

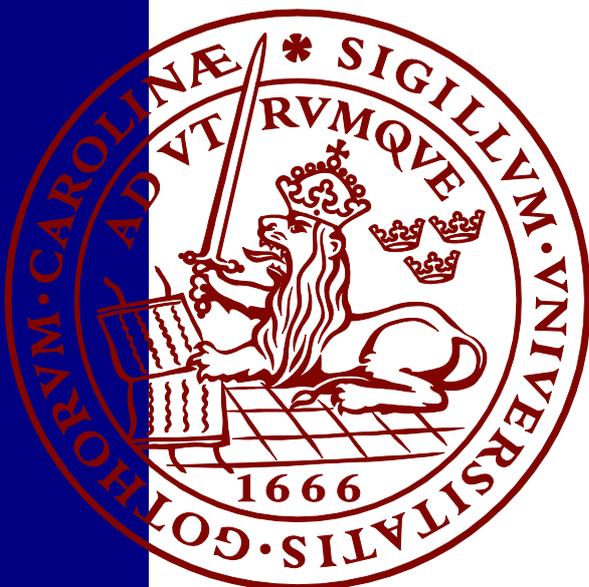
“They only talk about the trees”

An analysis of relations of power and justice in the
(de)construction of Nepal’s Second International Airport

Hanna Geschewski

Master Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science,
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Lund University
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(30hp/credits)



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Lund University Centre for
Sustainability Studies



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Abstract [eng]

While calls to reduce air travel have emerged in many high-income countries, Nepal, with only one international airport, is still striving to improve its air connectivity. In 2015, the government resumed its 1995 plan to build a second international airport near Nijgadh, a town in the southern plains. The project has since come under scrutiny from conservationists after plans emerged for extensive clearing of the densely forested project site. But the area is also home to nearly 8,000 people in three settlements, most of them migrants from hilly regions without formal land rights, who face displacement. While public and political debates continue to focus on ecological impacts of the project, the apparent lack of attention to the consequences for local communities raises questions about the safeguarding of their interests.

Drawing on justice theories and conceptualisations of power from political ecology, I conducted an empirical case study on how and to what extent the airport project can be understood as a historical and current conflict over recognition, participation and distribution, and how different dimensions of power reinforce injustices against affected communities. During two months of fieldwork in Nepal, I gathered empirical evidence from primary and secondary sources, including observations, semi-structured and exploratory interviews, project documents and media coverage.

My findings suggest that the misrecognition of local communities, particularly in Tangiya Basti, began long before the airport project, when the government reneged on its promise to grant land rights. Considering that in Nepal, property, caste and class are still crucial determinants of social status, this manifested the socio-economic marginalisation of the residents and fostered narratives portraying them as illegal encroachers. My results also show how processes of misrecognition are intertwined with current distributive and procedural injustices, reinforced by power asymmetries of various kinds. This extends to the exclusion of communities from major media discourses shaped by developmentalist and conservationist narratives, which further contributes to their invisibility.

Overall, I argue that while the airport project is often framed as a conflict over claims to nature, it is also a conflict over claims to social justice and livelihood security. My thesis offers entry points to larger questions of integrating community interests into sustainability and sustainable development concerns and highlights the need for more nuanced investigations of the impacts of large infrastructure projects on communities in Nepal and other parts of South Asia.

Keywords: justice, political ecology, recognition, developmentalism, land rights, Nepal

Word count: 11,978

सारांश [nep]

उच्च आय भएका मुलुकहरूमा हवाइ यात्रा घटाउनुपर्ने बहस चलिरहँदा एकमात्र अन्तर्राष्ट्रिय विमानस्थल रहेको नेपाल भने हवाइ सञ्जाल बढाउन प्रयासरत छ । नेपाल सरकारले सन २०१५ मा मुलुकको दोस्रो अन्तर्राष्ट्रिय विमानस्थल दक्षिणी समथर क्षेत्रको निजगढमा बनाउने सन १९९५ को योजनालाई पुनः ब्युँतायो । सरकारको यो निर्णयसँगै ठूलो क्षेत्रफलमा फैलिएको परियोजना क्षेत्रमा पर्ने घना जंगल क्षेत्र फँडानी गर्ने योजना संरक्षण अभियन्ताको विशेष निगरानीमा पऱ्यो । तर यो परियोजना क्षेत्रमा पर्ने तीन बस्तीमा लगभग ८,००० मानिस छन् जो मुख्यतया पहाडी क्षेत्रबाट बसाँइ सरेर बसोबास गर्दै आएका हुन् । कुनै आधिकारिक भूमि अधिकार नभएका यी ८,००० नागरिक विस्थापित हुनेछन् । परियोजनाका पर्यावरणीय प्रभावका बारेमा राजनीतिक र सार्वजनिक बहस चर्किरहेका बेला स्थानीय समुदायमाथि पर्ने असरका बारे पर्याप्त ध्यान नदिइँदा उनीहरूका सरोकारलाई सम्बोधन गर्ने विषयमा प्रश्न उठेका छन् ।

न्यायको सिद्धान्त र राजनीतिक परिस्थिति विज्ञानमा आधारित शक्तिको अवधारणाहरू प्रयोग गरेर मैले यो विमानस्थल निर्माण परियोजनालाई कसरी र कुन हदसम्म सम्मान, सहभागिता र वितरणका लागि भएका ऐतिहासिक र विद्यमान द्वन्द्वका रूपमा बुझ्न सकिन्छ, र शक्तिका विभिन्न आयामहरूले कसरी प्रभावित समुदायविरुद्धको अन्यायलाई बढावा दिन्छ भनी प्रयोगशिल्द सन्दर्भ-अध्ययन गरेको छु । नेपालमा दुई महिना लामो स्थलगत अध्ययनका क्रममा मैले प्रत्यक्ष अवलोकन, अन्तर्वार्ता, दस्तावेज अध्ययन र मिडिया विश्लेषण जस्ता प्राथमिक र माध्यमिक स्रोतहरू प्रयोग गरी प्रमाणहरू जुटाएको थिएँ ।

मेरो अध्ययनले विशेषगरी टांगिया बस्तीका स्थानीय समुदायहरूको अपर्याप्त सम्मान र पहिचान विमानस्थल निर्माणभन्दा धेरै अघि सरकारले स्थानीयलाई भूमिको अधिकार दिने वाचा पूरा नगरेदेखि सुरु भएको संकेत गर्छ । नेपालमा सम्पत्ति, जात र वर्ग अझै पनि सामाजिक स्तरका महत्त्वपूर्ण सूचक भएकाले र यसले स्थानीयबासीलाई आर्थिक र सामाजिकरूपमा सीमान्तकृत बनायो र उनीहरूलाई “अवैध अतिक्रमणकारी” का रूपमा चित्रण गर्ने कथनलाई बढावा दियो । यसका अलावा मेरो अध्ययनले समुदायको गलत पहिचानको प्रक्रिया कसरी विद्यमान वितरण र प्रक्रियागत अन्यायसँग गाँसिएको हुन्छ र त्यसलाई विभिन्न प्रकारका असमान शक्ति सम्बन्धले कसरी झन बढावा दिन्छ भन्ने देखाउँछ । यो “विकासवादी” र “संरक्षणवादी” कथनहरूमा आधारित आम संचारमा देखिने बहस र संवादमा यी समुदायको वहिष्करणसम्म फैलिन्छ र यसले उनीहरूलाई थप अदृश्य बनाइदिन्छ ।

समग्रमा, विमानस्थललाई प्राकृतिक दाबीसम्बन्धी द्वन्द्वको रूपमा चित्रण गरिएपनि यो सामाजिक न्याय र जनजीविका सुरक्षाको दाबीसम्बन्धी द्वन्द्व पनि हो भन्ने मेरो अध्ययनको जिकिर हो । मेरो यो शोधपत्रले समुदायका सरोकारलाई कसरी दिगो विकासमा समेट्ने र नेपाल लगायत दक्षिण एशियामा पूर्वाधारका विशाल परियोजनाहरूले समुदायमा पार्ने असरहरूबारे सूक्ष्म अनुसन्धान गर्नुपर्ने आवश्यकता जस्ता वृहत्तर प्रश्नहरूको प्रस्थान बिन्दु प्रदान गर्छ ।

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List of abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|--|
| CAAN | Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal |
| DFS | Detailed Feasibility Study |
| EIA | Environmental Impact Assessment |
| EJ | Environmental justice |
| GoN | Government of Nepal |
| KG | Kathgaun |
| LMW | LandMark Worldwide |
| MCA | Media content analysis |
| MoCTCA | Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation |
| MoFE | Ministry of Forests and Environment |
| MT | Matiyani Tole |
| PE | Political ecology |
| PIL | Public interest litigation |
| RQ | Research question |
| SIA | Second International Airport |
| TB | Tangiya Basti |
| TBSS | <i>Tangiya Basti Sarokar Samiti</i> Tangiya Basti Concern Committee |
| TIA | Tribhuvan International Airport |

1 Introduction

‘Nijgadh International Airport is [a] project of vital importance for Nepal. This is our national pride project. This will be a game-changing project for Nepal’s economic prosperity.’

Rabindra Adhikari, Late Minister of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation,
Government of Nepal (Paudyal & Koirala, 2018)

While calls to reduce air travel have entered mainstream discourses in many high-income countries (Jacobson et al., 2020; Timperley, 2019), landlocked Nepal still has only one international airport. Blaming Nepal’s poor air connectivity as a major barrier to increased tourism and economic activity, demands for building an alternative to Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA) are increasing (Sah, 2019). After years of deferment, in 2015 the Government of Nepal (GoN) revived its 1995 plan to construct an international airport near Nijgadh, a town 60 km south of Kathmandu (D. P. N. Pradhan et al., 2019).

The project has since been promoted as Nepal’s guaranteed path to development and prosperity; both themes are deeply entrenched in Nepali politics and society. Especially the notion of *bikas*¹, which commonly outlines the dream of catching up with the ‘West’, has prevailed for decades (Mulmi, 2018; Paudel, 2016; Pigg, 1992, 1993). In line with hegemonic development discourses, promoting economic growth and infrastructure expansion (Nightingale & Ojha, 2013), airport proponents have highlighted the economic opportunities it offers: it is estimated to serve 27 Asian countries and generate 100,000 direct and indirect jobs (Sah, 2019).

But similar to other large infrastructure projects (Robbins, 2011), the construction of Nepal’s Second International Airport, hereafter referred to as SIA, is not without socio-environmental consequences, also reflected in its listing as an infrastructure conflict in the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (EJAtlas) (Bridger, 2019). The proposed construction site comprises a dense sal (*Shorea robusta*) forest, known to be a migration corridor for elephants (Shah, 2019; Shahi, 2019). After the project’s Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was published in 2018, many expressed shock at the prospect of cutting over 2 million trees (A. Dhakal, 2018). Opposition formed among conservationists and environmental activists, especially in Kathmandu, and rallies and online campaigns were organised in the capital (K. D. Bhattarai, 2019b; Pro Public, 2019).

¹ Nepali translation of ‘development’

While protests and debates have focused on the ecological consequences of SIA, the project area is also home to nearly 8,000 people, most without formal land rights, who face displacement (Dhungana, 2019a; Shah, 2019). To date, the project authorities have not released a compensation and resettlement plan for the nearly 1,500 landless households. This apparent lack of public and political attention to the impact of SIA on these communities raises questions about the safeguarding of their interests. Literature shows that it is often those already marginalised who are most affected by infrastructure development (Ascher & Krupp, 2010; Otsuki et al., 2016). Fernholz (2010, p. 225) states: “Overall, the aim of major infrastructure projects [...] is to improve economic growth and well-being in a country or region. Yet, many studies show that the people living in the proximate areas frequently do not share in these benefits, and often suffer major economic, health, and cultural losses.”

This production of uneven landscapes in the name of development is often the result of multidimensional injustices experienced by the marginalised groups concerned (Ottinger, 2017). Unveiling such injustices in the creation and alteration of socio-environments has become a growing concern of various disciplines (Schlosberg, 2013). While justice scholarship has long focused on distributive and participatory aspects, conceptualisations have since expanded to include the notion of recognition “as an inherent element of justice” and often even as the basis for the other two dimensions (Fraser, 2005; Islar, 2013, p. 41; Schlosberg, 2004, 2007).

In my study, too, the invisibility of local concerns in public debates suggests issues of misrecognition. Building on research by Persson et al. (2017) and Islar (2012), I argue that the conflict over SIA is as much a struggle for social justice and recognition, sustained and undermined by various manifestations of power, as it is for environmental protection.

1.1 Thesis aim and research questions

My aim with this case study is to examine the injustices faced by the communities affected by the SIA project and how various kinds of power have manifested identified injustices. To achieve this, I draw on justice and political ecology (PE) research in the hope of further strengthening the synergies between the two fields. My theoretical entry points are social and environmental justice (EJ) as proposed by Fraser (1998, 2000), Schlosberg (2004, 2007, 2013) and others, and power theories common in PE. My analytical frameworks are strongly inspired by Svarstad’s work on conceptualising power and its relevance for justice scholarship (Svarstad et al., 2018; Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020).

My study is led by my overarching research question:

How and to what extent can the case of Nepal's Second International Airport be understood as a site of conflict over recognition and other related injustices?

To structure my work, I have divided the main research question into three sub-questions, the first two of which aim to reflect on the temporal aspects of justice:

- (a) What are the historical injustices regarding land use in the SIA project area?
- (b) What are current injustices regarding land use in the SIA project area?
- (c) What are the different dimensions of power embedded in the conflict and how do they reinforce injustices?

1.2 Thesis rationale

With this research I intend to contribute to various academic and socio-political areas and debates worldwide and in the context of Nepal. The SIA project is not only one of the most expensive projects ever undertaken in Nepal (with an estimated cost of USD 6.56 billion (Shah, 2019)), but also one of the most controversial, due to its immense socio-environmental impact. Although it has been in planning for 25 years, there is no scientific research on the project, apart from a paper by Shah (2019), which critically analyses the project's EIA. With my study, I hope to take a first step towards filling this gap, especially with regard to community concerns. Considering the government's problematic history of recognising the interests of communities affected by infrastructure projects (Nightingale, 2003, 2017; Rest, 2012), I further believe that my research can contribute to critical discourses on (sustainable) development in Nepal.

In applying a framework that draws on both theories of justice and of PE, I hope to promote the "potential for cross-fertilization between the two fields" as called for by Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2020). In particular, the authors propose to apply specific power conceptualisations from PE to EJ. I put this into practice by using a three-dimensional power structure developed by Svarstad et al. (2018) to understand issues of misrecognition and other injustices associated with it. Finally, I believe that amplifying marginalised voices is one necessary step towards "overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society", as Fraser (2000, p. 113) describes. Using quotes and insights from the conversations I had with over 25 people from the project area, I aim to foreground unheard voices and nuance the oversimplified portrayal of the affected people as one homogenous group.

