

Compact Rural Settlement in Rammechhap: A Preliminary Study

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Daayitwa Summer Fellowship

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Rural Settlements in Nepal

Majorities of the Nepali live in rural parts of the country. The 2011 census estimates that four-out-of-five Nepali live in rural settlements. And ninety one percent of the people living in rural areas live in settlements of below 10,000. In sheer numbers, that amounted to almost eighteen million Nepalis in 2011 as per the census.

Not only the rural population emerges as a giant in terms of population figures but it also acts as the jugular vein to support the Nepali economy. The National Living Standard Survey (NLSS) III indicates that rural households consist of ninety one percent of agrarian land in the country. In a country where majority of the people are involved in agriculture, this number too significant to ignore.

Despite the overwhelming presence of its population in rural areas, Nepal has been unable to provide for basic facilities for its rural masses. As a result, the quality of life of Nepalis living in these areas is quite poor. The National Planning Commission estimates that one in four people in rural Nepal still live below the line of poverty.¹ More specifically, the rural mountain people are poorer than the those in the rural Hills, and the Terai. In the same report, the NPC estimates that more than seventy percent of the rural households live in “unhealthy and unsafe” settlements. Basic services such as electricity, phone and toilets are not available to an overwhelming majority of the rural population.

¹ More details on the National Planning Commission policy brief on Compact Rural Settlement in Nepal published in January 2013.

This scenario of the rural Nepal has become a major challenge to address for Nepali policymakers. In recent days, they have come up with numerous policies, plans and schemes that focus on alleviating the poverty in rural Nepal. One of such proposed policies is the creation of clustered rural settlements. Honorable Shyam Kumar Shrestha, the supervisor of this project, is also keen on exploring this prospect for his electoral area in Rammechhap.

Compact Rural Settlements (CRS)

CRS envisions clustering scattered rural settlements so that the population living in such unified settlements could get “basic services and livelihood opportunities”(NPC Report, 2013, referenced above in note 1). This paper is going to focus on CRS in hilly Nepal. In particular, it is going to look at Rammechhap district as an example. Although analyzing the prospects of CRSs in the mountains and the Terai are of importance too; such analyses lie beyond the scope of this paper.

As this is a preliminary study, this will focus on identifying the factors that policymakers should take care of with regard to establishing CRS in the district. This is crucial because both the NPC, and the District Development Committee Rammechhap, hereafter referred to as DDC, have explicitly stated that creating CRS is one of their priorities in the future. Thus a preliminary study will be a helpful starting point for policymakers before they venture out on taking concrete policy actions.

Rammechhap

Rammechhap lies in the hilly region of Nepal. Administratively it is located in the Central Region in Janakpur Zone. The district occupies an area of 1564.32 sq. km.

Rammechhap has fifty-five Village Development Committees which lie under two electoral regions. Honorable Shyam Kumar Shrestha represents Electoral Region Number Two.

Aligning with the national trend, the majority of the people in Rammechhap are involved in agriculture. More than eighty six percent of the people cite agriculture as their primary occupation. Ethnically though the district is quite diverse. Chettries (26.44%), Tamangs (20.56%), Newars (14.09%), Magars (10.92%) and Brahmins (5.83%) are the major inhabitants of the district. Although majority (56.60%) speak Nepali as their first language, almost one in five of the district dwellers speak Tamang as their native language.²

² Read Rammechhap Yearly Development Plan- 2069/70 for more details.

Methodology

This study lasted for approximately two months and used a variety of techniques. I visited the field, contacted both national and local experts, and met with locals during the course of the research. I conducted both formal and informal interviews for this research. These interviews lasted anywhere from twenty-one minutes to fifty minutes. The interviews were carried out in Kathmandu, Betali, Manthali, and Pharhpu. The formal interviews focused on identifying the factors that associate with people residing in their current places.

The first field visit involved trips to Betali VDC (two days), Pharpu VDC (three days) and Manthali municipality, the headquarters (one day). During this field visit, I interacted with locals and met with government officials. During my stay in Manthali, I met with the Chief District Officer (CDO), the Assistant CDO, and the Local Development Officer, from the district. I also went to a youth entrepreneurship training camp conducted by a local NGO in Gelu VDC. The second trip lasted for three days and included interviews mostly with the locals from the Betali, and few adjacent VDCs.

