'Policy Mobilities' in Post-disaster Management after Nepal Earthquake 2015: A research agenda

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Abstract

A devastating earthquake in 2015 has left a huge mutilation to Nepal. In the aftermath of this terrible tragedy, the world community is supporting for effective post-disaster management (PDM) responses. Nepal government has planned for immediate responses to post-disaster management. PDM policies and programs have been realized to be the top most priorities of government. At the same time, Nepal has gone through a historical political change. Current political environment of Nepal seems to be highly dynamic but the progress in PDM policy process remains static for a while.

Constitution building, one of the most significant power-laden processes, has already been truly influenced by the globalised policy networks and local policy actors as well. New constitution of Nepal is characterised with multiple subjectivities of political and social identities e.g. ethnicity, gender, inclusiveness, proportionate participation, federalism etc. World communities are welcoming the new political changes in Nepal. At contrast, neighboring country India is not happy (for some socially and politically constructed meanings? Or, for some geopolitical reason?), and the grievances of *Madesh* are still alive.

In post-earthquake (and post-constitution) situation, the territory has been invaded with a number of influencing and triggering forces. On top of that, local actors are about to welcome and offer favorable environment for global policy networks in reconstruction programs. In fact, new form of government has a challenge to prioritise its policies and programs. Of course, post-disaster management policies and programs are the areas of priority to be addressed immediately.

Post-disaster management is truly a socio-spatial process focused for the resilience of socio-ecological systems of Nepal. There is dearth of knowledge regarding the movement of policies in post-disaster management (PDM) responses, rehabilitation and re-construction programs.

It is very important to understand how global policy networks (global agencies, interest groups and organisations) can influence local policy environment (policy networks, institutions and actors) and attempt to diffuse globalised policies to local context. In this context, 'policy mobilities' ideally serves to study socio-spatial dimension of origin, transfer, movement, and mutation of particular policies at different scales and sites with various interests of policy actors engaging at different level of power relations.

This paper reviews the geographies of 'policy mobilities' and develop a theoretical framework to analyse how policies are being moved, transformed and mutated to accelerate and stabilise PDM responses, rehabilitation and re-construction programs. It employs post-structuralist perspectives on policy narratives of interest groups to study the power laden process of 'policy mobilities' in rebuilding the urban, rural and mountain geography of Nepal. It concludes with discussion on emergence of the 'policy mobilities' approach and possible future directions of it in post-disaster management.

Key words: post-disaster management, policy mobilities, earthquake, mountains, resilience

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1. BACKGROUND

In the aftermath of *GORKHA*[1] earthquake, the socio-ecological system of Nepal (a Himalayan country) is dealing with an unbearable loss. It has caused severe damage to the villages of high mountains, mid hills and valleys (including Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal). Severe land mass degradation and soil erosions were noted in the Himalayan region. Almost all the villages in the high mountains and mid hills of eastern, mid, mid-western and western Nepal have been damaged due to big quakes and aftershocks.

In the aftermath of this terrible tragedy, the world community is supporting for effective post-disaster management (PDM) responses. In this post-disaster management context, various resources along with policies and practices are being mobilised from various regions of the world to the affected areas. Nepal government is working for immediate relief responses in cooperation with the local and international authorities, humanitarian agencies and development organizations. In fact, well-informed policies will be needed to implement long term programs in near future. It is necessary to study the movement of policies for long term rehabilitation and re-construction programs for the resilience of socio-ecological systems of the Himalayan country, Nepal.

Nepal has heralded a new constitution (*NEPALKO SAMBIDHAN 2072*) on September 20, 2015. Central to the politically constructed meanings, this has been regarded as a historical achievement of Nepal. World community has welcomed Nepal's political progress. But the neighboring country India is not happy at this achievement and at the same time, grievances of *Madhesh* are still alive. Recent political changes in Nepal are, of course, the central theme of our debate regarding the progress in PDM policies.

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The Himalayan region is highly heterogeneous. Cascading effects of climate changes and natural disasters like soil erosion, floods and earthquakes etc., make the Himalayan geography and the livelihoods of mountain people more vulnerable. Mountains are fragile geography (Blaikie and Muldavin 2004) and mountain socio-ecological systems are highly vulnerable to the consequences of climate changes, natural disasters, floods, earthquake and other inevitable natural events. Xu *et. al.* (2009) have noted down the possibilities of increased frequency and duration of extreme events. Bolch, Pieczonka and Benn (2011) have already alarmed an

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[1]A 7.6 local magnitude earthquake (according to National Seismological Centre, Government of Nepal) has damaged thousands of development infrastructures (e.g. roads, bridges, hydropower plants, schools, hospitals, water supply systems etc.), historical monuments etc. and hundreds of cultural heritage sites in the villages, cities and valleys of mid-western, western, mid and eastern hills of Nepal (including Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal).
For further details please visit:
National Seismological Centre, Government of Nepal at http://seismonepal.gov.np/index.php?action=earthquakes&show=recent
Nepal Disaster Risk Reduction Portal, Government of Nepal at http://drrportal.gov.np/
Earthquake Relief Portal, Government of Nepal at http://nitc.gov.np/eq/

increasing risk of glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) in the Himalayas. On top of that, Himalayan geography is one of the most vulnerable zones to Earthquake.