1.3 Relevance for sustainability science

While this thesis is informed by concrete justice and PE theories, it is situated in the broad area of sustainability science, which “seeks to understand the fundamental character of interactions between nature and society” (Kates et al., 2001, p. 641). With its interdisciplinary character it provides an umbrella for various ontologies and epistemologies and works towards problem-solving as well as critical knowledge production (Jerneck et al., 2011).

With my research I wish to contribute to a branch of sustainability science that focuses on the inclusion of justice concerns. Scholars such as Agyeman have contributed immensely to conceptualisations of “just sustainabilities” (Dobson, 2003; Faber et al., 2003; Robbins, 2011). As Bullard et al. (2003, p. 2) argue, “[a] truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, and economic opportunity, are integrally connected to environmental concerns”. Based on Middleton and O’Keefe’s (2001, p. 16) argument that sustainable development cannot be achieved without acknowledging social injustice as the root cause of failed development, and Jerneck et al.’s (2011, p. 78) emphasis on “questioning conditions that created problems of un-sustainability in the first place”, I centre my research around the struggle for justice and power embedded in the SIA conflict to understand current barriers to a more just and sustainable development in Nijgadh and Nepal.

1.4 Thesis scope and limitations

The scope of my research is limited by several factors. Firstly, I only looked at the early phase of the SIA project cycle, as major construction work has not yet begun. This led me to focus on the impact on local communities that the project has caused to date, i.e. pre-displacement. But since the project has been in the pipeline for 25 years, there is a large body of experiences and perceptions from various stakeholders that can provide valuable insights.

Second, due to the limited number of interviews I conducted, I do not claim to provide an exhaustive account of stakeholder voices and patterns of injustice. For various contextual and logistical reasons, I focused my fieldwork on Tangiya Basti, the largest of the three settlements within the project area. I visited the other two villages, but only conducted one group interview each. Differences in justice perceptions between settlements could be the subject of future research.

Finally, I do not intend to establish any general patterns of injustice in relation to large infrastructure development in Nepal and do not claim that my results are transferable to other projects of similar scale. Nonetheless, I believe that certain methodological approaches and findings can inform future research on land use conflicts and infrastructure development in Nepal.

2 Setting the scene

2.1 Dreaming of *bikas*

The notion of development, or *bikas*, has shaped the idea of the Nepali nation state for years (Kramer, 2008; Pigg, 1992). While many consider the early 1950s, marked by the fall of the Rana dynasty and the emergence of foreign-funded aid initiatives, as the beginning of modern development ideologies in Nepal, the rhetoric of prosperity and progress has been prevalent since Nepal was unified under the Shah dynasty in the 18th century (Paudel, 2016; Pigg, 1992).

As scholars have noted, development in Nepal is more than common concepts of ‘empowerment’ and ‘modernisation’ (Kramer, 2008; Pigg, 1993; Saxer, 2013). Rather, it is “the overt link between [Nepal] and the West”; a national vision of hegemonic superiority, deeply entrenched in the imagination of society and omnipresent in radio, TV and schoolbooks (Ahearn, 2004; Pigg, 1992, p. 497; Sharma, 2002). This has created a dichotomy between what is desired and what is not: urban vs. rural, educated vs. illiterate, the West vs. present-day Nepal (Rest, 2012). As Pigg states, “where there is a push for progress through development, there is the creation of a state of backwardness” (1993, p. 46).

Although the understanding of *bikas* is not homogenous, it is often expressed in material terms, as tangible facilities (*suvaidha*) (Murton & Lord, 2020; Nightingale, 2017; Pigg, 1992). Influenced by Western interpretations of development as technological progress, industrialisation and growth (Escobar, 1995), infrastructure expansion for improved connectivity and economic activity is a major pillar of Nepal’s “development dream” (Campbell, 2010; Murton & Lord, 2020, p. 3). In the National long-term goals of the 15th Five-Year Plan, which outline the path to the GoN’s vision “Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepali”², “Accessible modern infrastructure and intensive connectivity” is listed as a key goal for prosperity (National Planning Commission, 2020, p. 19). More specifically, the plan includes ten large transport infrastructure projects as part of 22 ‘National Pride Projects’; SIA is one of them.

While there is a need for improved mobility, research shows that large-scale infrastructure often leads to the production or consolidation of uneven landscapes, e.g. conceptualised as power corridors, leaving hopes for improved livelihoods unfulfilled for many (Campbell, 2010; Murton & Lord, 2020).

² The slogan *Samriddha Nepal, Sukhi Nepali* was introduced by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli in a speech during a state visit to India in 2018 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018)

2.2 Planning Nepal's Second International Airport

Although often framed as the latest mega-development initiative, plans to build SIA have existed for over two decades. This chapter provides an overview of the project's history, its potential impacts and counter-reactions. For a timeline of relevant events, see Figure 1.

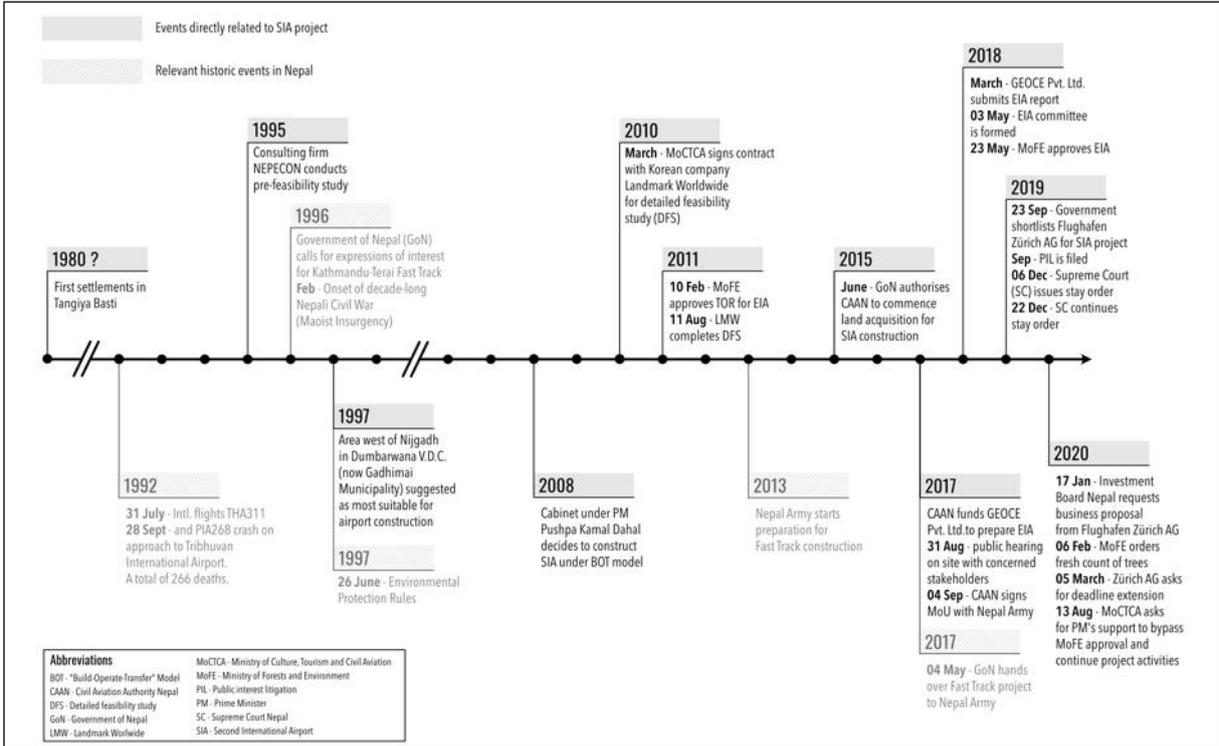


Figure 1. Timeline of events directly related to the SIA project and relevant historic events in Nepal (Own creation)

2.2.1 25 years in the making

Already in the 1980s, the GoN mentioned plans for a second international airport (Gautam, 2020). Discussions gained momentum in 1992, triggered by two catastrophic air crashes in Kathmandu (K. D. Bhattarai, 2019a). In 1995, the government commissioned the consulting firm Nepal Engineering Consulting Services Centre Limited (NEPECON) to conduct a pre-feasibility study of eight sites, in the course of which an area west of Nijgadh was identified as the most suitable (Gautam, 2020; Lal, 2019). However, the decade-long Maoist insurgency from 1996 onwards brought the project to a standstill (Gautam, 2020). It was not until 2010 that the project-implementing agency, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), commissioned the Korean company LandMark Worldwide (LMW) to conduct a detailed feasibility study (DFS) (Shah, 2019). MoCTCA, however, never received the complete DFS, only a summary, as the government never paid for the report in full (Lal, 2019). After plans to build SIA in cooperation with LMW as well as with the later applicant Flughafen Zürich

AG fell through, MoCTCA is currently preparing to develop the project on its own (Prasain, 2020b; K. D. Shrestha, 2020).

In a separate process, the Nepali engineering firm GEOCE Consultants (P) Ltd. was awarded the contract for a project EIA in 2016 and submitted the final EIA in March 2018 (Shah, 2019). Two months later, the report was approved by the Ministry of Forests and Environment (MoFE). Interestingly, the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) had already signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Nepal Army on behalf of MoCTCA in September 2017, long before the EIA was approved, which allowed the Army to cut down trees for building roads on the proposed construction site. (Golf, 2017).

2.2.2 Expected impacts on landscape and communities

The EIA, which was only published after environmental journalists filed a request in 2018, revealed that up to 2.4 million pole-sized and mature trees worth USD 629 million in timber would have to be cut to clear the project area (A. Dhakal, 2018; Shah, 2019). This figure has since been corrected by officials to 328,904 trees in the first project phase (Shah, 2019). Project authorities further claim that deforestation can be compensated by planting 25 saplings for each cut tree, but are yet to propose a suitable area (Lal, 2019).

Deforestation could have serious impacts on local biodiversity (Chernaik, 2019; S. Shrestha, 2018). The area is home to over 500 different bird species, 23 endangered flora and 22 endangered wildlife species (Lal, 2019; S. Shrestha, 2018). The forest lies within the Terai Arc Landscape (TAL) and is connected to the Parsa and Chitwan National Parks. Together they form important wildlife migration corridors (NEFEJ, 2019). Thakur (2015) concluded that the area around Tangiya Basti, i.e. the SIA project area, falls on three common elephant migration routes and is a highly suitable elephant habitat (see Figure 2). The interruption of current migration routes is expected to increase the risk of human-wildlife conflicts in this area (NEFEJ, 2019). As the forest serves as a water reservoir, deforestation is also expected to deplete groundwater during the dry season, threatening drinking water supplies and irrigation for thousands of people, as well as cause severe flooding during the monsoon season (Lal, 2019; NEFEJ, 2019). In addition, the project is expected to cause noise and air pollution and to threaten two collaborative forests adjacent to the project site, Tamagadhi and Sahajanath, whose user groups with 37,000 beneficiaries depend on forest resources for their livelihoods (NEFEJ, 2019; Shah, 2019).

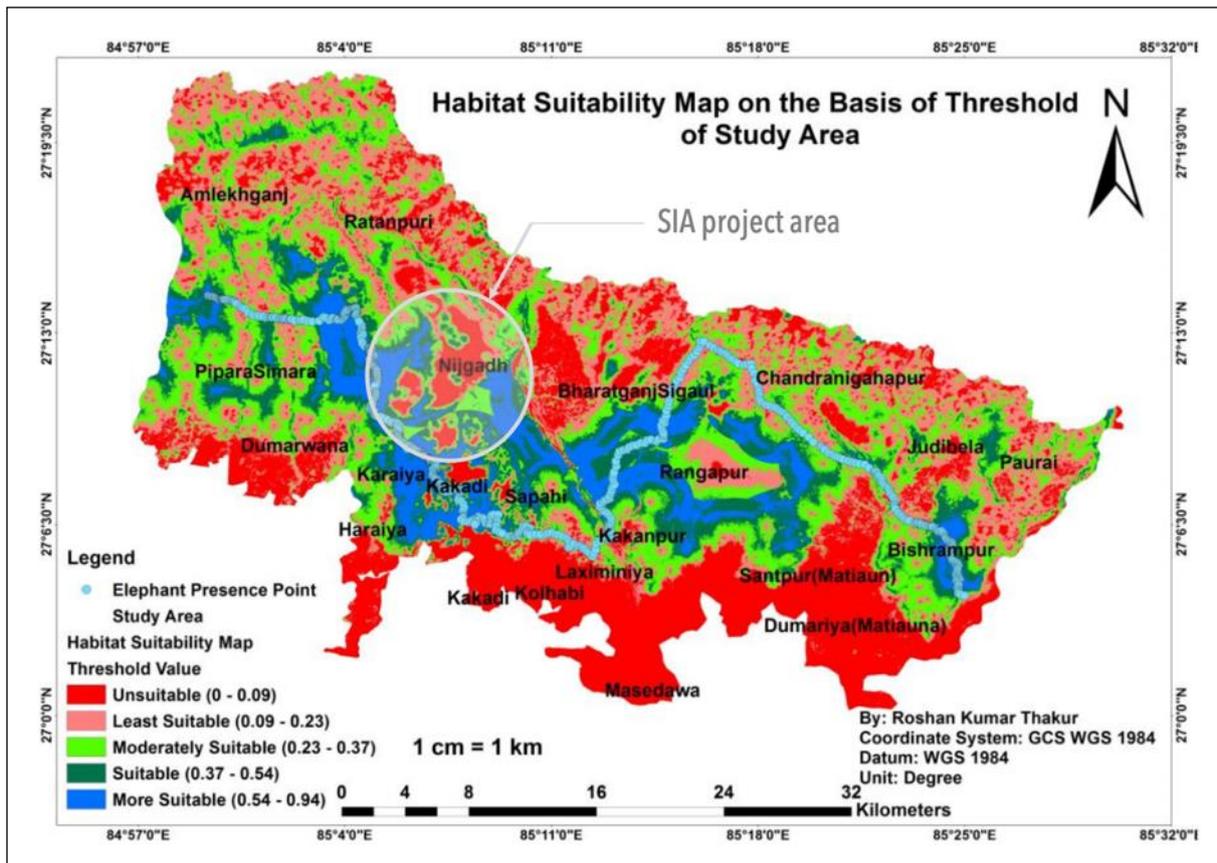


Figure 2. Habitat suitability map for elephant occurrence in central Nepal (Thakur, 2015). Grey circle, arrow and text added by the author)

2.2.3 Opposition formed

The release of the EIA was followed by criticism from various groups, including forest experts, lawyers, environmental activists and journalists. In addition to the ecological impacts, many questioned the excessive size of SIA, arguing that other international aviation hubs are significantly smaller than the allocated 8,046 hectares³ (B. Bhattarai, 2020; S. Shrestha, 2018). Opponents further alleged that the selection of Nijgadh was influenced by political agendas and that alternative sites were not adequately explored (S. Shrestha, 2018). The EIA itself also came under criticism for containing misleading information after parts of it were found to have been copied directly from an earlier EIA for a hydropower project⁴ (Gautam, 2020; Mandal, 2020). Building on this criticism, two Public Interest Litigations (PILs) were filed in 2019 against MoCTCA, MoFE and the Prime Minister's Office, among others, by groups demanding the review of alternative sites and the preparation of a new EIA (Awale,

³ The New Bangkok International Airport (Suvarnabhumi), Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi and the Singapore Changi Airport cover areas of 3,240 ha, 2,066 ha and 1,300 ha respectively (S. Shrestha, 2018).

