

## Understanding Public Trust in Disaster Governance: Three Cases from Nepal's Mountain Region

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### Abstract

*In policy level, Nepal's climate governance is fully equipped with the required institutional and administrative arrangements and holds the capacity to manage and minimize the effects of climate disasters. However, there is a concern how these arrangements are translated into actions in the time of disaster and what implications does it have on the public trust and their sense of security. To understand this human security dynamics of trust, this paper examines the climate governance, public trust, and human security through three climate-induced disasters in the mountain region of Nepal's Bagmati Province: the 2021 Melamchi Flood, the 2024 Kathmandu Flood, and the 2025 Rasuwa Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF). Drawing on ethnographic accounts, media reports, and institutional perspectives, the study explores how the state's reactive disaster governance has eroded citizens' trust in public institutions. In Melamchi, local early warnings mitigated casualties, yet prolonged displacement and delayed compensation revealed weak institutional commitment to recovery. The Kathmandu flood exposed the lack of political*

*will to preventive urban planning, where encroachment, poor drainage, and inconsistent enforcement deepened both physical and social vulnerabilities. The Rasuwa GLOF extended this crisis of trust beyond borders, as the absence of early warning and data-sharing from upstream China underscored Nepal's limited sovereignty in managing transboundary risks. Across these cases, disaster governance appeared visible but superficial, more performative than protective, reflecting systemic gaps between planning and practice. It argues that human insecurity in Nepal's climate context arises not only from environmental threats but also from declining public trust in the country's climate governance which is rooted in failures to anticipate risks and act with transparency and accountability. Therefore, building trust, both vertically between state and citizens and horizontally across communities and borders, emerges as a critical foundation for ensuring human security in the context of rising climate disaster in the mountain communities in Nepal.*

## **Introduction**

Nepal's climate governance is fully equipped with the required institutional arrangements and holds the capacity to undertake various actions to manage and minimize the effects of the climate disasters. The government of Nepal has expressed its full commitment to manage the climate disaster giving it a top priority by ratified global climate agreements, such as the Paris Climate Accord, and adopted national frameworks including the Second Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and the National Adaptation Plans (Karki, et al., 2021). To undertake the disaster related actions and responsibilities, it has also formulated required legal guidance and institutional mechanisms. A central legal guidance for the functioning of the climate governance is the *Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act (2074/2017)* to undertake preparedness, response, relief, and recovery related to the disaster. It assign the *Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA)* as the lead coordinating body. As the institutional structure there is a *Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council* (chaired by the Prime Minister) at the national level that sets national policy (MoHA, 2023). There is also an *Executive Committee* (chaired by the Home Minister) implements policies and decisions. Another important institution is *National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA)* that functions under MoHA as the technical and coordinating body for research, planning, preparedness, and implementation (Karki, et al., 2021).

Likewise, there is a *National Emergency Operation Center (NEOC)* which manages information, early warning, rescue, and relief coordination. Similarly, there are institutional set up similar to national level at provincial, district and local levels and executive

committee to manage the disaster. The major activities of these institutions are grouped into *preparedness, response, recovery* and *coordination*. The major activities within the preparedness are; early warning systems, monsoon preparedness plans, stockpiling relief materials, and training of rescue teams (including Nepal Police, Armed Police Force and Nepal Army). As the response, the major activities are; rescue, relief, humanitarian aid management, and coordination with NGOs, UN agencies, Red Cross, and community organizations (MoHA, 2023). The recovery activities are; rehabilitation, reconstruction, psycho-social counseling, and livelihood restoration. Finally, the coordination includes the emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration across government levels, private sector, and international partners. However, how these various institutional arrangements, including the authorities and their capacities are translated into action in the time of disasters and able to ensure the safety of the lives and properties are the key concerns to calibrate the performance of the climate governance.

In this regard, the sense of security of the people in any development project is coming at the center stage including in disaster management. In other words, as there is high public trust in state institutions, the sense of security among the vulnerable population has also gone higher (Tom, 2017; Uprety, 2025 & UNDP, 2022). In contrast, if there is a low level of trust among the people over the state authorities, the sense of security has also gone decline (Gómez, 2022). Based on this explanation, the sense of security can be utilized to calibrate the performance of the climate governance as in other development projects. Therefore, this paper places people's trust in governance as a central dynamic of human security in the context of understanding the performance of climate governance in Nepal. How is the situation of people's trust on public institutions in the context of climate governance in Nepal? Closer examination of the recent scholarship on climate disaster and learning from the empirical cases can satisfy this question partially, if not completely.

