation could become an extra burden (Jones et al. 2013) and a source of conflict and distrust with communities (Allen 2006). Institutional inertia and political culture can additionally drive local powerlessness despite ostensive efforts to decentralise (Author 3_2014). These challenges and weaknesses seem to exacerbate future vulnerability and risks [Author1_2024b, 2024c].

Considering the boundless nature of natural hazard risks and climate change, and the fact that policy and planning at one scale or territory could generate consequences in another, championing the paradigm of decentralisation without attention to its operationalisation could be dangerous (Faguet 2014). Decentralising power *de jure* but not *de facto* (through capacity, finance, and institutional knowledge) could further weaken local governments and hinder community-based organisations’ capacity to tackle risks and reduce the impacts of natural hazard events.

This paper contributes to deepening and grounding the notion of *just decentralisation* (Skidmore and Toya 2013) by exploring the usefulness of the concept of *misframing* from social justice theory (Fraser 2009) 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 structures from certain levels of decision-making (Ibid). Whilst 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 required to see, challenge and ultimately overcome misframing in decentralisation processes.

It entails a multi-level tracing of how injustices are produced and experienced, and draws on work on the politics of scale. 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. In so doing, our approach to misframing offers a critical lens to support implementation of decentralisation practices.

In the 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 (Timsina et al. 2021) [Author1_2023]. Our research shows how possibilities for land use change and new development in Khokana have been linked to a process of risk accumulation which ultimately impacted the Ward (lowest administrative and political unit in Nepal) Disaster Management Committee (WDMC)'s – as well as other local-level actors' – capacities to take action, exacerbating the vulnerability of marginalised groups such as migrants and low-ranked households 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 deployed during 2019-2024. In section 4, we explain the multi-scalar risk governance structure 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. Finally, we conclude the paper with policy recommendations for equitable and resilient urban planning, answering research question 2.

II. INTERROGATING DECENTRALISATION AND JUSTICE

Justice is increasingly recognised as a critical component of risk-informed urban planning, DRRM, and climate adaptation in cities (IPCC 2022). Yet, despite this growing rhetorical presence, the term remains under-scrutinised and underdeveloped in everyday, practical urban governance (Schlosberg 2007). 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 (Bulkeley et al. 2014).

Mainstream interpretations of justice, particularly those rooted in liberal theory, often adopt a universalist lens (Rawls 1971). 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 (Soja 2013). 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 (Fainstein 2016). 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” (Mustafa 2005, Sultana 2022).

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 (Young 2016 [1990]). While this shift is vital, it can also blur distinctions between procedural justice and participation practices, reducing justice to ‘making individuals and groups included in discussions’ (Cornwall 2008), rather than interrogating the deeper political structures and institutional arrangements that perpetuate exclusion from consequential decision-making (Hamdanieh et al. 2024).

This problem extends beyond the well-documented critiques of tokenistic participation (Arnstein 1969). It signals a need to unpack the origins, content, and operationalisation of justice narratives in urban governance: based on which understanding is justice 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 (Pelling 2011).

The core promise of justice - be it social, environmental, or climate-related (Schlosberg 2007) - 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 (Chu et al. 2016), while also attending to the systems and structures that enable or constrain justice across jurisdictions and scales.

Nancy Fraser’s work provides a simple and 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) (Fraser 2008). These must be interwoven, with parity of participation as the foundational principle – where all justice subjects are able to engage as equals in shaping decisions that affect them (Fraser 2009).