⁴ Chapter 7.3 of the EIA states: "Nepal has accorded high priority for the development of hydro-electricity project(s) (...). The project will generate environment-friendly clean energy and will contribute to the socio-economic development of the country" (GEOCE, 2018, p. 7.2)

2020; T. R. Pradhan, 2019). At the same time, the petitioners and other environmental activist groups organised protests across Kathmandu and raised awareness on social media (Bachmann, 2019).

In response to the petitions, the Supreme Court on 6 December 2019 ordered not to move the project forward until ambiguities regarding its impacts are resolved (T. R. Pradhan, 2019). After extending the stay order on 22 December 2019, Chief Justice C.S. Rana stated: “The court should be equally responsible toward the earth, trees, aquatic animals and birds” (OnlineKhabar, 2020; Prasain, 2020a). Despite the continued stay order, President Bhandari announced in her presentation of upcoming government programs that the construction of SIA will be advanced in 2020/21 (Aryal & Shrestha, 2020). In an attempt to bypass MoFE’s approval, MoCTCA approached Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli in August 2020 to press for a rapid start of project activities (‘Nijgadh Airport’, 2020).

3 Theoretical entry points

3.1 Conceptual frameworks: justice and sustainability

The linking of justice concerns with sustainability is not a new phenomenon, as the call for intergenerational justice in the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) shows. Over the years, many scholars have emphasised that sustainable development is inseparable from the quest for equity and equality (Bullard et al., 2003; Middleton & O’Keefe, 2001; Schlosberg, 2007). While there are limits to the compatibility of justice and sustainability, Klinsky and Golub (2016), among others, argue for including justice as a “central component of any sustainability effort”, as it challenges the status quo and promotes alternative development paths. In the context of this thesis, the potential of a justice frame in shifting the focus to the “unseen others” and “stakeholders who have been systematically excluded” in sustainability challenges is particularly valuable (Bullard et al., 2003, p. 324; Klinsky & Golub, 2016, p. 169). As Bullard et al. (2003) argue, this uplift of the marginalised can facilitate a shift from problem-oriented struggles of resistance to proactive solution-oriented strategies for just and sustainable transformation.

3.2 Analytical frameworks

In this section I outline the key theories that I base my research on. Environmental justice and political ecology serve as the theoretical umbrella, although it is important to stress that neither of them is considered a coherent ‘grand’ theory. Rather, by drawing from various disciplines, such as geography, social theory, anthropology, economics, history and political science, they can be understood as ‘lenses’ through which human-environmental interactions can be examined (Schubert, 2005). There is a growing body of literature linking justice and PE concepts (Domènech et al., 2013; Gonzalez, 2019). Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2020, p. 2) noted that there is potential for synergy especially in the notions of justice and power, due to “a lack of specification of various conceptions of ‘power’ in [EJ] literature”. Thus, combining EJ and PE to understand what injustices exist and examine what kinds of power manifested them seems a promising framework for analysing the Nijgadh case.

3.2.1 Environmental justice

For my case, I have chosen a three-dimensional environmental justice framework that includes aspects of distribution, recognition and participation, inspired by Schlosberg (2004, 2007, 2013) and Fraser (1998, 2000, 2005), among others. Although the EJ framework is commonly used to examine communities' claims to nature and natural resources, I believe that its grounding in social justice theory also makes it suitable for examining other justice claims put forward by communities.

Distributive justice investigates how costs and benefits are distributed in socio-ecological interventions (Bell, 2004; Robbins, 2011). While it is still a core focus of justice research, particularly in quantitative and spatial analysis, scholars such as Young (1990) and Fraser (1998, 2000) concluded that a distributive approach is insufficient to determine what causes unequal burden- and benefit-sharing: “issues of distribution are essential, but incomplete” (Schlosberg, 2004, p. 518). For my work, examining distributive patterns with regards to how the local communities’ livelihoods and access to land and facilities have been impacted by SIA provides a valuable entry point. Following Schlosberg and others, however, I understand distributive injustices not detached from misrecognition and existing power asymmetries.

Justice as recognition refers to whose values, views and interests are taken into account. Contrary to the view of some that recognition is merely another good to be distributed, it has emerged as a distinct justice dimension, strongly influenced by the work of Fraser (2000), who understands misrecognition as institutionalised social subordination that causes distributive injustice, rather than representing a type of it. In the SIA case, recognition presents a key lens to understanding patterns of marginalisation of the local communities through various institutional, social and cultural channels. Drawing from Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2020, p. 4), I supplement recognition theory with concepts of senses of justice, defined as “ways in which affected people subjectively perceive, evaluate and narrate an issue”, and critical knowledge production, which concerns the access to independent information, to “facilitate the expression of subaltern voices” and explore competing justice claims of affected communities, also beyond mere EJ claims.

Procedural justice focuses on who participates in decision-making processes regarding environmental interventions and how (Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020). Scholars have emphasised that participants need to be recognised to have the much-vaunted 'seat at the table', demonstrating the close linkage between justice dimensions (Schlosberg, 2004, 2013). Yet the notion of participation is not uncontested and especially PE has contributed much to its critical assessment, showing that it “often implies a top-down approach in practice” (Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020, p. 6). In my research, procedural justice provides a helpful perspective, not just in terms of how affected communities are included in the SIA decision-making process, but also how they practice participation within their communities, essentially examining internal manifestations of power.

3.2.2 Conceptualising power in political ecology

There are various definitions of PE, all sharing the common understanding that ecological changes are the result of political processes (Robbins, 2011). One thematic focus is power and “[t]he role of unequal power relations in constituting a politicised environment [...]” (Bryant, 1998, p. 79). To conceptualise power in PE, Svarstad et al. (2018) have identified three key approaches: actor-oriented, neo-Marxist and post-structuralist. Here, the authors emphasise the synergistic potential between the three to understand how power influences human-environment interactions in different ways and at different scales. These power dimensions represent valuable starting points for unravelling the complexities of the SIA case and understanding how the injustices experienced by affected communities are situated within political and socio-cultural manifestations of power.

Actor-oriented power theories understand power as exercised by different actors in negotiation processes, which are defined by pre-existing, often structurally manifested, power asymmetries and available “power resources”, which include political, material or socio-cultural means to influence decision-making (Svarstad et al., 2018, p. 353). In terms of EJ, actors with greater agency are less likely to face outcomes that they perceive as unjust and undesirable, e.g. in the form of environmental burdens. In the case of SIA, an actor-oriented approach helps to identify specific stakeholders and their use of power resources in decision-making processes.

Neo-Marxist (structural) power theories understand human agency to be historically produced by established social structures, generally within capitalism, that delimit the exercise of power (Svarstad et al., 2018). Structural perspectives provide a useful lens in the SIA case to place individual actors, their motivations and their power resources in a structural context of socio-cultural categories such as class and caste and help to examine how certain injustices are structurally manifested. They also help to understand the SIA project in the context of neoliberal development trends in Nepal.

Post-structuralist power is largely based on Foucauldian thinking and is often categorised as discursive power, governmentality and biopower (Svarstad et al., 2018). For my research, I focus on discursive power perspectives that help to explain how powerful actors shape discourses and produce narratives that reinforce their agendas, often in subtle ways, that are reproduced by other actors. This is particularly useful in situating the SIA project within prominent competing discourses of development and conservationism, typical for environmental conflicts (Adger et al., 2001), and in explaining how these are used by different actors, but also how they contribute to injustices, especially in terms of recognition.

4 Methodological approach

4.1 Ontological and epistemological positioning

My research is situated in the social constructivist paradigm, which assumes multiple realities formed by interpersonal interactions and societal norms, thus socially constructed, whose meanings are to be interpreted by the researcher who is themselves influenced by their own subjective experiences (Creswell, 2012). With this in mind, I seek to capture a multitude of views concerning the SIA project and to grasp their complexity. Acknowledging that context matters, I also consider historical, cultural and political factors that shape the realities of individuals in this study.

While I use collected data to understand patterns inductively, which is typical for constructivism, I also build on existing theories of justice and PE. I consider qualitative and quantitative data, adopting a mixed-method approach that may seem incompatible with constructivist philosophy. Yet, a growing number of scholars have argued for a more holistic understanding of research paradigms (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2013). McChesney and Aldridge (2019), for example, apply a constructivist stance to frame their mixed-methods study.

4.2 Research strategy

My research is designed as an empirical single case study. It is explanatory in that it investigates the “how” and “why” of a contemporary phenomenon, rather than merely describing it (Yin, 2009). Its main purpose is the in-depth understanding of the case, not the formulation of generalised transferable results (Bryman, 2012). I use the case of community livelihood conflicts surrounding the SIA project to illustrate broader trends in development and modernisation in Nepal. Although it is difficult to draw clear case boundaries (Creswell, 2012), in Figure 3 I outline its empirical focus, theoretical placement, and fieldwork approach.

| CASE | EMPIRICAL | THEORETICAL |
|----------|--|---|
| SPECIFIC | Land use conflict over community livelihoods | Environmental justice; Power manifestations |
| BROAD | Developmentalism; Local manifestation of modernisation | Political ecology (Post-developmentalism) |

| | | |
|---------------------------|--|---|
| EMBEDDED UNIT OF ANALYSIS | Experts (scientists, lawyers, activists) | Local communities; local authorities |
| RESEARCH SITES | Kathmandu | Bara district: Nijgadh, Simara, Tangiya Basti, Khatgaun, Matiyani Tol |

Figure 3. Empirical case study design (Own creation based on Islar (2012))

4.3 Data collection

As advised for a case study, I use various sources of evidence to account for the complexity of the case and facilitate convergence through triangulation (Yin, 2009). I gathered primary data through semi-structured interviews and observations and complemented this with secondary data in the form of project documents, legal and strategic documents, and media coverage.

In February and March 2020, I spent eight weeks in Nepal to conduct my fieldwork. First, I travelled to Nijgadh for an exploratory visit to the SIA project area, where I introduced myself to several residents and told them about my interview plans. Back in Kathmandu I reflected on my impressions and decided to focus on Tangiya Basti, in order to gain a deeper insight into local dynamics and to allow people to become comfortable with my presence. Later in February, I returned to Nijgadh for three weeks to conduct observations and interviews with local residents and authorities. Upon my final return to Kathmandu, I interviewed activists, lawyers and environmental scientists with knowledge of the case.

4.3.1 Study site

I conducted most of my fieldwork in and near the SIA project area in Bara district, which spans 8,046 ha and is delimited by the rivers Lal Bakaiya to the east and Pasaha to the west, the East-West-Highway to the north and a fence to the south (GEOCE, 2018). 94.3% is forestland, while the three settlements

within the project boundaries cover an area of about 500 ha (Shah, 2019). Tangiya Basti (TB) is the largest settlement, see (A) in Figure 4, and has grown to 1,476 households since its establishment in the 1970s (Dhungana, 2019b). Most people are migrants from the hills and belong to the *Janajati*⁵ ethnolinguistic groups of Tamang and Magar; other ethnic and caste groups are Dalit, Bahun, Chettri and Newar (Dhungana, 2019a). None of the residents have land ownership documents of the area (Dhungana, 2019a).

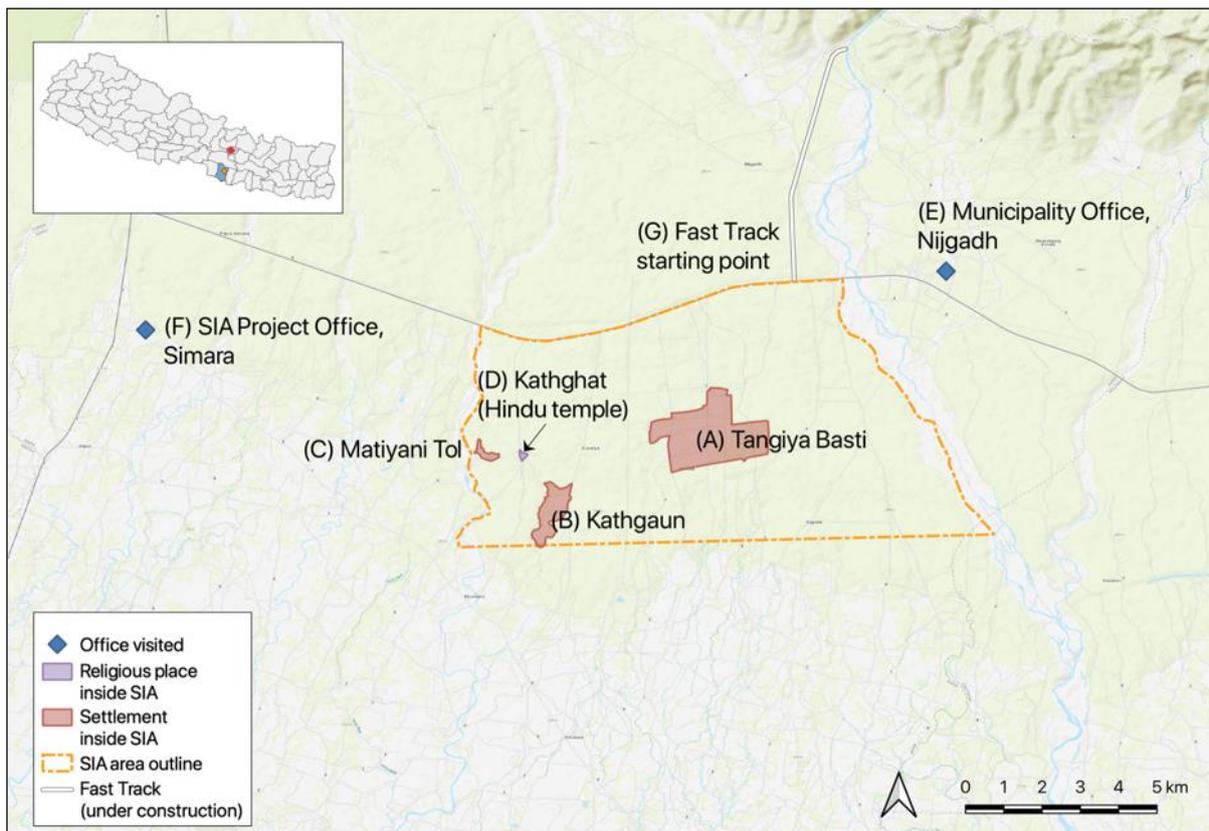


Figure 4. The study site in Bara district with the proposed SIA construction site (Own creation based on fieldwork, DIVA GIS data and printed map provided by SIA Project Office)

The second largest settlement is Kathgaun (KG, see (B)) with people of various ethnicities and castes including *Tharu*, an indigenous group from the Terai. Of the 132 households, only 16 never owned land. Recently, however, the government acquired most of the privately-owned land through compensatory payments, leaving many without legal documents (Sah, 2019). The smallest and youngest settlement is Matiyani Tol (MT, see (C)). Dalit families from other parts of the Terai began settling in the early 2000s. To date, all 40 households are landless (Shah, 2019).