### **Review of Literature**

Scholars have approached the climate governance from various perspectives in the Himalayan context. Agrawal (2022) approaches the climate governance through an examination of *climate financing and institutional accountability*. His study traces the evolution of Nepal's climate governance framework; from the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA, 2010) and the Local Adaptation Plan of Action (LAPA, 2011) to the more recent Climate Change Financing Framework (CCFF, 2017) and National Adaptation Plan (NAP, 2021–2050). Agrawal finds that while Nepal has made significant institutional progress in mobilizing climate finance, the translation of funds into tangible

local results remains limited. This is due to systemic issues such as weak coordination, lack of ownership among local governments, and low fund absorption capacity (Agrawal, 2022). In contrast, Bishwokarma et al. (2021) observe the lack of localization of the national policies at the community level which directly affects the trust relationship between citizens and the state. Therefore, they propose a more structured model of *localization of climate governance* through their *four-pillar framework*: (1) policy and institutional arrangements, (2) communication and strategic partnership, (3) resource and implementation mechanisms, and (4) monitoring, evaluation, and reporting.

Nixon et al. (2025) also observe the erosion of trust than the better performance of the institutional design itself. It is because the lack of understating the local context such as “whose knowledge counts” and how local governance systems mediate between diverse social actors. In disaster situations, as Nixon et al. (2025) emphasize that climate adaptation is *context-specific* and its outcomes depend on navigating the *political dynamics of governance* both vertically (across national and local levels) and horizontally (across communities, NGOs, and private actors).

Karki et al. (2021) also indicate the lack of people's trust on the climate centrally controlled climate governance. They argue that enhancing the adaptive capacity of local governments and fostering partnerships among communities, civil society, and state institutions are central to effective disaster governance. This approach underscores the need for *institutional synergy* and *collaborative learning*; both of which are critical to building long-term resilience and restoring public trust in local governance mechanisms. Their study stresses that the effectiveness of local action depends on capacity-building and the ability of local governments to coordinate across sectors and leverage resources.

Finally, a study on the perception of vulnerable families along the Koshi Riverbank by Shrestha and Chaudhary (2021) provides an important empirical lens for understanding the relationship between citizens and disaster governance institutions in Nepal. They show that multiple formal early warning mechanisms exist, including alerts from the Department of Hydrology and Meteorology, the Ministry of Home Affairs, mobile phone companies, and local governments. However, these formal mechanisms have limited influence on the actual evacuation decisions of local people (Shrestha & Chaudhary, 2021). Instead, the local residents tend to rely on informal communication channels such as relatives, neighbors, and local observers (e.g., the “red flag” warning system). This behavioral pattern signals a crisis of trust in state-led communication; people do not believe that official messages are timely, accurate, or relevant to their lived realities.

Shrestha and Chaudhary (2021) also highlight that the past experiences with unreliable or exaggerated flood warnings have eroded people's confidence in institutional forecasts. Because warning messages are often framed in probabilistic or technical terms (“probability of rainfall”), local people perceive them as uncertain and not actionable (Shrestha & Chaudhary, 2021). Consequently, the credibility gap between formal disaster communication and local experience widens, leading to reactive rather than preventive evacuation behaviors. This finding shows that trust is a central dimension of disaster governance which can enhance the sense of security among the local people and significantly influence the disaster mitigation plans.

Taken together, these studies reveal a complex picture of disaster and climate governance in Nepal. Agrawal (2022) highlights the financial and institutional gaps that undermine credibility of the central authorities. Bishwokarma et al. (2021) observe the lack of localization of the national policies, whereas Nixon et al. (2025) and Karki et al. (2021) finds that the climate policies and plans formulated in the state level do not fit in the local contexts. Furthermore, Shrestha and Chaudhary (2021) exposes the structural fragmentation of governance, and indicate a crisis of trust in state-led communication system. All these studies indicate that there is serious gap rhetoric and realities of climate governance of the country which must have minimized the people's trust in the climate institutions. To get even a deeper level of understanding of the situation in the specific context, the following section examines three selected specific disaster cases occurred in last 5 years between 2021 to 2025 in the mountain region of central Nepal in Bagmati Province. The selected cases of disaster for this study are: the 2021 Melamchi flood, the 2024 Kathmandu flood, and the 2025 Rasuwa Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF), each representing a different nature of disaster occur in the entire Himalayan arch of South Asia.