This framework has influenced environmental and climate justice scholarship, which has added further dimensions, including capabilities and ecological reflexivity (Schlosberg, 2007). Recent work in climate justice has brought these ideas further into the realm of practice. Parsons et al. (2024), 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 (Pacheco 2004), community-based natural resource management (Batterbury and Fernando 2006, Blaikie 2006), as well as DRR [Author3_2014, Marks and Lebel 2016]. 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 that are connected to increased multihazard risks. Misframing is a type of injustice that arises when the boundaries of political community or governance are drawn in ways that exclude certain groups, places, knowledge, or scales from being recognised as legitimate claimants of justice (Fraser 2009). 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 (Swyngedouw 2004). 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 (Marston 2000). 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 (Author 3_2014). 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 (2016) 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 mis-match between the scale at which responsibility is held and the scale at which power is held; and/or a mis-match 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 (Author1 et al_2023). These issues are by no means limited to DRM: in the context of Amazonian development, Brown and Purcell (2005) warn against the reification of the local scale as being inherently most desirable in addressing social and ecological challenges. Cash et al. (2006) similarly highlight the complex multi-scalar production of social-environmental challenges, and thus the need for progressive institutional responses acting 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.

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

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.

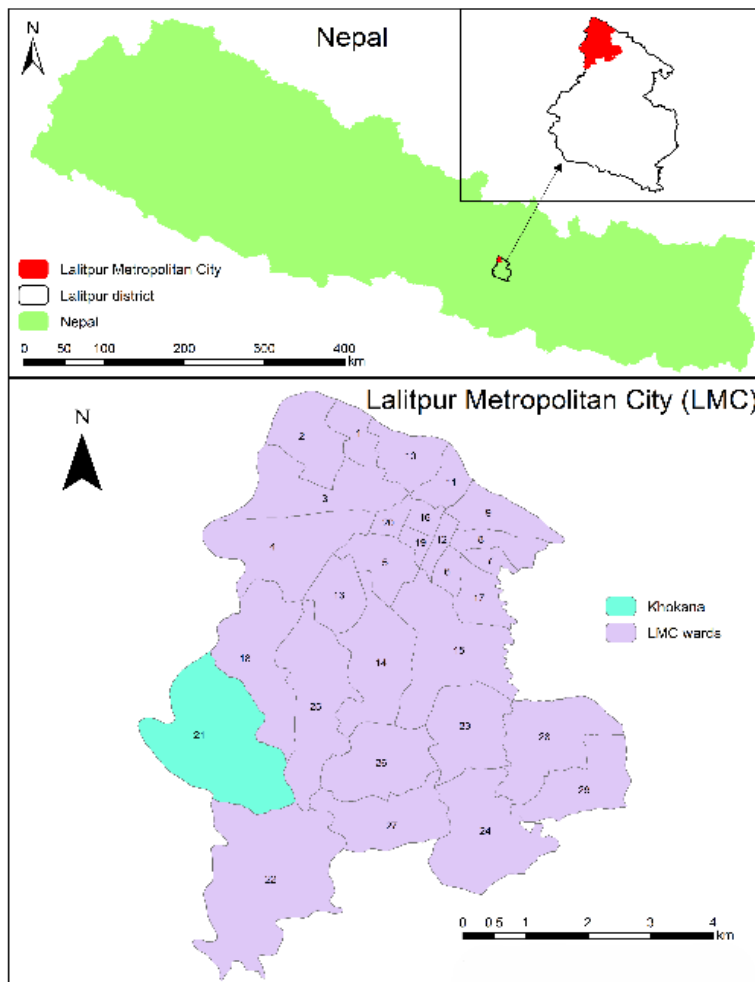
- A. Spatial and Policy Misframing: Occurs when there is a mismatch between the governance scale at which risk production occurs and the scale at which responsibility and capability is assigned.
- B. Representational Misframing: Relates to who counts as legitimate in (decentralised) decision making and 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. is there equity in how different forms of knowledge are utilised in decision-making (which 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 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 policy review, we deployed snowball sampling method to select respondents, identify internal community differences, and collect primary data. Firstly, to understand local socio-economic and risk contexts, we interviewed 22 households representing women, marginalised and migrants, and 3 Ward and 3 Municipal officials. This helped us to expand our network, to include socio-economically and politically weak and influential communities, and understand various relations with local government, individual views on participation, representation and role in local development endeavours, and their perception of the ongoing rapid and haphazard urban development and impacts. Secondly, we conducted Focused Group Discussions (7) with disaggregated groups from within Khokana that included households from women and marginalised, high-income families, migrants and *tahara* settlers (households in temporary settlements), households from a fire risk-prone settlement, households settled near a site for macro infrastructure development, and the members of Ward Disaster Management Committee (WDMC). We also conducted a participatory hazard mapping including local farmers. These FGDs helped us to learn collective and differentiated views on ongoing development activities, community participation, exclusion, the role of local government, local risk history and their impact on traditional practices and local agriculture-based livelihood (impacted by urbanisation). Thirdly, in parallel to FGDs, we engaged with the WDMC members, including representatives from the FGD participants, to facilitate ward-level policy discussions [Author1_2024a, Author2_2024]. We organised these engagements with local government and communities through iterative workshops (7) with participants that had already engaged in previous activities, drawing on the ethos of knowledge co-production (Geekiyanage et al. 2021, Ziervogel et al. 2021) [Author5_2015]. This co-production approach not only allowed us 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. in local risk management.