⁵ Heterogeneous groups with their own culture, language, religion and customs, which make up 35.6 percent of Nepal's population and do not fall into any of the categories of the Hindu *Varna* system (Jha, 2019)

4.3.2 Observations

During my stay in Nijgadh, I spent most of my time in Tangiya Basti. I usually started my day in a tea shop, which is a popular meeting place in the village. Witnessing people's daily chats proved extremely insightful, as they often talked about the SIA project. As Creswell (2012, p. 167) notes, such participant observations "[...] may help the researcher gain insider views and subjective data." I also took several walks through the village and the forest and documented my impressions through photographs and videos. In addition, I explored Nijgadh and its surroundings looking for 'signs' of the airport. I also had informal conversations with Nijgadh residents in tea stores, restaurants and tuk-tuks about the latest developments on the SIA project and the area. Each day I noted down my experiences in a field diary, an excerpt of which can be found in Annex I.

4.3.3 Interviews

I used semi-structured interviews as my key data source, as they align with constructivist knowledge production, operating as "a construction site of knowledge" (Kvale, 2007, p. 21). During my preliminary research, I identified relevant interest groups, listed in Table 1 (see Annex II for a complete interviewee list). I employed strategic purposive sampling, which is common for this type of study design (Bryman, 2012), and supplemented it with snowball sampling, as many interviewees introduced me to other people (Creswell, 2012). This was particularly helpful in TB, as a personal referral often led to a greater willingness to talk. Altogether I conducted 23 interviews between 23 February and 19 March 2020, three of which were group interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 and 120 minutes.

Table 1. Interest groups for interviews

| Interest group | Affiliation | Place (see Figure 4) | No. of interviews |
|--|---|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Residents from settlements to be displaced | Residents from Tangiya Basti | Tangiya Basti (A) | 13 |
| | Residents from Kathgaun | Kathgaun (B) | 1 |
| | Residents from Matiyani Tol | Matiyani Tol (C) | 1 |
| | Members of <i>Tangiya Basti Sarokar Samiti</i> (TB Concern Committee) | Tangiya Basti (A) | 1 |
| Local government representatives | Mayor Nijgadh Municipality | Nijgadh (E) | 1 |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--|------------|-----------|
| Project representatives | SIA Project Office staff | Simara (F) | 1 |
| Environmental activists | People's Alliance for Nature (PAAN) representative | Kathmandu | 1 |
| Scientists | Environmental scientist | Kathmandu | 1 |
| | Forestry expert | Kathmandu | 1 |
| Lawyers/legal experts | Environmental justice expert | Kathmandu | 1 |
| | Public interest litigator | Kathmandu | 1 |
| Total | | | 23 |

The interviews were mostly semi-structured, focusing on the individual perceptions of the respondents (Kvale, 2007). For the interviews in TB, KG and MT I developed an interview guide (see Annex III), visualised in Figure 5, based on the three EJ dimensions. Additionally, I conducted seven exploratory expert interviews, two with local authorities and five in Kathmandu, that did not follow a specific guide and served to collect knowledge of various aspects of SIA (Bogner & Menz, 2009). In line with constructivism, expert knowledge is not understood as objective information but rather as “individual perceptions and orientations [that are] essential for shaping social practices in a field of action” (Döringer, 2020, p. 2). I conducted most interviews in Nepali, except the last five in Kathmandu, which I did in English. I was assisted by a Nepali translator in transcribing and translating the Nepali interviews, while I transcribed the English interviews myself.

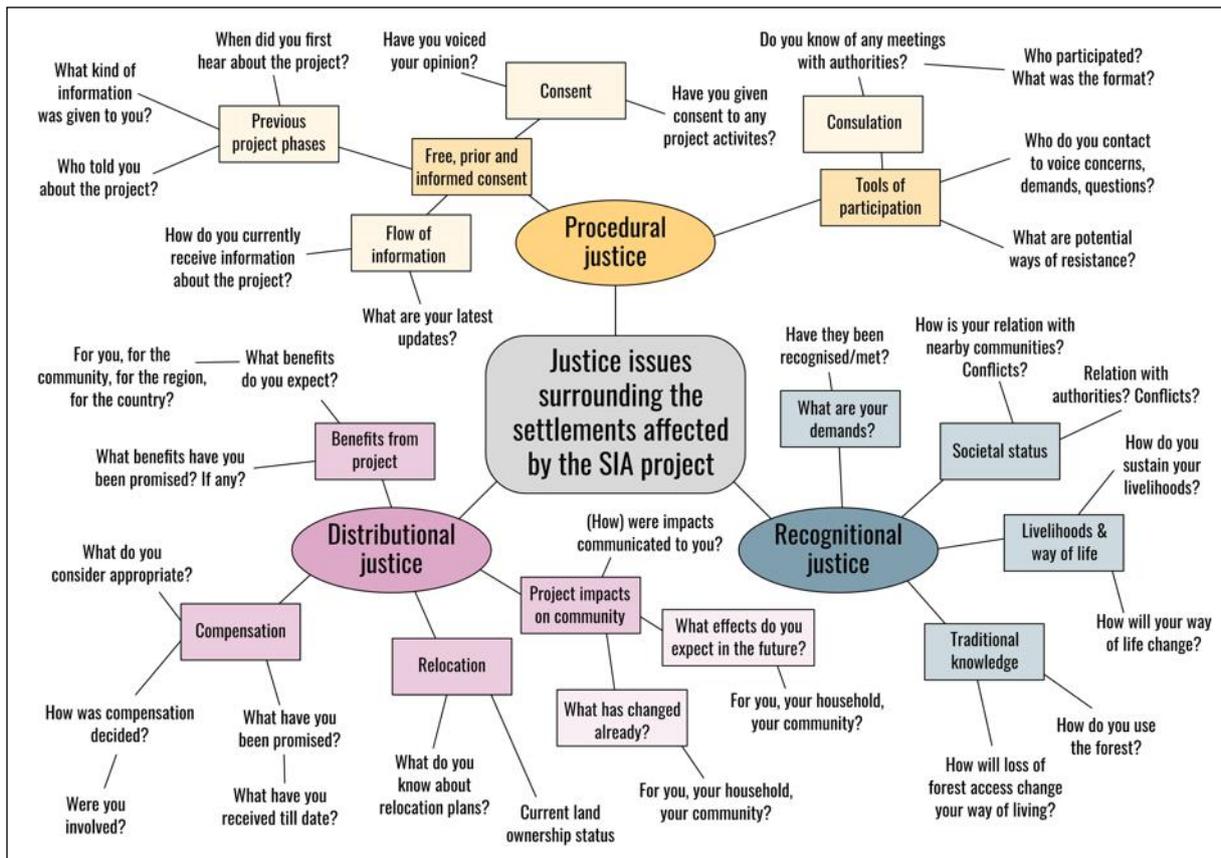


Figure 5. Mind map for semi-structured interviews with local community members. The map is centred around the three dimensions of justice. (Own creation)

4.3.4 Secondary sources

To complement the interview data, I used various secondary sources, which are listed Table 2. I also collected and analysed media reports on the SIA case (see Chapter 4.4.2).

Table 2. Project-related documents used

| Document type | Document name | Author | Source |
|------------------|--|----------------|------------------|
| Project document | Environmental Impact Assessment | (GEOCE, 2018) | Personal contact |
| Project document | Project bank Second International Airport | (MoCTCA, n.d.) | Personal contact |
| Project document | Expression of Interest for Preparation of SIA Master Plan, 1 st Phase | (CAAN, 2017) | CAAN website |

| | | | |
|----------------|--|---|------------------|
| Working paper | Strategy paper on Nijgadh Airport | Natural resource expert (anonymous) | Personal contact |
| Report | On Biological Resources Permanently Lost to the Second International Airport Project | (Chernaik, 2019) | Personal contact |
| Press release | List of demands | (Tangiya Basti Concern Committee, 2017) | Personal contact |
| Legal document | Public interest litigation | Legal expert (anonymous) | Personal contact |

4.4 Data analysis

4.4.1 Interview and document analysis

I analysed my primary and secondary data following the steps of Kvale & Brinkman (2009). After transcribing and translating the interviews, I coded them to identify themes and patterns. This was done deductively and inductively, as my analysis was informed by theories of justice and power, but I also sought to identify new perspectives to capture the lived experiences of the respondents. I supplemented my analysis with information from the documents listed in Table 2.

4.4.2 Media content analysis

I conducted a media content analysis (MCA) to investigate how the affected communities are represented in the Nepal press. MCA can be used quantitatively and qualitatively (Luo, 2019; Macnamara, 2005). I employed a combined approach, recommended by Kaefer et al. (2015), and examined the quantifiable coverage of the settlements as well as narratives used in the reporting on them. For my analysis, I collected relevant media reports published in Nepali English-language online news portals in 2019⁶. Figure 6 shows the workflow of collecting and preparing the media articles.

⁶ I limited my search to English-language publications, as the translation of an entire year of Nepali news coverage of SIA would have gone beyond the scope of this study.

Step 1: Data collection and preparation

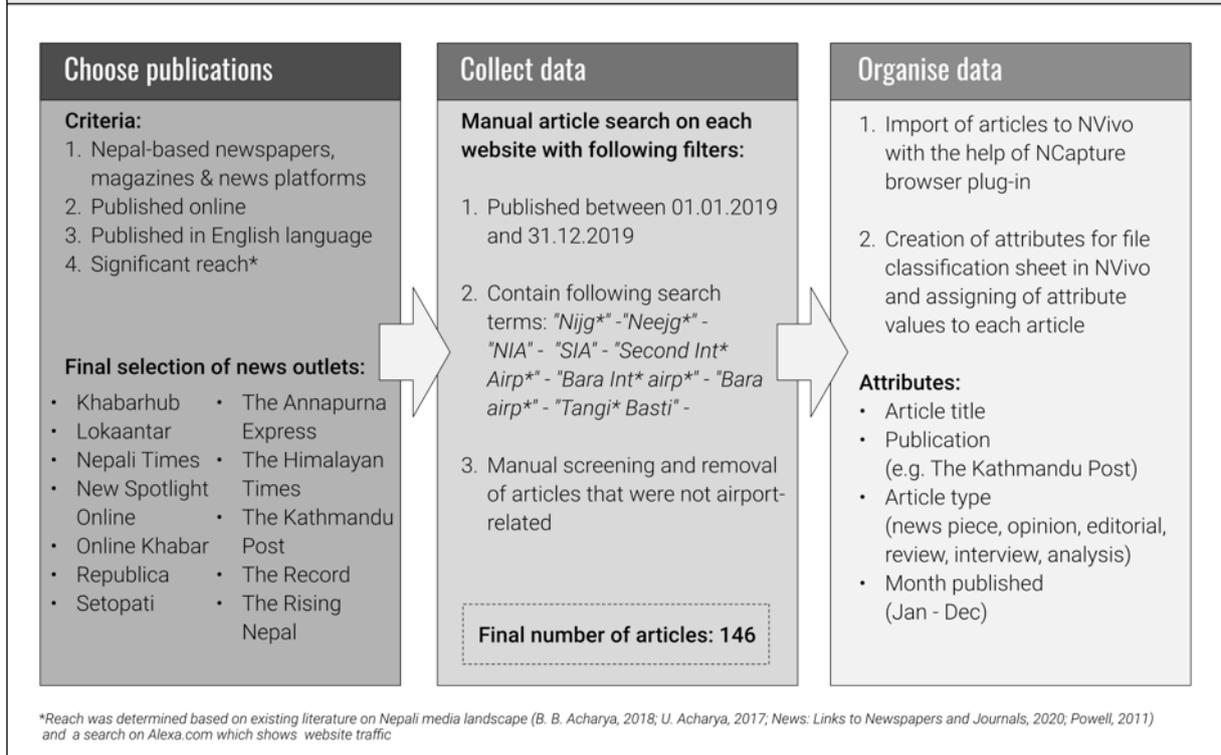


Figure 6. Diagram of data collection and preparation workflow for media content analysis (Own creation)

After organising the 146 articles in NVivo, I followed Kaefer et al.'s (2015) steps and eliminated irrelevant content, followed by a word frequency query to determine key themes. I coded each theme inductively, "reading their content line-by-line, and coding salient themes into new child nodes" (Kaefer et al., 2015, p. 9). Then I revisited all themes and merged, rearranged or deleted them where appropriate. The final coding frame is presented in Figure 7. Finally, I quantified the media representation of the affected communities by conducting multiple text searches in NVivo and qualitatively examined relevant narratives and connotations.