### **Research Methodology**

This is a qualitative research on the climate governance. It examines the purposively selected three cases of climate disasters occurred in the last 5 years between 2021 to 2025 in the mountain region of central Nepal in Bagmati Province. The selected cases of disaster for this study are; the 2021 Melamchi flood, the 2024 Kathmandu flood, and the 2025 Rasuwa GLOF representing different geographies and sociopolitical context of the region. Each of the case has its specific type and trigger. And, it has its specific impacts and underlying causes. It has been assumed that these cases represent the latest phenomena of climate disasters occurring in the region.

The study adopts ethnographic approach to collect primary and secondary data in relation to the cases of the disaster. Among them, the major sources include narratives and reactions on social media, local and national news reports, institutional records, and targeted interviews with affected residents and local authorities. By triangulating these perspectives, the paper offers a grounded understanding of how trust in governance is constructed and contested during times of crisis, and what this reveals about the everyday human security of the marginal communities living in the mountain region of Nepal. A hypothesis is that during the time of disaster public expresses distrust on the institutions and authorities of the state. The latest Microsoft Word processing and various AI tools were utilized to analyze the data.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The ethnographic details generated for this study are presented in selected three cases of disaster below. It also examines how the agencies responded and public reacted to them as the key findings of this study.

#### **Melamchi Flood (Jun, 2021)**

In June 2021, the Melamchi region of Sindhupalchok and Rasuwa districts witnessed one of the most devastating climate-induced disasters in recent memory. Though monsoon rainfall had just begun across Nepal, the magnitude and scale of destruction in Melamchi stunned experts and locals alike. Flood affected local resident reported that about 40 people died and few were missing, over 450 families were displaced, 46 houses, eight resorts and multiple bridges were swept away, trout farms and marketplaces were submerged, and entire neighborhoods were inundated with mud and debris (Mandal, 2021). Despite official rainfall data indicating only moderate precipitation in the region, the floodwaters rose to the first floors of buildings and left behind a catastrophic trail.

What unfolded in Melamchi was not a typical monsoon flood. Experts noted that the recorded rainfall levels in the affected areas were not sufficient to explain the scale of destruction. This pointed to deeper, systemic vulnerabilities rooted in the region's geology, legacy of 2015's earthquakes, and unregulated development practices (Acharya, et. al., 2015). Years of unchecked resource exploitation, road construction, and hydropower infrastructure development had significantly destabilized the fragile hillsides (ICIMOD, 2021). The flooding was likely caused by landslides blocking the river upstream, creating temporary dams that eventually burst, releasing massive waves of debris-laden water at intervals. This pattern represented a new and alarming type of disaster, one that was complex, unpredictable, and not easily attributable to natural causes alone.

In the days leading up to the flood in Melamchi, residents living along the upstream of the Melamchi River noticed unusual sedimentation and a sharp rise in the river's flow. Word spread quickly across local networks: through phone calls, social media, and direct warnings shouted from one settlement to another. As one local resident put it, *"We heard from our relatives in the upper village that the river was rising fast. That was our only warning, no message came from the central government."* The early communication among villagers and the coordinated efforts by local residents and municipal authorities significantly reduced casualties. Many families managed to save essential documents, jewelry, and small cash savings before the floodwaters reached their homes.