While in Kathmandu, I conducted desk research based in Daayitwa's office. I also met with national experts including a Vice Chairperson of the National Planning Commission, an ex-Secretary for Urban Development and Planning and a researcher from the Kathmandu University (KU). There were multiple ongoing interactions with honorable Shyam Kumar Shrestha during the process.

Factors Influencing CRS in Rammechhap

Socio-Economic Factors

There is a great diversity of socio-economic class in the district. One of the crucial factors that determine the socio-economic class of a person is the amount of landholding. It can be generally said that the more land a person has the higher the socio-economic status of a person. Although this comes with qualifications including the location of the land, productivity, distance from a motorway and various other factors, more landholding as an indicator of higher socio-economic status generally seemed to apply in Betali and in Pharpu. Those with little land, with the production enough to feed their families for not more than three-six months, were generally positive about resettlement issues.

Cultural Factors

Although caste and religion based discrimination is less dominant than it used to be few years back, explicit discrimination still do exist in Rammechhap. This could lead to social disharmony if CRS policies are not culturally sensitive. For instance, I found that many so-called “untouchables” in Betali had converted to Christianity. The “upper-caste” Hindus in the village, mostly Chhetris, would minimize trade with the converts. In a pre-dominant Chhetri society where some form of barter trade still exists, this puts the “dalits” in great difficulty. Putting the converts, be them “dalits” or even “non –dalits” is likely to prompt a major discontent among many “upper-caste” Hindus in Betali.

Other Factors

Factors such as political affiliations and the access to pre-existing basic services also play a role in determining whether or not people are willing to locate. At least in Betali, I found that party loyalties play a crucial role in figuring out which policies to support and which to resist. A policy brought forth by a parliamentarian of one party is likely to get opposition from the other parties in the local areas and this can be at times vehement in areas where the opposition has a stronghold.

Similarly, people living next to a major roadway seemed generally indifferent to the prospect of CRS whereas those living faraway from the roadway were generally enthusiastic, albeit with some skepticism. The challenge for policymakers is that the settlements along the roadway are scattered and it might be difficult for them to convince those settlers to resettle.

Recommendations to Honorable Shyam Kumar Shrestha

Encourage Further Research

At the present moment there is a dearth of research material on the issue of CRS in Nepal, let alone one focusing in Rammechhap. This study is a preliminary one. It took a month and a half of research to understand the policy underpinnings, bureaucratic workings and find a suitable research question. Finding a puzzle that was feasible to resolve in two months challenging. Although this study has does not provide concrete solutions to CRS, it does identify and address some issues that policymakers are grappling to deal with.

In order for the policies of CRS to be sustainable, it is critical that the policies are evidence based. The Honorable is in a privileged position to lobby for further research and study in the topic. It could be done in multiple ways. Two are listed below:

- 1) Approach specific departments of national universities and lobby for government funding to these departments on research topic related to CRS.
- 2) Lobbying to create a department within one of the ministries that undertakes action-research related to CRS and related topics is another way.

Use Authority to Bridge the Gap

The Honorable has diverse and extensive contacts in government, political parties, local areas, and in other sectors. He could leverage that to connect different actors interested in CRS and bring them together. Using his authority as a representative of the people and his political and social capital he can use his position to further the agenda of CRS.

In particular, I found that local youths and the police personnel have extensive knowledge about the region. Linking these two key forces with the DDC and NPC policymakers might be crucial as the policymakers can make use of local knowledge and expertise, which are crucial for sustainability of any development project.

Use Rebuilding as an Opportunity

The CDO office in Ramechhap estimates that around ninety percent houses in Ramechhap are destroyed from the major quake in April. With the reconstruction and rebuilding phase kicking off, it is now an apt time for the Honorable to attract the attention of national policymakers to think about CRS issue and the necessity of conducting further research on a local level. Moreover, many people in the district now are looking to rebuild or repair their homes. With an evidence-based policy, it would be easier for the Honorable to convince the public of the benefits of CRS.

However it comes with a warning that establishing CRS without adequate research might bring complex socio-economic, cultural and political problems. Also implicit in the report is the assumption that active public participation of the public in the policy drafting process is crucial for people to take ownership. After all, they are the ones who have to first accept the policy and then resettle.

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