Step 2: Multi-level coding and final coding frame

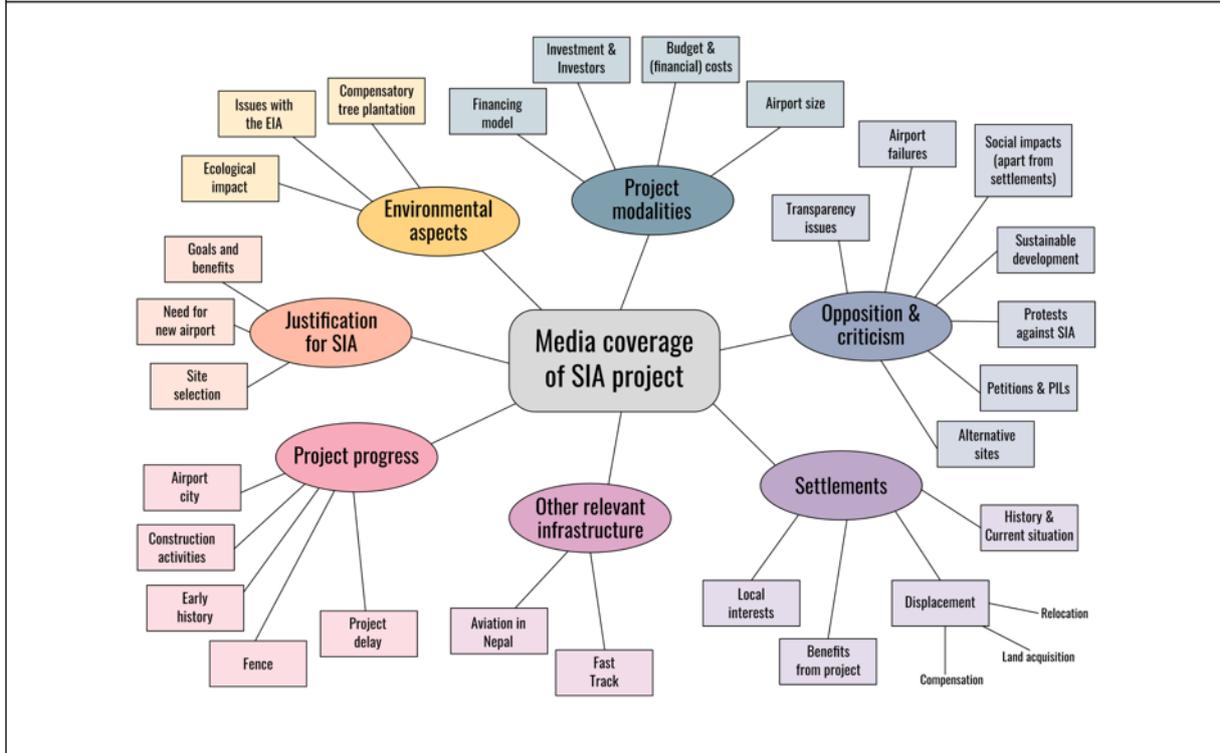


Figure 7. Diagram of workflow for top-down coding in media content analysis (Own creation)

4.5 Research quality and ethical considerations

In line with constructivism, I acknowledge that my research is shaped by cultural and socio-political norms that influence me; or as Creswell (2012, p. 179) states: “All writing is ‘positioned’ and within a stance”. While this implies that I did not aim to establish absolute truths, I nonetheless strived to display an accurate account of the case and reflect on the impact of the research on the researcher, participants and readers. There are ample perspectives on how to facilitate such qualitative validity (Creswell, 2012). Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) synthesised various validation perspectives and developed four primary and six secondary criteria, some of which and their application to this research are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. Validation criteria and their application to this research

| Criteria and Assessment | Application to my research |
|--|---|
| <i>Primary criteria</i> | |
| <p><i>(1) Credibility</i></p> <p>Do the results of the research reflect the experience of participants or the context in a believable way?</p> | <p>To ensure credibility, I used several of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) techniques. First, I aimed for prolonged engagement by spending extensive time in the field and adjusting my initial fieldwork plan to focus on only one settlement instead of three. This enabled me to familiarise myself with the historical context and the cultural and socio-political dynamics at play in TB through an ethnographic approach and gave residents the opportunity to develop trust. Second, I conducted observation in the village to develop a deeper understanding of local dynamics. Third, I used triangulation to ensure consistency in my research by including multiple data sources as well as different qualitative and quantitative methods and theoretical entry points.</p> |
| <p><i>(2) Authenticity</i></p> <p>Does a representation of the emic perspective exhibit awareness to the subtle differences in the voices of all participants?</p> | <p>To ensure an authenticity, I aimed to include a multitude of voices. First, I interviewed various stakeholders to create a varied account of the case. Second, since my focus was on local communities, I conducted interviews with residents of different gender, caste, age and education to capture the different nuances in local perceptions and lived experiences (Sandelowski, 1986). Third, I believe that conducting the interviews myself in Nepali language and having them translated by a native speaker contributed to reducing language barriers and increasing authenticity.</p> |
| <p><i>(3) Criticality</i></p> <p>Does the research process demonstrate evidence of critical appraisal?</p> | <p>As suggested by Marshall (1989), I tried to reduce my personal biases by openly exploring ambiguities in my findings and include narratives that differ from my major line of argumentation. Furthermore, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) I kept a reflexive journal throughout my field work which includes daily thoughts and challenges that I experienced. Third, I practiced reflexivity by considering my position as a white researcher. As explained by Kvale (2007), there is always, albeit unintentionally, a power asymmetry between the researcher and the subject. While I always explained my affiliation and my intentions prior</p> |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <p>to interviews, responses may have been influenced by what people thought I wanted to hear. I am aware that although I speak the language and am familiar with Nepali society, as an outsider I will never be able to provide a complete account of the life experiences of the respondents. This makes it more important to present thick reports (see below).</p> |
| <p><i>(4) Integrity</i></p> <p>Does the research reflect validity checks? Humble presentation of findings?</p> | <p>While qualitative research is subjective in nature, I aimed to validate my interpretations by providing thick descriptions, i.e. a detailed account of cultural and social dynamics, in the form of text, maps and photos (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and centring my analysis around voices captured in my interviews and narratives drawn from my secondary sources.</p> |
| <p><i>Secondary criteria*</i></p> | |
| <p><i>(1) Creativity</i></p> <p>Were imaginative ways of organizing, presenting, and analysing data used?</p> | <p>I promote creativity in two ways. First, I apply a novel mixed-method research design, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative and qualitative media content analysis (Chapple & Rogers, 1998). Second, I organize and present my data using various forms of visualisation, such as charts, mind maps, time lines, and tables.</p> |
| <p><i>(2) Congruence</i></p> <p>Are the process and the findings congruent? Do all the themes fit together?</p> | <p>I explain the methods I have used for data collection and analysis, the theories on which my research was based, and their relationship to my findings and the research questions. In this way, a certain transferability of the study design and results is established, although generalisations are not the goal of my research (Sandelowski, 1986).</p> |
| <p><i>(3) Sensitivity</i></p> <p>Was the investigation implemented in ways sensitive to the nature of human, cultural, and social contexts?</p> | <p>Throughout my fieldwork, I gave highest priority to dignity and respect for the participants (Lincoln, 1995). Initially, I spent several days without interviews so that people could get used to my presence. While, apart from one person, every person I met was willing to be interviewed, before each interview I confirmed their consent, also to be recorded, and explained my intentions with this study to limit the feeling of deception and to create trust and comfort (Bryman, 2012).</p> |
| <p><i>* Other secondary criteria are: explicitness, vividness and thoroughness</i></p> | |

5 Results and analysis

In this chapter, I present the results of my interview, document and media content analyses and explore the injustices experienced by residents within the SIA project area, focusing on Tangiya Basti.

5.1 RQ1: What are the historical injustices regarding land use in this area?

5.1.1 A lack of landownership

Tangiya Basti was established in 1974/75 and has since grown to 1,476 households with around 7,500 inhabitants (TB01)⁷. While *basti* translates to ‘settlement’ in Nepali, *tangiya* points to the origins of the village as it is derived from *taungya*, a Burmese term (*taung* = hill and *ya* = cultivation) that describes a type of shifting cultivation in agroforestry (Bhusal, 2010). Sources mention that the *taungya* system was introduced in Nepal in 1972-74 in the Tamagadhi area near Nijgadh, suggesting that the founders of Tangiya Basti were some of the first in Nepal to apply it (Adhikari & Poudel, 2018; Gahatraj, 2017).

In *taungya*, agricultural crops were grown along with tree saplings, mainly *Dalbergia sissoo* and teak, on degraded state-owned forestlands (Amatya, 2018). After three to five years, when the tree canopy began to cast excessive shade, cultivation was shifted to another, nearby location (Ndomba et al., 2015): “We came here to do tree plantation [...] We grew *sisau* trees. For example, we sowed maize and mustard, we ate that. And when the trees grew, we moved” (TB09). The system was a cheap and effective way to manage forests while providing a livelihood for the planters, who were mainly victims of natural disasters and landless peasants from hill districts (Bhusal, 2010; Ojha, 1983).

[We came] in 2032 BS⁸ [1975/76 AD]. The reason was, there was a landslide in the upper region, and we lost most of our land. [...] People affected by the flood, who didn’t have land or houses anymore came here. (TB06)

The emergence of multi-party democracy in 1990 ultimately led to changes in Nepali forest policy and the abolition of *taungya* (Ninglekhu, 2020; Wagley & Ojha, 2002). Despite initial promises by authorities, planters who had lived in huts around the forest until then received neither land ownership certificates (*lalpurja*) nor alternative land plots. In the absence of any government interference or support, they began to establish a permanent settlement in Tangiya Basti (TB13; GEOCE, 2018). A villager reminisced:

⁷ A complete list of interviewees can be found in Appendix I. The letters indicate the location where the interview was taken, e.g. TB for Tangiya Basti, and the digits indicate the temporal order, e.g. 01 for first interview in TB

⁸ Bikram Sambat, the official calendar in Nepal, is 56.7 years ahead (in count) of the solar Gregorian calendar.

Our forefathers were told, 'You will be employed as laborers to raise saplings and farm the land [...], and once the government stops employing this system [...], we will arrange land for you permanently'. [...] But once we had democracy, the government didn't move us anywhere, nor did they give us land ownership. Since then, we've been here. (TB01)

Later, during the 10-yearlong Civil War (1996-2006), the TB forest was a hiding spot for armed Maoist rebels who were controlling large parts of rural Nepal at the time (TB12). The Maoists taught the villagers to build more durable structures with wood from the forest. During this period, the TB population increased considerably (TB04). Two years after the end of the war, the Maoists won the 2008 assembly elections. Officials soon imposed a permanent ban on taking timber from the TB forest; but still no arrangements for permanent tenure were made.

The denial of formal land rights to the TB population appears to be the first and possibly most momentous case of their nonrecognition, long before SIA was launched, with direct distributive implications. In Nepal, land ownership is an important determinant of wealth, power and social status, or as Dhakal (2011, p. 1) states: "Land is probably the most important asset in the rural-agrarian economy". A land certificate is the key to access to services and socio-economic security (Wickeri, 2011), and a lack thereof renders people marginalised and unable to carry out simple procedures, as one shopkeeper in TB explains: "It is difficult to do anything here because we don't have permanent residence. [...] I cannot register for any business because this place is a temporary residence" (TB07).

But people in TB are not only administratively marginalised, they also face misrecognition as they are seen by many as illegal encroachers of the land they have inhabited since the 1970s. In an informal conversation with a staff member at the SIA Project Office in Simara, after I explained that I was investigating the impact of SIA on local communities, he replied: "Are they affected or are they the effect?" (28.02.2020), implying that they have been exploiting forest resources. Similarly, one of my interviewees in Kathmandu from an ecologically-motivated SIA opposition group stated:

I see [TB residents] as encroachers of the forest land, although the government [...] might have kept them in that place [...], because a person should know that being on forest land is an enclosure⁹ [...] ignorance of the law is no excuse. (KTM05)

An environmental activist I interviewed in Kathmandu reported similar reactions during a panel discussion with environmental experts on SIA:

⁹ Here, 'enclosure' is to be understood as 'encroachment' or 'appropriation'.

[The experts] said, [TB residents] are like leeches. [...] They are the ones that came and took over the forest, destroyed it, cleared everything, and destroyed more so they need to be taken out of there. [...] I was really taken aback. (KTM01)

The above reactions not only disregard that the Nepali leadership was instrumental in the encroachment of the forest under the *taungya* programme and the founding of TB through promises of permanent settlement and later neglect, they also show how the residents are socially stigmatised: “They discriminate against us as if we were outsiders. As if we came off our own accord, but we did not do that. The government brought us here. King Birendra was the ruler back then” (TB12).

5.1.2 A lack of recognition as a community

The SIA project is an essential part of TB’s history. Many respondents had heard about plans to build an airport over two decades ago. Some remembered that officials came to the village in 1995 as part of NEPECON's pre-feasibility study of potential airport sites (see Chapter 2.2.1): “They dug some soil, but nothing was fixed. [...] They came here to check if the land is okay to build the airport” (TB03). After the Civil War had halted the project, a delegation led by the former Minister of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Prithvi Subba Gurung, returned to TB in 2008 to announce SIA’s resumption (TB04; TB11-G). This was the first time that the government had provided residents with project information and inquired about their opinions. Yet the meeting was also used to underline the finality of the project, making the enquiry into the community's concerns appear to be mere tokenism: “He came with five ministers and requested us to not hinder the development process. [...] He told us that the airport will be built and that it has already been announced nation-wide” (TB04).

The exclusion of residents from the early SIA decision-making process is not just an injustice in itself, as defined by Young (2002), it also illustrates the interplay of procedural, recognitional and distributive justice dimensions. Preventing the locals to “participate on a par” in the project planning is an expression of their nonrecognition and social subordination with implications for their distributive equity (Fraser, 2000, p. 113). Their socio-economic status as a landless migrant population undermines them as equal rights holders in Nepali society¹⁰; showing the circularity of recognition and participation: “If you are not recognized you do not participate; if you do not participate, you are not

¹⁰ This does not mean that official land titles protect rural people from marginalisation, as can be seen in the case of Kathgaun (KG) where most of the around 110 land-owning households sold their land titles to the government and now claim that they are unable to acquire new land large enough to sustain themselves due to insufficient compensation payments (KG01-G). Nevertheless, their legal ownership of the land required the SIA project officials to involve them in talks on compensation much earlier than the landless TB community.

recognized” (Schlosberg, 2007, p. 26). Young (2002, p. 34) extends this to democracy and justice – where one is an element but also a condition of the other – and argues that where structural injustices exist, “formally democratic procedures are likely to reinforce them”.

5.1.3 A lack of access to basic facilities

Due to its informal status, TB had been largely excluded from rural development initiatives. Thus, many residents reacted positively after the SIA plans surfaced in 1995, hoping to finally gain access to basic facilities, such as electricity (TB01). But instead, SIA soon proved to be the main reason why basic services were not made available for TB:

After the state decided to build the airport, everything was stopped [...] We need a [electricity] line, roads, irrigation, health services, drinking water. We have been asking for these since the beginning. But the government has ignored us, saying that since an airport is going to be built, why should the state spend money? (TB01)

This reasoning was confirmed by a SIA project official in Simara: “We cannot build the airport without removing the village. Knowing this, investing in facilities for the village is a waste. [...] The focus should be on faster resettlement rather than providing facilities” (SI01). Similarly, a local politician stated: “We know that the people in Tangiya Basti need facilities, be it water for farming, electricity or shelter, but we cannot ignore that this is double expenses since they have to be resettled” (NI01). While these responses appear rational and solution-oriented, they neglect the temporal scale of the struggle, as TB residents were advocating for access to facilities long before SIA gained public momentum.