In the immediate aftermath, local authorities and national agencies, including the Nepal Army and Armed Police, engaged in rescue operations that saved hundreds of lives. But the response plan was not effective to ensure the quick and better relief. The agencies involved in relief operations without any coordination. A local municipal officer candidly admitted, *"There is slow response, blame-shifting among agencies, and poor relocation plans. Policies and action plans exist on paper, but implementation remains superficial and inconsistent."* The officer further explained that national agencies cited budgetary constraints and procedural bottlenecks, while many local governments lacked concrete disaster management plans. Even when Melamchi Municipality formulated its own local response plan, *"lack of integration and support from higher levels of government reduced its effectiveness."*

Many victims reported receiving minimal support; mostly small cash installments or temporary shelter assistance. A university student from Melamchi who was living in Kathmandu during the disaster recalled it after four years of the disaster:

"There were large numbers of people and huge media trials, but the support was not going to the needy families properly. The municipality provided one installment of 25 thousand, but it was minimal support. Hundreds of families are still living temporarily and may downgrade their economic status for a long time to come."

She further explained that more than 150 families were still living in rented and temporary houses in nearby communities, unable to rebuild their homes in their original location. One victim replied:

"It is the local municipality that has supported few cash in the beginning and supporting for materials to live and construct the houses. But that is all very insignificant. We are doing by ourselves trying to come back and getting involved in various other livelihoods."

The slow and uneven recovery process has deepened social resentment. Discussion with the locals of Melamchi revealed that the number of local youths seeking jobs outside the community has already gone high and the seeker for foreign employment has also increased.

As one displaced household head expressed in frustration, *“We are waiting for the government to come, but they only come with promises, not solutions. Those who suffered have to bear the dukkha (suffering) alone.”*

This examination of the ethnographic details on the Melamchi Flood above show that the informal, community-based early warning system and the measures adopted by the local municipality were the first line of defense for downstream communities. But the pre-position of the relief materials, and well coordinated mechanism across different levels of government did not take place (DPNet, 2023). Consequently, the dozens of people lost their lives and there was a huge loss of properties. Likewise, the relief and recovery process took longer time. Displaced families could not feel safe for the long time after disaster and their trust with the institutions eroded severely. In moments of crisis, people expect the state to act as a protector and guarantor of safety. When that expectation is unmet, trust collapses. As observed during field conversations in Melamchi even after the years of disaster, many residents spoke of their experience not as a “natural disaster,” but as a “failure of disaster governance.”

### **Kathmandu Urban Flood (September, 2024)**

The second case of climate disaster selected for this study is the urban flood of Kathmandu that occurred in the region in the late September 2024. Just days before Nepal’s major festive season, the Kathmandu Valley witnessed one of the most intense urban flooding events in its recorded history of more than five decades. Between 27 and 28 September, 2024 the Kathmandu flood led to widespread flooding, road blockages, disrupting transportation, agriculture, livelihoods and public safety. The Nepali Times (2024) reported that triggered by a large-scale low-pressure system over northern India and a secondary cyclonic disturbance over western India, the region was bombarded with over 700 mm of rainfall in just 30 hours; equivalent to nearly half of the valley's annual average.

The NDRRMA reported 246 deaths, 183 injuries and 18 missing while more than 17,000 people rescued on these two days (UNCT, Nepal, 2024). Another field report on the flood has mentioned over 10,000 families displaced, nearly 6,000 homes destroyed, and more than 13,000 partially damaged widespread landslides, debris flows, river overflows,

and infrastructural destruction across central Nepal, in Bagmati Province with 249 deaths and 177 injuries officially recorded (KC, 2025). Vulnerable groups, especially low-income families and informal settlers along the marginal areas of the Valley such as in riverbank and flood prone areas, bore the brunt of the disaster. What should have been a time of celebration and community gathering turned into a harrowing episode of displacement, loss, and despair. Streets became rivers, homes turned to mud, and families scrambled for safety as waters surged through the valley with terrifying speed.

The government of Nepal had led all the humanitarian and early rescue and recovery efforts in response to the flood including national and international agencies. The initial efforts concentrated on search and rescue, life saving, damage assessments and the provision of emergency shelter. It was reported that during the flooding in the Valley, over 3,000 security personnel were deployed (Ghimire, 2024). There were rafts and also aerial rescues for the people stranded by the floods. Likewise, the rescue from boats and using ropes were done in the midst of the flood.

The Nepali Times (2024) had further reported:

“Security personnel have rescued 2,103 people, nearly 1,500 of them in Kathmandu Valley from the flooded areas with the help of other rescue agencies. Nepal Army helicopters were used to pluck stranded people from rooftops and river banks in the Valley.”