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) - a town with a rich culture, with one of the oldest temples and architecture in the Kathmandu Valley built in the 14th century. Although Khokana was annexed to Lalitpur Metropolitan City (LMC) in March 2017 as a part of federalisation process, it retains many rural characteristics even today, and is different to the core city wards in LMC. It is located at the southern edge of the Kathmandu Valley (665 sq km), where the Bagmati River ends and exits from the valley (see Map 1). Administratively, Khokana belongs to ward no. 21 of LMC and comprises around 5000 population (ca. 1000 households). Demographically, most of the population are *Jyapus* (farmers), with the caste Dangol and Maharjan holding most of the land and leading the local economy, politics, culture, and festivals. Kushle, Shahi, Napit and Kapali are the marginalised and socially low-ranked communities who depend on providing labour services to *jyapu* and facilitating their culture and festivals. Migrants, who comprise factory owners,

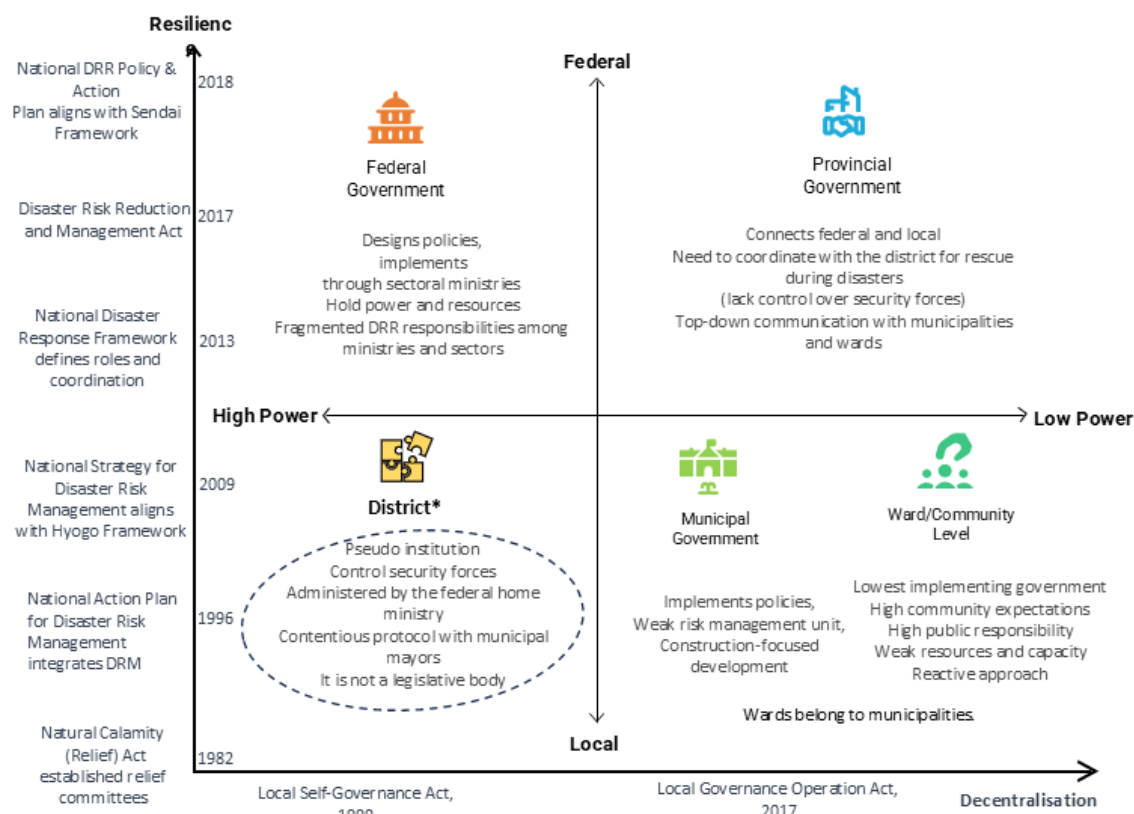
commercial farmers, wage labourers and *tahara* settlers, are the third category of communities. But they lack access to local culture and politics. Except for migrants, the two other categories (i.e., *gyapus* and low-ranked households) are collectively known as the Newar community in the Valley (see also Nepali 2015). More than four years (2019 – 2024) of field work engagements in Khokana enabled us to understand this complex environment and 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