Contrary to nearby villages, TB is still not connected to any major electricity grid and residents rely on 60 to 100-Watt solar panels for basic lighting and phone charging (see Figure 8). Drinking water is supplied through around 50 taps that were installed with government support in the early 1990s, but according to residents, it is of poor quality and fetching it is strenuous (TB04; TB07). Similarly, education services have been stagnating due to the government’s apathy: “There are only three schools. One runs up to grade 8, the other is up to 5, and one is a boarding school. [...] we could run +2 levels¹¹, but the government doesn’t allow us to progress” (TB01).

¹¹ +2 level includes Grade 11-12 and is completed with the Higher Secondary Certificate (required for university admission).



Figure 8. Small solar panels commonly used by households in Tangiya Basti for energy supply (Own photo, February 2020)

In the absence of support, TB residents have taken the initiative to build infrastructure themselves, often with financial support from relatives working abroad (TB01). A striking example of such collective action is the village irrigation system, see Figure 9, which has enabled people to improve their livelihoods through the commercial cultivation of bananas and tobacco, among others: “We have built all the irrigation facilities with our own money. We created groups of 15 to 20 households, and one household would invest 40,000 to 50,000 rupees” (TB01). However, while the government has long stood idly by and initially even encouraged community-driven initiatives in TB¹², it has increasingly hindered local efforts: “They don’t even allow renovating a collapsing house and tell us to stop building, because the land has already been taken by the Ministry of Tourism” (TB01).

Given the continued stagnation, many respondents wished for a timely end to their limbo, with or without SIA: “It is only a loss if we remain in this state of pendulum” (TB07). This contrasts with the interest of airport critics in Kathmandu, who are hoping for a further delay of the project, as one activist explained: “For us it is good. The more we can wait, the more discouraged investors will be, the more attention this project will get” (KTM01).

¹² For example, through the rural development scheme ‘Build Your Village Yourself’ under Prime Minister Adhikari in 1994-95

From my initial observations, TB appeared like a remote pastoral village. But what at first glance seemed picturesque is a reflection of the harsh reality of life for the residents, where community development has been hindered in the name of national development. In fact, TB's infrastructural deprivation illustrates that the impact of SIA began to unfold over two decades ago. The state of uncertainty has shaped the history of TB, leading to limited access to education, communication and secure shelter. Once again, the nonrecognition of the villagers and their needs had direct distributive consequences, leading to their continued marginalisation.



Figure 9. Pump and line as part of village irrigation system (Own photo, February 2020)

5.2 RQ2: What are the current injustices regarding land use in this area?

After mapping out the historical injustices in TB and how they are linked to SIA, I examine current justice violations in this sub-chapter.

5.2.1 A lack of consultation and access to independent knowledge

After 25 years of planning SIA, fast forward to 2020: According to media reports and a SIA project official, the preparatory work preceding the first project phase is nearing completion (Rai, 2019; SI01). One of the most visible results is a fence, see Figure 10, consisting of concrete pillars and wire, that encloses the three settlements, Kathghat Temple, access roads, and also marks the southern border of the project site. As the fence's purpose was not clear to me, I asked my respondents about it, only to find out that they too were not sure, as officials had never informed them: "We don't know. They said it's for the airport. Then again, they have to destroy the fences once they start to build the airport" (TB03). One respondent said she had to ask the authorities to cut passages for households that still do not have a toilet - and are reluctant to invest in one because they may be relocated - and defecate in the forest (TB10). The fence is exemplary for the sluggish flow of information concerning SIA and the insufficient consultation with residents, which could have prevented the toilet issue, for example.

Although the EIA (GEOCE, 2018, p. 2.7) states that "Public Consultation was sought at different stages of EIA report preparation", the only formal consultation that my respondents mentioned was a public hearing in Simara on 31 August 2017. Its purpose was "to inform the local people about the environmental implication of the projects and to collect the opinions, suggestions and recommendations from the local institutions, local bodies and people" (GEOCE, 2018, p. 2.7). Nevertheless, the choice of the location around 25 km from TB suggests that the hearing was not intended to reach the entire population but was mainly aimed at community leaders and village elites. In fact, most interactions with authorities seem to take place through the local Tangiya Basti Concern Committee (TBSS), which acts as a representative body of all three settlements on SIA issues.

This is not to say that people of TB have no contact with government members. Many responded that officials frequently visit to speak about SIA or, as one villager put it, "I don't think there is a minister who has not come here yet" (TB10). On 17 November 2019, the current Tourism Minister Yogesh Bhattarai made a stopover in TB (TB05), during which he announced the completion of SIA within five years and promised the villagers a swift solution for their resettlement – "We believed him, thought he was going to build it then and there. But nothing has happened till now" (TB10). Despite growing

disillusionment, statements like Bhattarai's still have an undeniable effect on people: "When a person like that tells us something, we are born to believe them" (TB05).



Figure 10. Fencing along the road from East-West Highway to Tangiya Basti (Own photo, February 2020)

Several respondents said that the presumed interest of politicians in TB is mainly due to its value as a vote bank¹³: "During election time [...] they run from house to house begging for votes" (TB01). But despite this awareness, limited access to alternative sources makes it difficult to evaluate the information provided by officials: "We only repeat what we hear" (TB02). This dependence on information produced and reproduced by dominant actors such as the government is considered an injustice in Svarstad and Benjaminsen's (2020) concept of critical knowledge production. The ability of marginalised groups to access independent knowledge on the project, its impacts, and actors is understood as a crucial justice dimension in environmental interventions.

Many responded that they seek information about SIA through radio, newspapers, social media (see Figure 11) or the TBSS (TB02; TB03; TB07). However, as for print media, their importance is limited if they, firstly, do not report sufficiently on issues relevant to the communities and secondly, mainly reproduce statements by dominant actors, as shown in Chapter 5.2.3. The TBSS, on the other hand,

¹³ South Asian concept of a group of people who can be relied upon to vote together in support of the same party (Breeding, 2011; Srinivas, 1951).

appears to be a powerful source of information, because several of its members stated to have personal contacts in government offices and political parties who provide them with updates on SIA:

We contact our friends in Kathmandu. [...] Some of them are leaders who are close to the politicians. [...] that's how we know what's going on [...] We don't get informed by the Simara [SIA project] office, we usually get the information from our friends. (TB11-G)

The TBSS was established in 2008 in response to the resumption of SIA and has since had three chairpersons, including the current one, a *Bahun*¹⁴ and former teacher (TB04). In March 2020, the TBSS had 17 members, male and female, from almost every *to*¹⁵ of TB (TB11-G). People from KG and MT also occasionally take part in TBSS meetings (KG01-G; MT01-G). Although the TBSS effectively gathers information and channels the villagers' interests as a seemingly unanimous voice to appeal to the authorities, it also acts as a 'filter' through which information must flow before it reaches the rest of the community, which again restricts access to truly independent information, as advocated by Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2020).



Figure 11. Local tea shop, from where residents can access WIFI (Own photo, March 2020)

¹⁴ Nepali for Brahmin, i.e. highest caste in Hindu *varna* system

¹⁵ Nepali for town quarter, square or junction

Moreover, it is striking that in a village with less than 15% upper-caste households (NI01; TB02), the first and current committee chairmen are *Bahun*. This suggests that caste is still a strong determinant of the socio-political power distribution in the community. Historically regarded as the ruling caste, until date *Bahun*s have the highest literacy rates and civil service representation in Nepal (Malla, 2018). Nightingale (2005, 2010) shows that the perceived intellectual superiority of high castes continues to lead to social stratification at community level, partly maintained by *Bahun*s themselves and partly through complex processes of internalised subalternity of lower castes. One villager, a Tamang, justified the *Bahun* leadership by saying: “He’s speaking for this place, for us and no one is as intelligent as him. [...] He is a son of *Bahun*s and is like no other” (TB04). With regards to the TBSS election process, another Tamang villager said: “We had a meeting and we chose the people who could talk well” (TB09).

In the above statements, caste and perceived intellect are used to justify the *Bahun* leadership of the TBSS, which in turn acts as the community’s leading voice. The perceived superiority of educated (high-caste) actors comes with the perceived inferiority of less educated (low-caste) actors and an internalised notion of backwardness (see Chapter 2.1). When I asked a villager, a Magar, how aware TB residents were about SIA and its potential impacts on their livelihoods, he responded: “People are not really interested in the airport. This is a *Matwali*¹⁶ settlement. [...] *Matwalis* are straight people. They don’t show much interest in these things”. Again, caste is directly linked to behaviour and intellect. Seven out of 13 interviewees in TB described their community as uneducated¹⁷ (e.g. TB04; TB07). The subordination extends further to the relation with the authorities: “We aren’t as educated as [the project authorities]” (TB10) and “We can only listen, we don’t really say anything” (TB02).

This notion of inferiority reflects the hegemony of expert knowledge in Nepal, explored by Nightingale (2005), and is similar to Rest’s findings from Arun Valley, where people have been living in uncertainty over a hydropower project for over 25 years: After a conversation with a woman who described herself and her people as ‘not educated’ and without ‘enough brainpower’, Rest reflected, “This conversation is paradigmatic for many encounters I had [...]. Not only for the evident lack of information about the project, but also for putting the blame about this on themselves: as if someone had told her the whole thing but she had just been too ignorant to understand” (Rest, 2014, p. 143).

¹⁶ Derogatory term for previously used caste category of the alcohol-drinkers (as opposed to *Bahun*s that do not drink alcohol for religious reasons), classified by the Civil Code 1854 (*Muluki Ain*); now *Janajati* (Jha, 2019).

¹⁷ The education level was brought up in open-end questions, i.e. I did not particularly inquire about it, but people mentioned it anyway.

I argue that people's acceptance of their perceived incapacity should not be confused with indifference towards the project and its impacts on their existence. Rather, it reflects the manifestation of caste and class in Nepali society, where the 'subaltern' have been deprived of any power to influence mainstream discourses. As Ninglekhu (2020) concludes in a magazine article about the three settlements: "The 'subaltern' can speak, but not in a language that the 'mainstream' has ever attempted to learn and understand." It is precisely for the purpose of decoding this 'language' that Svarstad and Benjaminsen (2020, p. 5) emphasise a 'senses of justice' approach as a crucial element of recognition in order to "gain access to 'hidden transcripts'" and amplify subaltern voices, as I elaborate in the next sub-chapter.

5.2.2 A lack of benefits from development

One aspect of Svarstad and Benjaminsen's 'senses of justice' is the notion of 'sense of place' (Barron, 2017; McKittrick, 2011), which describes the attachment that residents have to their area. This connection also became apparent among people in TB, despite the frustration over continued lack of access to basic facilities: "We were born on this land, raised on this land" (TB02) and "When I travel elsewhere, I feel suffocated. I'm raring to get back home, because we have trees, shade, and it's so relaxing to sit under the tree in the summer" (TB01).

Surrounded by dense forest and clear streams, TB is indeed exceptionally scenic, but as described earlier, its unspoilt character also represents its exclusion from the perceived benefits of development that occurred in nearby areas: "The people downhill, who came 20 years after us, their place is more developed than ours" (TB11-G). For many respondents, SIA promises an end to this limbo, and the abandonment of their homeland is a sacrifice worth making "We won't get any development here, that's why we're saying the airport should be built. [...] We'll be relocated to another spot, and get what we need, right? Our access to development will no longer be blocked, right?" (TB02).

However, while several respondents expressed similar hopes that come with resettlement, some conceded that ultimately the government (TB06) and people in nearby peri-urban areas (TB05) would benefit far more from the airport: "The landowners, people who can open up companies and hotels, will benefit. There's never any real benefit for people [like us] who have to work daily to feed ourselves" (TB10). In fact, landowners and estate agents in Nijgadh have already started to reap the benefits of the "fictitious commodity" SIA, as land values have risen rapidly since the project was resumed (Ninglekhu, 2020). Price increases of 2000% in just a few years were reported (TB04), starting at 6,000 NRs per m² in the outskirts of Nijgadh and more than ten times that along the main road. Enabled by neoliberal land policies and fuelled by promises about the economic potential of SIA, land

in Nijgadh, similar to the plots in Figure 12, has become a precious commodity among members of the affluent middle and upper-class from Kathmandu (Ninglekhu, 2020); a trend I myself observed during my stay in a hotel in Nijgadh, where I saw new groups arriving from Kathmandu every day and overheard many conversations about land prices, sizes and locations.

In an attempt to secure their basic livelihoods and to not be excluded yet again from the dream of *bikas*, the inhabitants of TB under the leadership of the TBSS have formulated seven demands with regards to their resettlement, listed in Table 4. The press release of 29 July 2017 stressed that "land must be made available to the locals in the form of redistribution and not in the form of financial compensation". This compensatory land should be in close proximity of the SIA project site (demand B). Respondents justified this with the hope for employment opportunities and increased economic activity - a hope that appears greater than the fear of noise pollution (TB04; TB09).



Figure 12. Plotted land areas at the outskirts of Nijgadh (Own photo, March 2020)

The project authorities have not formally responded to date, although they repeatedly assured that arrangements will be made: "They told us that they won't make us cry and they would manage and provide facilities. But it isn't in written form" (TB03). So, the overshadowing state of uncertainty about what the future will look like remains; as described by an activist in Kathmandu:

They'll probably get better schools. But their living conditions will be completely destroyed. They have been living within nature where everything is so surreal and clean. [...] They have no idea where they'll be relocated. Whether everyone will be in one place or whether they will be kept in different areas. (KTM01)

The authorities' techno-bureaucratic top-down attitude, once again, reflects the nonrecognition of the communities, their sense of place and their socio-cultural structures. Furthermore, also in view of other development-induced displacement processes in Nepal (e.g. Domènech et al., 2013; Rest, 2014), it highlights the urgent need for more deliberative approaches to governance at the community level (Banjade & Ojha, 2011; Cameron & Ojha, 2007).

Table 4. Translation of list of demands presented by the Tangiya Basti Concern Committee (TBSS) on 29 July 2017

| Demands | Comments |
|--|---|
| A Land of 2 <i>bigha</i> 5 <i>katha</i> per family should be made available. | Bigha and katha are customary measurement units in southern Nepal. 2 bigha 5 katha = 15238.41 m ² |
| B Compensation areas should be provided within a distance of 3 km from the border of the project area. | |
| C One employment opportunity per household should be guaranteed. | This refers to new jobs created in connection with the construction and operation of SIA. |
| D Rations should be provided for up to 18 months. | This refers to the provision of food and other essentials for the first 18 months after resettlement while the compensatory land is cultivated. |
| E Physical infrastructure (drinking water, electricity, roads, schools, health post etc.) should be provided at the place of relocation. | |
| F The costs of resettlement and reconstruction of houses must be borne by the government and | |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | households must be allowed to take materials from their current structures. | |
| G | Development work and the expansion of facilities for humanitarian needs in this area, which were halted before the project became operational, should no longer be hindered. | Authorities have halted development activities, such as electrification, in Tangiya Basti and have also banned residents from renovating their houses or building new ones. |

5.2.3 A lack of representation in the media

Fraser (2000) and Schlosberg (2004) agree that the nonrecognition of communities in the course of socio-environmental interventions leads to their continued marginalisation, also with regards to distribution and participation. Here, it is not only project stakeholders who may fail to recognise communities, but also discourse-shaping actors such as the media. Initially, I struggled to find information about the affected settlements in the media; and even on social media, I noticed the predominance of content focusing on the ecological impacts of the project, examples of which are shown in Figure 13. This made me wonder whether this is an indication of broader discursive patterns in the reporting on SIA.