There is no doubt that the rescue operations conducted immediately after the flooding helped to save hundreds of lives and huge amount of properties. However, the overall effectiveness of the disaster governance did not turn satisfactory to the public in responding the flood including early warning system and coordinated efforts to conduct early responses and recovery plan. Though the response and recovery operations in the Valley was far more easier than in the Melamchi and it was the center of the country and highly accessible geography to conduct rescue operations public in the wide range have criticized the authorities.

Residents across the Kathmandu and Lalitpur, particularly those in low-lying settlements along the Bagmati, Bishnumati, and Nakkhu rivers, reported that official evacuation orders came only after floodwaters had already entered their homes. One local trader from Lalitpur, who lost her shop near the Nakkhu River, voiced her frustration: “*I lost my shop in Lalitpur to the floods. We live near Nakkhu River because it’s all we can afford. No body told me about the flood before.*”

While understanding the causes of the huge losses and damages just in two days we need to consider the disaster in a holistic perspective. An expert in the field posted a photo of the flood in Bagmati and wrote, *"the flood havoc of 28 September 2024 is an extreme example of encroachment of the waterway of all rivers inside Kathmandu Valley, greatly damaging infrastructures and lives."*

Another expert in the field of urban planning put his thoughts in a personal conversation (with the author) that it was not only the rain but the causes of the catastrophe were multiple and overlapping including government's delayed warning system and the absence of anticipatory planning. A municipal engineer interviewed after the flood admitted that *"plans for drainage improvement and flood zoning have existed for years, but political instability and lack of coordination stalled everything."*

Likewise, the local activists and journalists were particularly vocal in highlighting institutional complicity in social media posts. One widely shared post of 29 September, 2024 by a social activist following the disaster read: *"Kathmandu is drowning again! 322mm rain in 24 hrs, worst since 1970. Why are we still building structures on Bagmati riverbanks? Govt needs to stop approving these projects!"*.

Another widely circulated post lamented: *"Bagmati River swallowed homes in south Kathmandu. Unplanned urban sprawl and sand mining made this worse. When will Nepal learn?"*

A sarcastic post by an widely known opinion maker of the Valley read: *"Many thanks to the Sand Mafias; this is happening right now. The 365 days of unrestrained, uncontrolled sand extraction are causing this erosion and flooding. I hope you have a peaceful life sand extractors and buyers."*

Local residents were indicating their fingers to the government institutions for the losses. During the field study in Lalitpur in the aftermath of the 2024 Kathmandu flood, a local schoolteacher reflected on how the disaster had reshaped the economic landscape of the community. Sitting beside the partially submerged fields along the Nakkhu River, he described how the flood had eroded both livelihoods and aspirations;

*"The people who came to the Valley looking for a better life, those who bought small plots near the river, built homes, started small farms or shops, are now left with nothing. They invested everything here, and in one night, they became poor again. There is no compensation that can ever cover these losses. The land has lost its value, and so have the opportunities."*

He pointed toward the upstream of the Nakkhu river down from Ranibu in Lalitpur and continued:

“And where is the government now? It came with cameras and officials during the rescue—but even that was delayed. This time, the state failed to rescue on time. I heard of a family nearby; they climbed to their roof and kept shouting for help as the floodwater surrounded them from all sides. No one came. They all died.”

He further added:

“This is not just about one flood. It’s the long-term consequence of land grabbing and the commodification of the land. The land mafia took control of the riverbanks and sold them to low-income families. And now, once again, it is the poor who are paying the price.”

Such sentiments capture the wider erosion of trust between the public and state institutions; a trust that depends not merely on post-disaster rescue, but on credible, inclusive, and preventive governance. Although emergency responses were swift in the aftermath in many areas of the Valley, with temporary shelters established and financial relief distributed to some victims, the larger public discourse emphasized that these were reactive gestures. The government’s reliance on “firefighting governance” revealed structural weaknesses long embedded in Kathmandu’s urban development model. The digital expressions of grief and accusation form an emerging ethnography of distrust, show how citizens publicly negotiate their insecurity in real time. What emerges is a collective recognition that the flood was not merely a hydrological disaster but a failure of governance foresight.