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). In Nepal, historically, the Natural Calamity (relief) Act 1982 was the first of its kind enacted by the government, focusing on disaster management, which was replaced by the most recent DRRM Act in 2017. After the 2015 earthquake, the Nepal government issued several DRRM policies aligning international agreements such as HFA, SFA, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Accord 2015. The Nepal government designed and authorised DRRM institutions at multiple scales, ranging from central to local. 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 [Author1_2020] (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. The 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 the 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



* The *district* is a pseudo-institution in the DRRM sector in Nepal, as it is not a legislative body, 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 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 ranked higher in the government protocol, has hindered municipal leaders from attending the committee meetings, so mayors often avoid meetings, which has shrunk the possibilities for materialising creative coordination between municipalities and districts.

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

The Ward/community-level risk management operates through WDMC (DRRM, 2017). 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 with Wards for various planning and development purposes. The wards do not directly communicate with Province and Districts, they, being municipal subordinates, have to 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, which is around NPR 200,000 (around US\$1455).

In sum, whilst national disaster management policy in Nepal has gone a long way towards decentralisation, there are various functional barriers to the meaningful redistribution of decentralisation of power and agency in practice, and some acts and regulations which create ambiguities about roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, as we analyse 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 responsibilities for risk management at local scales. In other words, whilst responsibilities have been decentralised to local government, wards and communities, the drivers of risk creation exist at sites and scales that are 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 in Khokana

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 in which these decisions stemmed from uncoordinated levels of governance created a mismatch between the scales in which risk is produced, experienced and managed or potentially addressed, characterising spatial and policy misframing.

As documented by Poudel et al. (2023), 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. Firstly, 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. Secondly, the construction of *taharas* started being widespread, mainly in previously agricultural land. Although some *taharas* were constructed by the local earthquake (2015) victims for temporary residence, low-income households, wage labourers, and migrants have also constructed *taharas* for residential and small-scale commercial farming purposes. Thirdly, factory owners have bought/rented land and are running their businesses. Fourthly, land plotting is increasing mainly for residential purposes, so land speculation is growing. Finally, road construction (particularly a new Fast Track route) by both municipal and federal governments has accelerated new infrastructure (houses, hotels, restaurants) on both sides of the roads. Now, a significant part of agricultural land has been converted into residential areas and covered by construction and development activities (Photo 1).