When inquiring in TB about media coverage, some indicated that they felt misrepresented or ignored. One respondent's statement even gave this thesis its title: "they only talk about the trees" (TB10). Another villager was particularly frustrated by the incomplete reporting:

They only talk about Nijgadh Airport. Sometimes they mention the village but never in the headlines. There are actually 1476 houses here [...] but the newspapers always report it carelessly [...] Some say there are only 200 houses. [...] They label us as slum dwellers. [...] If they want to publish correct information they have to come here. The reporters go to Nijgadh because they think that's where the airport is built. That's why no truth comes out. (TB07)



Figure 13. A selection of images and infographics posted on social media between 2019 and 2020 (Collected by the author)

To further investigate the reporting on the settlements, I analysed 146 articles published in 12 major English-language Nepali news platforms during 2019. 69 articles had SIA as their main topic (hereafter referred to as Group A), while the remaining 77 only briefly mentioned the project (Group B). 27 articles mentioned the communities within the project area, 21 of them belonged to Group A and six to Group B. However, only five articles, all from Group A, had the settlement(s) as their main topic (Group A.1). 17 of the 27 identified articles mentioned TB by name, while others used terms such as “locals”, “landless squatters” or “slum settlement”. None of the articles mentioned the other two settlements by name, although three indirectly referred to KG as “private land” and “land owners”. The subsequent coding confirmed that the settlements are not a prime focus of SIA reporting, as shown in Figure 14. Environmental aspects of SIA were most frequently reported, especially the potential ecological impacts, such as deforestation and threats to wildlife.

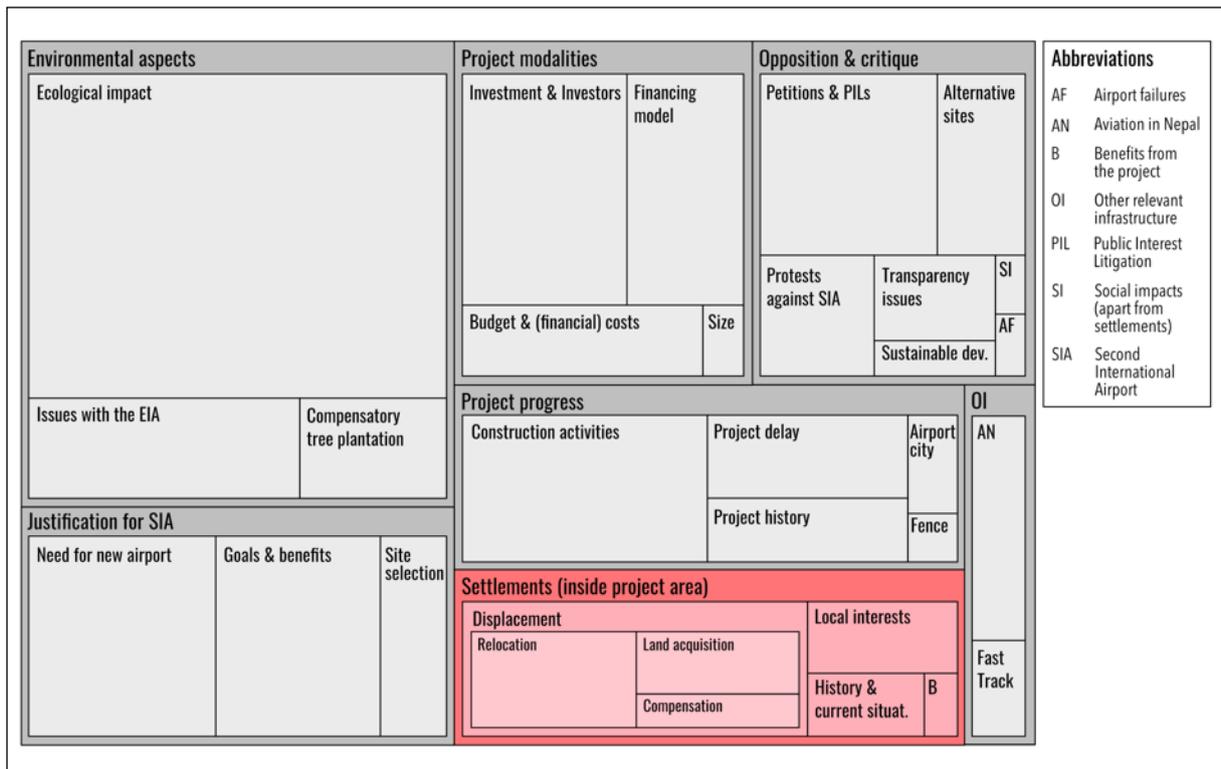


Figure 14. Tree map diagram illustrating the distribution of specific themes in the SIA media coverage (Own creation, based on NVivo diagram)

After the quantitative MCA, I examined the type of information published, its accuracy and the connotations used to gain further insight into discourses on local communities. I found that settlement-related reports mainly focused on the imminent displacement of the communities. However, local history was only marginally discussed. Given that TB's landless population was referred to as "squatters" in several articles, withholding information on the historic involvement of the government in the founding of TB is problematic, as it suggests that people have illegally occupied the land. It is also striking that voices of local residents were hardly ever featured: only four articles contain direct or indirect quotes from local residents, indicating a clear imbalance of who is heard. But this imbalance reaches even further: nearly all the residents that were quoted were village leaders and members of the TBSS. It is therefore questionable how representative the featured voices are.

Overall, my analysis shows that the affected communities only occupy a peripheral place in the English media coverage of SIA. Apart from a few exceptions¹⁸, news agencies rarely address social impacts of the project, bring local voices to the fore or provide information about the historical and cultural background of the communities. This reflects the nonrecognition of the communities and their struggle

¹⁸ For example, The Record Nepal, a Kathmandu-based digital magazine has published in-depth articles about the settlements.

and contributes to their invisibility. Combined with the focus on environmental impacts of the project, this may further divert major debates from social justice issues and bury a more nuanced understanding of the conflict under the dichotomy of 'building the airport' vs. 'saving the forest', thus shaping the way discourses on SIA are produced. Furthermore, with regard to Svarstad & Benjaminsen's (2020) critical knowledge production, the media become an unsuitable source of information for the residents, which increases the dependence on private internal or external sources of information, with its own biases and interests.

5.3 RQ3: What are the different dimensions of power embedded in the conflict?

After outlining several injustices faced by affected communities, I will now focus on power asymmetries that have compounded these injustices, drawing primarily on power conceptualisations of Svarstad et al. (2018).

5.3.1 Structural (Neo-Marxist) power

The lack of recognition of the communities concerned and their stakes in the SIA project is a central theme of my analysis and is representative of their nonrecognition as equal members of Nepali society. As predominantly landless *Janajatis*, they are at the bottom of Nepal's societal power pyramid, shaped by complex caste and class relations, as land is still a key determinant of "wealth, power and social prestige" in Nepal (Biswakarma, 2018, p. 52). In this 'social monopoly of land', "the less land the poor own, the more dependent they become on those who control it" (N. R. Shrestha & Conway, 1996, p. 321), or more generally expressed by Svarstad et al. (2018, p. 354), "structure generates the potential and limits for the exertion of power".

With no or very small land holdings in their hilly homeland, TB's founders depended on the government's goodwill to let them secure their livelihoods as *taungya* tree planters and have since lived in the fear of looming displacement. With the continued denial of land rights and the ban on further conversion of forest into farmland, the socio-economic rise of the communities has stagnated for decades. While, with the revival of SIA, surrounding communities have profited from the speculative land market and increasing land values, the landless residents again depend on the government's goodwill to relocate them as they don't have the means to do so themselves: "We're ready to die. We have nowhere to go. It's better to die" (TB10).

5.3.2 Actor-oriented power

Bounded by structural forces, the communities' existential struggle for recognition and social status is also shaped by the exertion of power by specific actors and decision-making processes (Svarstad et al., 2018). One example is the persistent denial of basic facilities. In a process of convoluted negotiations over the access to electricity, Bara's Chief District Officer (CDO) ultimately used his 'power resources' to deny the settlements access to the regional grid, thus siding with SIA project managers (TB11-G). Another example is the decision-making process on the place of resettlement. While the TBSS leaders were shown several locations in November 2019, the SIA project manager, whom I interviewed about possible resettlement sites, was clear that the decision would be taken top-down: "We only followed orders from above. We send them suggestions and data. Decisions must be data-driven. These are all internal matters" (SI02).

While in PE, resistance of local communities is often seen as a counterforce to political or corporate actors, in this case the resistance of the residents is limited by their fragile dwelling situation. Although many seemed determined to fight for their demands – "We will protest against [the government]" (TB11-G) – the government keeps its leverage with the threat of forced eviction. Furthermore, the communities lack external support and allies who could advocate their demands without fear of retaliation. My analysis shows that this is partly because the airport opposition largely builds on conservationist narratives that frame the villagers as encroachers and promote a 'fortress conservation' approach, "where urban elites call for the enclosure of lands long used and occupied by [...] local people, all in the name of protection" (Peet et al., 2010, p. 27). As one activist admitted:

Even if the airport doesn't get made there, I think the [TB] people irrespectively will get relocated. [...] Because even if you want to turn this into a protected area, there shouldn't be, there cannot be villages [...] And it's really sad for them but that's how it is. (KTM01)

The same activist explained that while she had initially planned to call attention to the villagers' situation, she realised that because of the communities' landless status, it would be extremely difficult to define actual rights violations: "As evident as it is, [...] Tangiya Basti people, their condition, it won't hold for our case" (KTM01). Ultimately, both PILs against SIA are based almost entirely on environmental concerns.

5.3.3 Post-structuralist power: Discursive power

Finally, the production and circulation of powerful narratives strengthen structures and legitimise actors' decisions. In the present case, several discourses are shaping the struggle of local communities.

The government has repeatedly presented SIA as a guaranteed pathway to development, although without a detailed market analysis its profitability remains questionable. Here, typical for developmentalism in the Nepali context, an infrastructure project is directly linked to national prosperity; SIA as a 'National Pride Project'. With the desire for *bikas* permeating all levels of society, questioning a project like SIA can be seen as 'anti-development' and therefore 'anti-national'. This was also evident in TB, when respondents insisted that they knew of the national benefits the project would bring: "It's a work of development. The country will have an income from it, [...] because [of that] the airport should be built" (TB02). Although they want their demands met, almost in a notion of governmentality, many expressed the need to make sacrifices in the name of development: "We love our nation. If the airport project is a success, it means that our village will be destroyed" (TB11-G) and "We have to lose something to gain something" (TB07). Linking development to patriotism further weakens the communities' power to resist and their struggle for justice. Not only are they confronted with government retaliation for their protest, but they also risk being portrayed as 'anti-nationalists' which further deteriorates their already vulnerable position in Nepali society.

Since most villagers are not indigenous to the area¹⁹, their struggle for livelihoods is further delegitimised by portraying them as 'encroachers' and questioning their claim to the land they inhabit, as previously illustrated. Only 50 km north of Nijgadh, the resistance of an indigenous Newari community to the Fast Track Road Project²⁰ was much stronger, as evidenced by extensive media coverage, as their struggle was based on their cultural-historical connection to their land and the preservation of Newari culture as a national good (Manadhar, 2018; Subedi, 2019).

The narrative of 'illegal encroachment', causing the degradation of forest resources, also unites pro and anti-airport groups, as shown in Chapter 5.1.1. As Shrestha and Conway (1996, p. 315) argue: "land encroachment [...] situates landless peasants in a position of direct conflict [...] with the Nepalese State and its vested class interests which, over the past few years, are camouflaged as environmentalism". This conflation of state-led developmentalist and SIA-opposition-led conservationist narratives illustrates the discursive power asymmetries towards local communities, also shown in Chapter 5.2.3, rendering them invisible. It also reveals a tension between EJ and social justice struggles, where claims to nature are pitted against community interests, impeding a nuanced discussion of either.

¹⁹ with the exception of 80 Tharu households in KG

²⁰ The 72.5 km long Kathmandu-Terai Fast Track, another 'National Pride Project' that is currently under construction, will act as a direct link between the capital and Nijgadh, reducing travel time from five to one hour (Khatiwada & Aryal, 2019; Shakya, 2019).

6 Conclusion

Through my research, I aimed to provide insights into the complex forces that shape the everyday struggles for justice and livelihoods of communities affected by the construction of Nepal's Second International Airport. I show how the misrecognition of residents' interests and lived realities, particularly in Tangiya Basti, is closely intertwined with past and present distributive and procedural injustices and reinforced by power asymmetries of various types and scales. I argue that the villagers' social subordination was manifested with the failure of the government to grant land rights, long before SIA was launched. Their status as landless, predominantly *Janajati*, migrant population has since not only undermined their inclusion as stakeholders in the airport project and their demands for basic facilities; it also fuelled narratives of portraying them as 'illegal encroachers' used by dominant actors to further delegitimise the communities, which contributes to their invisibility in major debates.

Villagers manoeuvre their sense of belonging, their peasant identity, their desire for *bikas* and a less troublesome future for their children, their disillusionment with the government, their hope for fair compensation, their struggle for just treatment, their patriotism and their compliance with government decisions. These contradictory notions, which emerged even within individual interviews, have one commonality: uncertainty, underlining the temporality of local livelihoods.

In my analysis, I have combined justice theories and conceptualisations of power from political ecology with notions of sense of justice and critical knowledge production to explore competing justice claims around the SIA project, which is predominantly framed as purely a conflict over natural resources. I show that at the community level, claims to social justice and socio-economic security outweigh claims to nature; in part because the 25-year-long limbo has led to a diminished sense of place. These social justice concerns contrast with environmental justice claims put forward by urban airport opponents.

Overall, I understand the SIA conflict to be shaped by powerful development and conservation narratives that do not provide an adequate platform for community voices. My research suggests that further investigation of the impact of large infrastructure projects on local livelihoods and potential tensions between competing justice claims of stakeholders is needed in the context of Nepal and other regions of South Asia; including more nuanced investigations of micro-level dynamics along caste, class and gender lines. Ultimately, my research highlights the need to explore larger questions of reconciling community interests with sustainability and sustainable development concerns; with deliberative democracy approaches offering potential entry points.