### **Rasuwa GLOF (July, 2025)**

The third and the final case of disaster to examine the people's trust in public institutions for this study is the Rasuwa GLOF of July 8, 2025, the most recent among the selected ones. The GLOF unfolded when a wall of water and debris tore through the Rasuwa district in northern Nepal, obliterating infrastructure, claiming lives, and severing one of the country’s primary cross-border links with China. In just minutes, the Miteri Bridge, Nepal’s vital economic artery with the north, was swept away. Within hours, customs yards, police outposts, hydropower plants, and entire stretches of highway had vanished and twenty individuals were confirmed missing from the customs area alone (Lord, 2025). Bodies were recovered far from the downstream, attesting to the force and reach of the flash flood.

Unlike previous water-induced disasters triggered by heavy rainfall, this flood occurred without warning; there had been no rain at all. Satellite data and hydrological readings confirmed a sudden spike in river levels at the Timure and Syafrubesi stations between 3:00 and 3:30 a.m., supporting what would later be confirmed: this was a GLOF (Glacial Lake Outburst Flood), triggered by the collapse of a supraglacial lake that had formed rapidly on the Chinese side of the Himalayas, specifically near the Puripu Glacier (Shrestha, 2025).

Experts termed this flood as a transboundary hydrometeorological disaster; a grim demonstration of how climate change does not adhere to national borders. The glacial lake that burst began forming as a meltwater pond in December 2024, swelling rapidly through June 2025 (Lord, 2025). Experts from ICIMOD, an international agency working in the Himalayan region since more than 30 years, noted that these supraglacial lakes, often unstable and formed on the surface of debris-covered glaciers, are notoriously hard to monitor and can collapse without external triggers such as earthquakes or heavy rain (NSO, 2025). Their increasing prevalence in the Himalayas is a direct consequence of warming temperatures and melting glaciers—global phenomena with deeply local consequences.

Local responder described the scene as *“a sudden wall of water that came without a sound or signal,”* and survivors recounted waking to the sound of exploding debris rather than any official alert. One local trader met in Kathmandu said: *“We didn’t even know the flood was coming. It came from the mountains, not from the sky. Nobody warned us; not the government, not the border people. Everything was gone in minutes.”*

Digital ethnography from the time amplifies this frustration. A post on 24 July, 2025 gave counted the immediate loss and damages, *“Impact: – 20+ dead (Nepali & Chinese) – Homes, bridges, hydropower plants (200 MW lost), damaged; Dry port & trucks swept away. Even the vital Nepal-China Friendship Bridge was destroyed.”*

Another widely circulated post on 24 July, 2025 declared: *“Himalayan Alarm: Rasuwa Flood. Nepal’s Rasuwa district faced a deadly flood; not from rain, but from a glacial lake outburst in Tibet. A wake-up call from the melting Himalayas.”*

As one activist summarized in a viral post of the following day of the disaster: *“Experts urge: Cross-border early warning systems. Climate-resilient infrastructure. Urgent regional cooperation. The Rasuwa flood is a glimpse of what unchecked glacier melt can unleash.”* Social media further reflected this frustration with reactive governance. One post called for immediate reform, *“the mountains are melting, but our governments are frozen.”*

This testimony from the Rasuwa GLOF reveals a profound sense of abandonment and uncertainty among borderland residents, sharply shaking public confidence in the state's capacity to anticipate, coordinate, and govern climate-induced risks. These capacities; early warning, cross-border communication, and institutional preparedness remain largely underdeveloped within Nepal's existing disaster governance architecture. The erosion of trust is not confined to affected communities alone; people across the country expressed heightened insecurity as scientists, experts, and climate activists publicly questioned not only the state's reactive response but, more critically, its failure to foresee and prevent foreseeable harm. From a human security perspective, the Rasuwa GLOF demonstrates how environmental insecurity transcends political boundaries, while governance responsibility remains territorially constrained. In such contexts, public trust becomes fragile, as citizens confront the limits of state authority in managing transboundary climate risks, leaving communities exposed not only to natural hazards but also to institutional uncertainty and political inaction.

This study brings three distinct cases of disaster undertook in different geographic and socio-political context together to understand how government responses and public reactions shape trust in disaster governance and, ultimately, human security. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during and after disasters, media reports, and social media narratives, the study adopted a form of *multi-sited* and *digital ethnography*. This methodological approach is particularly significant for examining trust, as public confidence or distrust is often articulated not only in face-to-face encounters but also through mediated and online spaces during moments of crisis.