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

These land use changes, and particularly the loss of agricultural land, not only impact maintaining traditional livelihoods but also Khokana's ability to deal with the flow of monsoon waters due to reduced infiltration and more rapid surface run-off. This has contributed to a significant increase of flood/inundation risk in Khokana, which compounds with increased landslide and earthquake-related risks, as many of the new and informal constructions are not following building codes (especially 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. With these changes, some areas in the southern Khokana have experienced both landslide and flooding in addition to continuous lateral erosion by the Bagmati River. The agriculture land and growing *tahara* settlements near the royal canal and its tributaries have already started experiencing inundation during monsoon. Importantly, these growing impacts are affecting mainly marginalised groups, migrants and cultural sites such as Shikali temple and cremation ground located near the river. Such everyday risks lack adequate attention by planners and infrastructure development agencies.

Khokana is characteristic of mismatches between the scale of risk drivers (through development pressures and investments in macro infrastructure) and risk manifestations (i.e., haphazard urbanisation in practice). This is a strong indicator of spatial and policy misframing, in which risk drivers are far removed from those everyday experiences – they are complex and multi scale. These drivers are a function of decisions, roles and responsibilities created through hierarchical government structures whereby authorities are decentralised without due consideration to the need for pragmatic coordination mechanisms between governments, and without equal access to resources, knowledge and technologies (see section IV). Several large projects are 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/no attention to landslide risks [Author1_2023]. These investments in development and construction have further attracted migrants and other 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 weak capacity and limited resources, is tasked with addressing multi-scale and multi-hazard risks with little 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 designing, and resource allocation - i.e. policy and spatial misframing - continue to reproduce vulnerabilities through urbanisation.

b. Representational misframing: conflicts with excluded and discontented communities

Whilst the local government in Khokana often publicly advocates for inclusivity and equal participation in policy and planning, in practice, there are underlying systems, biases, and power dynamics that 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. In Khokana, local communities are misframed by not being

involved in the macro visions at higher levels which significantly impact their everyday lives, and later blamed for the impacts of natural hazards. This was evident, for instance, in discussions with a migrant male, seeking support from the ward to manage the flood water that enters his house during monsoon. He complained about being dismissed by authorities, who said, *“how can you complain of inundation after building a house near the royal canal (Rajkulo)”*.

During interviews and FGDs, other local groups beyond migrants also expressed frustration with the ward’s misframing of roles and responsibilities, citing poor road conditions, drinking water problems, inadequate healthcare facilities, etc. A female health volunteer expressed her disappointment: *‘despite multiple requests for the repair and maintenance, the sub-health post remained in despair with roof leaks ruining stored medicines’*. According to these groups, their localised needs and requirements are often ‘less prioritised’ and ‘neglected’ in higher-level political or economic planning, exacerbating their vulnerability to disasters.

Furthermore, community members highlighted inadequate leadership in the WDMC and the Ward government to support local DRRM efforts effectively. The overburdened roles on day-to-day service delivery and budget constraints represent a major barrier to well-framed DRRM practices at the community level, as an expert highlighted in 2024. During an FGD in 2021, the WDMC participants said that factors contributing to the WDMC's dysfunction include a lack of meeting agendas and a clear disaster management plan that diminishes their motivation and effectiveness of rescue materials. Additionally, the lack of knowledge transfer has weakened the Ward’s capacity to act on their own scalar jurisdiction. An informant highlighted, *“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 the institutional memories of DRRM training and management practices are missing in WDMC, in addition to the budget and human resources constraints.