7 References

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8 Annexes

Annex I: Excerpt from field diary

Monday, 24.02.2020

Bike ride to Tangiya Basti (1 hr)

- Gyalpo Lhosar (Sherpa/Tibetan New Year) – not as commonly celebrated in TB as Sonam Lhosar (Tamang New Year), but most Buddhist houses have put up new prayer flags, some girls wearing bakhu

Interaction at local tea shop (30 mins)

- When I ask ST about article in Naya Patrika that suggests that villagers are ready to move (i.e. nearly no opposition from TB), he says that he doesn't really trust the media and that Naya Patrika never actually interviewed him but just took bits from interviews with other news outlets like News24
- Also, "sahar ko manche lobhi chan"

Lunch invitation at RL's house (2 hrs)

- Family recently built new house (2-3 years ago), after old house was not inhabitable anymore
- House has prayer room, oldest of the family has been reciting prayers since morning on occasion of Lhosar
- Buff meat is served since it is a festival day, along with fruits and soft drinks
- I am served first but family only eats after puja is completed – receiving blessing from grandfather
- Father got two sons and daughter when he was very young – look more like his brothers
- One son lives at home with wife and little son T
- Other son P lives in Kathmandu (after 3 years in Dubai working in sales) and works as an accountant – comes back to TB once or twice a year
- Daughter also lives in Kathmandu

Bike ride with PL (30 mins)

- First settlements in TB started around main chowk (School chowk and Dolakhe chowk)
- Later extension towards outskirts – forest area was partly cut and turned into farm land
- Total of 3 schools – school at Dolakhe chowk is private
- Driving past old wooden houses which seem in need of repair: "yedi airport banana bhane manche haru turuntai naya ghar banaidinchan"
- PL thinks that people will get compensation based on current property value, i.e. people with new houses will get more than people with old houses
- But RS explains at another point that property evaluation already dates back some years and every new house built after that will not be included in compensation estimation
- Kulman Ghising promised electricity line – "pheri nagarpalika le rokhyo"
- Overall PL thinks that TB is a nice village – "ekdamai mileko basai" in terms of roads, house assembly
- With his colleagues and friends in Kathmandu he doesn't discuss the airport issue much – he believes they don't know much and don't really care

Walk through TB (east end)

- Some families can be seen celebrating Lhosar
- People working on fields – we see musuro ko daal growing next to banana and corn fields

Interaction with RS at Binita Hotel (30 mins)

- Suggests whom to interview
- Mentions that groundwater table is 150 ft. deep

Interview with BP (1 hr)

- He doubts that there will be major benefits for TB, but he is not "anti-development" and thinks that the airport should be built
- He is aware of some negative consequences like vibration

Annex II: Interviewee list

| Abbreviations | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Interview type | Place (used in Interviewee ID) |
| O Open | TB Tangiya Basti |
| SeS Semi-structured | KG Kathgaun |
| G Group | MT Matiyani Tol |
| | NJ Nijgadh (town) |
| | SI Simara |
| | KTM Kathmandu |

| No. | Type | Stakeholder | Affiliation | Date | Place | Audio | Interviewee ID |
|------------|-------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | O | Local representative | TB Concern Committee member | 23-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB01 |
| 2 | SeS | Local community | TB resident | 24-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB02 |
| 3 | SeS | Local representative | TB Concern Committee member | 25-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB03 |
| 4 | SeS | Local community | TB resident | 25-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB04 |
| 5 | SeS | Local representative | TB Concern Committee member | 25-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB05 |
| 6 | SeS | Local community | TB resident | 27-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB06 |
| 7 | SeS | Local community | TB resident | 27-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB07 |
| 8 | SeS | Local community | TB resident | 27-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | No | TB08 |
| 9 | SeS | Authority | Nijgadh Municipality | 28-02-2020 | Nijgadh | Yes | NI01 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|-------|----------------------|------------------------------|------------|---------------|----------|--------|
| 10 | O | Authority | SIA Project Office | 28-02-2020 | Simara | No | SI01 |
| 11 | SeS | Local community | TB resident | 29-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB09 |
| 12 | SeS | Local representative | TB Concern Committee member | 29-02-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB10 |
| 13 | G | Local representative | TB Concern Committee member | 01-03-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB11-G |
| 14 | O | Local representative | TB Concern Committee member | 01-03-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB12 |
| 15 | SeS-G | Local community | KG resident | 04-03-2020 | Kathgaun | Yes | KG01-G |
| 16 | SeS-G | Local community | MT resident | 04-03-2020 | Matiyani Tol | Yes | MT01-G |
| 17 | SeS | Authority | SIA Project Office | 05-03-2020 | Simara | Yes | SI02 |
| 18 | O | Local representative | TB Concern Committee member | 05-03-2020 | Tangiya Basti | Yes | TB13 |
| 19 | SeS | Civil Society | Environmental activist | 11-03-2020 | Kathmandu | 01:30:35 | KTM01 |
| 20 | SeS | Civil Society | Forest scientist | 13-03-2020 | Kathmandu | 01:29:02 | KTM02 |
| 21 | SeS | Civil Society | Environmental justice expert | 13-03-2020 | Kathmandu | 01:28:00 | KTM03 |
| 22 | SeS | Civil Society | Environmental scientist | 17-03-2020 | Kathmandu | 00:57:50 | KTM04 |
| 23 | SeS | Civil Society | Public interest litigator | 19-03-2020 | Kathmandu | 02:38:50 | KTM05 |

Annex III: Interview guide

1. General information / १. सामान्य जानकारी

1.1 Personal details / १.१ व्यक्तिगत विवरण

What is your name and caste? (Caste mostly becomes apparent from name.)

हजुरको नाम र जात के हो? (जात प्रायः नामबाट नै स्पष्ट हुन्छ।)

What is your level of education?

तपाईं कतिमा पढ्नु हुन्छ वा तपाइले कति पढ्नु भयो?

1.2 Information on organisational affiliation / १.२ संगठनात्मक सम्बन्धमा जानकारी

Are you part of any formal or informal organisation? Which one? (e.g. CFUG, local stakeholder committee etc.)

के तपाईं कुनै औपचारिक वा अनौपचारिक संगठनमा कार्यरत हुनुहुन्छ? यदि हुनुहुन्छ भने : कुन? (जस्तै समुदाय वन प्रयोगकर्ता समूह, स्थानीय सरोकारवाला समिति, आदि)

IF YES: What are the objectives and main activities of the organisation?

संगठनको उद्देश्य र मुख्य गतिविधिहरू के- के हुन्?

2. Current land use and livelihoods / २. हालको भूमि प्रयोग र जीविका

2.1 Personal history and socio-economic situation / २.१ व्यक्तिगत इतिहास र सामाजिक-आर्थिक अवस्था

How long have you and your family been living here? What brought you here in the first place?

तपाईं र तपाईंको परिवार यहाँ बस्दै आएको कति समय भयो? के कारणले गर्दा हजुर यहाँ आएर बस्न पर्यो?

What type of land tenure do you have? If you own land, how big is your plot?

तपाईं यो जमिनमा कति समय बस्नुहुन्छ ? तपाइको आफ्नै जमिन छ ? यदि छ भने तपाईंको जग्गा कति छ ? (कठ्ठा या बिघा)

What else do you own? (cattle, vehicle, agricultural machinery etc.)

तपाईंसँग अरु के- के छ?

How do you secure your livelihoods? (subsistence/commercial agriculture, employment, remittance etc.)

तपाईं कसरी आफ्नो जीविकोपार्जन गर्नुहुन्छ?

2.2 Land tenure trends / २.२ जग्गा अवधिबारे गतिविधि

How have land prices developed in recent times?

हालसालै जमिनको मूल्य कसरी बढेको छ?

How have forms of land tenure changed in recent times?

हालसालै जग्गा अवधिका प्रकारहरू कसरी परिवर्तन भएका छन्?

3. Relation to Nijgadh forest / ३. निजगढ वनसँग सम्बन्धित

How old is this forest? What do you know about its history? (Natural, planted etc.)

यो जंगल कति पुरानो हो? तपाईंलाई यो वनको इतिहास बारे के थाहा छ?

What kind of access do you have to the forest? How do you use the forest?

तपाईंको वनसंग कस्तो प्रकारको पहुँच छ? तपाईंले जंगललाई कसरी प्रयोग गर्नुहुन्छ?

Who (else) has access to and/or uses the forest? (People from surrounding villages, municipality etc.)

अरु को-को ले यो वनमा अनुमति पाउछन ? अरु कसले वनको प्रयोग गर्छन ? (वरपरका गाउँहरू, नगरपालिका आदि)

Is there any past or current competition or conflict between people for access to the forest or possession of forest resources? If so, since when?

के वनको स्रोत साधानको उपभोग गर्न वा वनको अधिकार पाउनको लागि कुनै समय (हालसालै वा कुनै बेला) झगडा वा प्रतिस्पर्धा भएको छ ? यदि छ भने, कहिले ?

4. Airport and environmental justice / ४. एयरपोर्ट र वातावरणीय न्याय

4.1 Procedural justice / ४.१ प्रक्रियात्मक न्याय

How did you first hear about the planned airport construction? When was that?

तपाईंले योजना बनाइएको एयरपोर्ट निर्माणको बारेमा कसरी थापाउनु भयो? कसरि कहिले थाहा पाउनुभयो?

What kind of information was given to you by the authorities? When was that?

अधिकारीहरूले तपाईंलाई कस्तो प्रकारको सूचना दिएका थिए? तपाईंलाई सूचना कहिले दिए ?

Did the authorities ask for your consent regarding the airport project?

के अधिकारीहरूले एयरपोर्ट परियोजनाको सम्बन्धमा तपाईंको सहमति मागे?

Have you ever been consulted regarding the planned construction? Were you asked about your opinions, concerns etc.? Do you want to be asked?

के तपाईंलाई कहिल्यै योजनाबद्ध निर्माणको बारेमा परामर्श गरिएको छ? तपाईंको राय, चिन्ता आदि बारे के तपाईंलाई सोधे ? के तपाईं तपाईंको राय र बिचार सोधियोस भन्ने चाहनुहुन्छ?

Have you ever participated in any airport-related meetings? IF YES: Do you know how participants were chosen?

के तपाईंले कुनै पनि एयरपोर्ट सम्बन्धी बैठकहरूमा भाग लिनुभएको छ ? के तपाईंलाई सहभागीहरू कसरी छानियो भन्नेकुरा थाहा छ ?

How have you received information about the progress of the project so far?

यस परियोजनाको प्रगतिको बारेमा तपाईंले कसरी जानकारी प्राप्त गर्नुभयो?

If you have questions or concerns about the project, do you know whom to contact for information?

यदि तपाईंसँग यस परियोजनाको बारेमा प्रश्न वा सरोकारहरू छन् भने जानकारीका लागि कसलाई सम्पर्क गर्ने थाहा छ?

4.2 Distributional justice / ४.२ वितरण न्याय

Since you first heard about the project, has something already changed for you personally? Generally? What?

निर्माणको बारेमा पहिलो चोटि सुन्नुभएको दिनबाट केहि परिवर्तन भएको छ? व्यक्तिगत रुपमा या साधारण? के हुन्?

Do you know how the construction will affect you and your livelihoods?

निर्माणले तपाईंलाई र तपाईंको जीविकालाई कसरी असर गर्ने छ भन्नेकुरा के तपाईंलाई थाहा छ ?

How were these consequences of the construction communicated to you?

निर्माणका यी परिणामहरूबारे तपाईंलाई कसरी सूचित गरियो?

Besides direct consequences for your life, can you think of any other consequences of the construction and operation of the airport? IF YES: Were any of those communicated to you? How, when, by whom?

तपाईंको जीवनको प्रत्यक्ष परिणामहरू बाहेक, के तपाईं एयरपोर्टको निर्माण र सञ्चालनको कुनै अन्य परिणामहरूको बारेमा सोचनभएको छ ? निर्माण पछिको कुराको बारेमा ? यदि सोचनु भएको छ भने : के तपाईंसँग कसैले कुराकानी गरेको थियो? कसरी, कहिले, को द्वारा?

Have you been promised any compensation? If so, what and how much exactly?

के तपाईंलाई कुनै क्षतिपूर्ति दिने वाचा गरिएको छ? यदि हो भने, के र कति ?

Were you asked if you agree to the compensation before it was decided?

के क्षतिपूर्तिलाई निर्णय गर्नु अघि तपाईं सहमत गर्नुहुन्छ भनेर सोधिएको थियो ?

Do you think the compensation (if promised) is appropriate?

के तपाईंलाई लाग्छ क्षतिपूर्ति (यदि प्रतिज्ञा गरिएको छ भने) उपयुक्त छ?

4.3 Recognition justice / ४.३ मान्यता प्राप्त न्याय

How will the airport construction/operation affect your way of life?

एयरपोर्ट निर्माण / चालनले तपाईंको जीवन शैलीलाई कसरी असर गर्दछ?

What are your demands regarding the construction project? Have those demands been recognised?

निर्माण परियोजनाको बारेमा तपाईंको माग के हो? के ती मागहरूको सुनवाई भयो?

Have you already experienced conflicts related to the airport project with other local communities or government officials? (Any type of intimidation...)

के तपाईंले पहिले नै अन्य स्थानीय समुदाय वा सरकारी अधिकारीहरूसँग एयरपोर्ट परियोजनासँग सम्बन्धित द्वन्द्वहरू अनुभव गर्नुभएको छ? (कुनै पनि प्रकारको धम्की ...)

5. Airport construction in the context of development / ५. विकासको सन्दर्भमा एयरपोर्ट निर्माण

Do you think this project is important for Bara? For Nepal? Why (not)? In what way?

के तपाईंलाई लाग्छ यो परियोजना बारा जिल्लाको लागि महत्वपूर्ण छ? नेपालका लागि? किन (छैन)? कुन तरिकामा?

Who do you think will benefit the most from the airport? Who will benefit the least?

तपाईंको लागि एयरपोर्टबाट कसले धेरै फाइदा लिन सक्छ? कसलाई कम फाइदा हुन्छ?

Do you think the airport will improve your current way of life? In what way?

के तपाईंलाई विमानस्थलले तपाईंको हालको जीवनशैलीमा सुधार ल्याउँछ जस्तो लाग्छ? कुन किसिमबाट?

What kind of changes do you expect for the area and local communities when the airport is built?

एयरपोर्ट निर्माण भईसके पछि, यस क्षेत्र र स्थानीय समुदायको लागि तपाईं कस्तो किसिमको परिवर्तनको आशा गर्नुहुन्छ ?

Closing question / समापन प्रश्न:

Is there anything you would like to add? What else should we talk about regarding this issue/topic?

के तपाईं केहि कुरा थप्न चाहनुहुन्छ ? यस विषय / शीर्षकको सम्बन्धमा हामीले अरु थप के कुरा गर्नुपर्दछ?