Across all three cases, a striking pattern emerges: while people consistently acknowledged and expressed trust in immediate rescue efforts; such as helicopter evacuations, security personnel risking their lives, and emergency extractions from rooftops or riverbanks, there was little evidence of public recognition of successful climate or disaster governance. It shows that trust is momentary and situational, attached to visible acts of rescue rather than to planned preparedness, institutional coordination, or long-term recovery strategies. It does not mean the is to place priority on the momentary and situational acts but people were completely missing or simply unaware about the planned prevention, early warning, risk communication, and rehabilitation strategies of the authorities.

In Melamchi, local-level coordination (with local government) and informal warning systems, particularly information shared by upstream residents, played a crucial role in saving lives. This highlights the relative strength of horizontal trust within communities

compared to vertical trust in state institutions. However, ethnographic conversations conducted years after the disaster reveal a significant decline in trust over time. Delayed compensation, unresolved relocation, and prolonged displacement of affected families undermined any opportunity to rebuild confidence in governance.

The Kathmandu flood illustrates how trust deficits are produced in the unplanned and densely urbanized contexts. Despite the large-scale mobilization of security forces and rapid rescue operations, public reactions emphasized bureaucratic inertia, fragmented accountability, and the absence of preventive governance. The revocation of zoning regulations, unregulated riverbank encroachments, and outdated drainage infrastructure became focal points of public anger. Their voices; often excluded from urban planning, re-emerged powerfully through social media and personal testimonies, expressing loss, frustration, and a profound sense of abandonment. The Rasuwa GLOF extended the crisis of trust beyond national boundaries. The lack of transboundary data sharing and early warning mechanisms with China exposed the limitations of Nepal's domestically oriented disaster governance architecture. In this case, trust erosion was not only vertical (citizens–state) or horizontal (among domestic stakeholders) but also external, raising doubts about the state's capacity to protect citizens in a shared and interdependent Himalayan ecology.

Taken together, these cases support the hypothesis that public expressions of distrust intensify during and after disasters, particularly when institutions appear reactive, opaque, and uncoordinated. Trust, as revealed through ethnographic evidence, is not an abstract attitude but a lived and performative relationship which is built through credible warnings, transparent and participatory decision-making, and equitable recovery, and eroded through delay, silence, exclusion and politicization.

## **Conclusion**

The three selected disaster cases (Melamchi, Kathmandu, and Rasuwa) demonstrate that climate disasters in Nepal are not solely environmental events but deeply political and institutional moments that test the foundations of public trust and human security. Despite differences in scale, geography, and triggers, all three disasters expose a shared governance pattern characterized by reactive responses, fragmented coordination, and limited anticipatory capacity. These structural weaknesses have cumulative effects, gradually transforming episodic crises into enduring conditions of insecurity.

A key conclusion of this study is that human insecurity in Nepal's climate context is produced as much by governance failures as by environmental hazards. People no longer assess the state only by its ability to deliver relief, but by its willingness and capacity to

anticipate risk, communicate honestly, and act consistently across all phases of disaster management. Trust, in this sense, emerges as both an outcome of governance and a prerequisite for effective disaster response. The ethnographic and digital narratives analyzed in this paper further reveal that trust is unevenly distributed. While rescue personnel often retain public respect, institutions responsible for planning, regulation, and recovery face growing skepticism. This disjuncture suggests that disaster governance exclude people or remains no more transparent in various phases of disaster preparedness. It also makes skeptical as if it remains narrowly focused on emergency response, while neglecting preparedness, prevention, and long-term rehabilitation, the very domains where trust is built or lost.

By triangulating local testimonies, institutional responses, and mediated public discourse, this paper contributes to disaster governance scholarship by foregrounding public trust as a central dimension of human security. It argues that rebuilding trust requires a transformation of governance from centralized and reactive control toward anticipatory, participatory, and solidaristic practices that recognize communities not merely as victims, but as agents of resilience. Without such a shift, climate disasters will continue to erode not only lives and livelihoods, but also the fragile social contract between citizens and the state in Nepal's mountain regions.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

### **Author Introduction**

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