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 do not have effective representational channels or are lacking the tools and support to operate effectively. This is contributing 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 to be observed 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, "*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*", shared an expert in 2024. Additionally, according to LMC's DRR focal person, during meetings with the federal and provincial governments, discussions do engage with municipal DRR preparedness and research. But while 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 materialise 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 risk governance at the federal level is the persistent reliance on ad-hoc decision-making processes 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 using a committee-based method to make decisions encourages the exclusion of a diversity of risk knowledges which 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 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 complicate coordination among agencies. This fragmentation continues to hinder 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 is hindering knowledge recognition across scales. A government official working at the community level said that the communication between provinces, municipalities and wards is primarily top-down. This hierarchical thinking persists at all levels and governs their subordinates. For example, Federal authorities think Provinces have weak capacity, Provinces consider municipalities are weak in terms of handling budget and technologies, and Municipal officials think Wards lack capacities in several ways (technical, human resources, expertise, etc). A municipal official said that the Ward does not have the authority even to open their own bank account, so they should approach the municipality for reimbursement of the spent budget and also should deposit local taxes into the municipal bank account (MoFAGA 2017 [Article 12.C.33]). The municipality disperses the budget to all wards through annual policy and programs, which have a high chance of overlooking community/context-sensitive planning. This incomplete fiscal and capacity decentralisation further limits the role of wards and

communities in decision-making and in tackling local risks and haphazard urbanisation, echoing observations in Jamaica by Blackburn (2014) that perceptions of local government weakness can become self-perpetuating.

These observations are consistent with epistemic misframing, with the decentralised system is operating in a way that devalues local knowledge on risks and local priorities. Resources are being allocated according to assumptions (often coming 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 priorities and agendas. The wards thus face problems in translating knowledge to action due to capacity, resource constraints, and 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/poor participation of marginalised groups from critical macro-level decisions that lead to risk accumulation (representational misframing), and limited transferring of knowledge, technology, and coordination gaps across scales (epistemic misframing). These injustices, we argue, stem from a poor realisation of multilevel governance, constructing and perpetuating weak capacity among the Ward, the Ward Disaster Management Committee (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, 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, 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 tier 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 (temporary settlements) in Khokana are often excluded from higher-scale planning processes, denied/limited access to basic services, and blamed for risk creation. They fall through the cracks in multi-level governance systems that define 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 [Author1_2024]. Additionally, the decentralisation of risk governance is top-down, which is designed to meet the national need through guided formats and fulfilment of data required by the higher governments (see also Russell et al. 2021). Consequently, as our fieldwork in Khokana 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, both in municipalities and wards, overlooks everyday risks and local needs. They portray investment in risk reduction (i.e. minimising risks that have yet to be experienced) as a waste of money, so they focus on constructions with vested political interests to influence voters through materiality. This limits the ability to design responses that are rooted in actual risk dynamics on the ground.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has expanded the evidence base for injustices associated with decentralisation in the context of disaster risk governance, and advanced the conceptualisation of misframing through a three-part framework that enables its identification on the ground. The framework is flexible and its working in different contexts might lead to other configurations and concepts. In the context of Khokana, we have demonstrated 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 scales. Khokana, and Nepal more generally, is by no means unique in struggling to realise the potential of decentralisation. Anchored as it is in the meta-theory of misframing, it is likely that our framework will be equally applicable in other global south nations where risk management is not aligned with resource and knowledge sharing and lack coordination among authorities and actors at 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. Realising 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.

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 the 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 scaled 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/policy misframing.

From a practice perspective, these findings point to several directions for urban risk management in Nepal – and more widely in contexts of DRRM decentralisation policy and/or practice. Firstly, there needs to be enhanced recognition that processes of disaster risk creation are complex, multi-scalar, and intrinsically interconnected with urban development trajectories (Author1 et al_2023). 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 knowledges 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 passive 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.

Secondly, there needs to be the following functional reforms 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 intends for the 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., 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 the local government. A pragmatic sharing of finance, technology and human resources with local government - alongside authority, context-sensitive policy guidelines, functional participatory space, and a coordination 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, experiences, and knowledges 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, knowledges, 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 (e.g. Gaillard and Mercer 2012; Donovan 2016; Ramkumar 2022), however, in practice, there remains a considerable gap. 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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