In spite of increased frequency and intensity of extreme events in mountain geography, there is knowledge gap regarding the movement of policies in post-disaster management (PDM) responses, rehabilitation and re-construction programs. By engaging 'policy mobilities' approach, this research aims to analyse how policies are being moved, transformed and mutated to accelerate and stabilise PDM responses, rehabilitation and re-construction programs. This research aims to contribute significantly to the knowledge in PDM policies and practices.

Current (post-constitution) political situation in Nepal seems to be highly dynamic. There are changes in the dynamics of local political parties and policy actors. The recent changes have given birth to new influencers as well.

Talking about the PDM policy programs, Nepal's changing political scenario has provided a new ground where local and global policy networks, interest groups, donor agencies etc. are struggling to influence each other and define PDM policy agendas and practice them in reconstruction programs. At the same time, here are pertinent questions, for example; how PDM programs will be developed and implemented at central and local level? When will the PDM policy priorities be addressed and implemented by the new government? Are major agendas of PDM and DRR being sidelined due to dominating and highly dynamic political exercises? How has it been since the occurrence of *GORKHA* earthquake?

Along with these general queries, a research agenda has to focus on following research questions.

How the recent political and social changes and their meanings have been considered in the PDM policies?

How the major interest groups are influencing policies and practices of PDM in changing political scenario?

3. FRAMING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

3.1. Geographies of Policy Mobilities

The apparent movement of the particular policy programmes from one place to another over time is studied by 'policy mobilities' approach (McCann and Ward 2013, Prince 2012, Peck and Theodore 2010). The paradigm of the geographical approach for policy research shifts towards 'policy mobilities' due to relational connections of the peoples, places and policy process (McCann and Ward 2012, Peck 2011). According to Peck and Theodore (2012), policy mobilities conceptualise the policy-making field as a socially structured and discursively constituted space, marked by institutional heterogeneity and contending forces.

It is evident that power is adhered with policy ideas, processes, narratives, resources, dialogues and trade relations as well. According to McCann (2011), assemblage of resources in itself is a power-laden and political process.

It is obvious that power is adhered to discourses and narratives of interest groups that bring together with politically and socially constructed meanings. So, policy mobilities approach is not only a study of movement of policies but also a study of underlying interests and power adhered with mobile policies. This conceptualization is closely relevant to the policy mobilities in PDM programs in the post-constitution period of Nepal.

3.2. Post-structuralist Perspectives on Policy Narratives of Interest Groups

With an introduction of multiple subjectivities of social and political identities, differences, federalism, inclusiveness and proportionate participation etc., recent political changes indicate an essence of post-modern political scenario in Nepal. This is in line with Newman (2005) - historically and discursively constituted meanings of social and political identities give rise to post-structural and post-modern politics.

From poststructuralist's perspectives on narratives, the important elements of reality are socially constructed (Fischer 2003, Hajer 1995, Roe 1994, Stone 2002 cited in Jones and McBeth 2010) and there is nothing natural or eternal about existing political identities, discourses and practices (Newman 2005). Similarly, Peck and Theodore (2012) suggested that policy designs should be regarded as complex and evolving social constructions rather than as concretely fixed objects.

According to Newman (2005)-

> *"Poststructuralism can be seen as a theoretical strategy – or series of strategies – that responds to, and engages with, what has been termed the 'postmodern condition'. In political terms, the postmodern condition is associated with the abandonment of the notion of the universal rational subject who could act as an autonomous and self-willed agent in the political sphere. This has had an impact on radical politics in particular, where the rise of the new social movements around issues such as gender, ethnicity and sexual identity, as well as environmental causes, took the place of Marxist class struggles over economic issues."*

The questions of identity, differences and representation have received increasing attention over the decade after the introduction of post-structural and post-modern approaches (Martin, McCann and Purcell 2003) and in mainstream public policy literature, the vast majority of narrative scholarship has been in the post-structural tradition (Jones and McBeth 2010).

Poststructuralist policy analysis has been considered within the larger context of current post-positivist social theory and methodology (Gottweis 2003). Most of the works in policy mobilities are gaining critiques from poststructuralist perspectives and taking many poststructuralist insights as well (Temenos and McCann 2013, McCann 2010).

So, it is worthwhile to consider the post-structural political scenario of Nepal to scrutinize the discourses and narratives of interest groups engaged in the policy priorities of post-disaster management of Nepal earthquake 2015.

3.3. Research Methodology

Consistent with the post-structural perspectives and post-positivist research paradigm, policy mobilities approach has employed qualitative research methodologies (Cochrane and Ward 2012; McCann and Ward 2012a, 2012b cited in Temenos and McCann 2013). Multiple methods (case studies and cross-case comparisons, policy narratives and discourse analysis) can be employed for in-depth study of the post-disaster management (PDM) responses from local, national and international authorities, agencies and organization. The role of policy networks (actors, institutions and their networks in 'policy mobilities') can be studied through case study approach and 'following the policy' methods (Peck and Theodore 2012) coupled with the 'study of situations' (McCann and Ward 2013).

3.4. Analytical Framework

Central to the contestation of politically and socially constructed meaning of policy narratives and discourses of interest groups, an analytical framework to study policy mobilities in PDM responses has been constituted as follows.
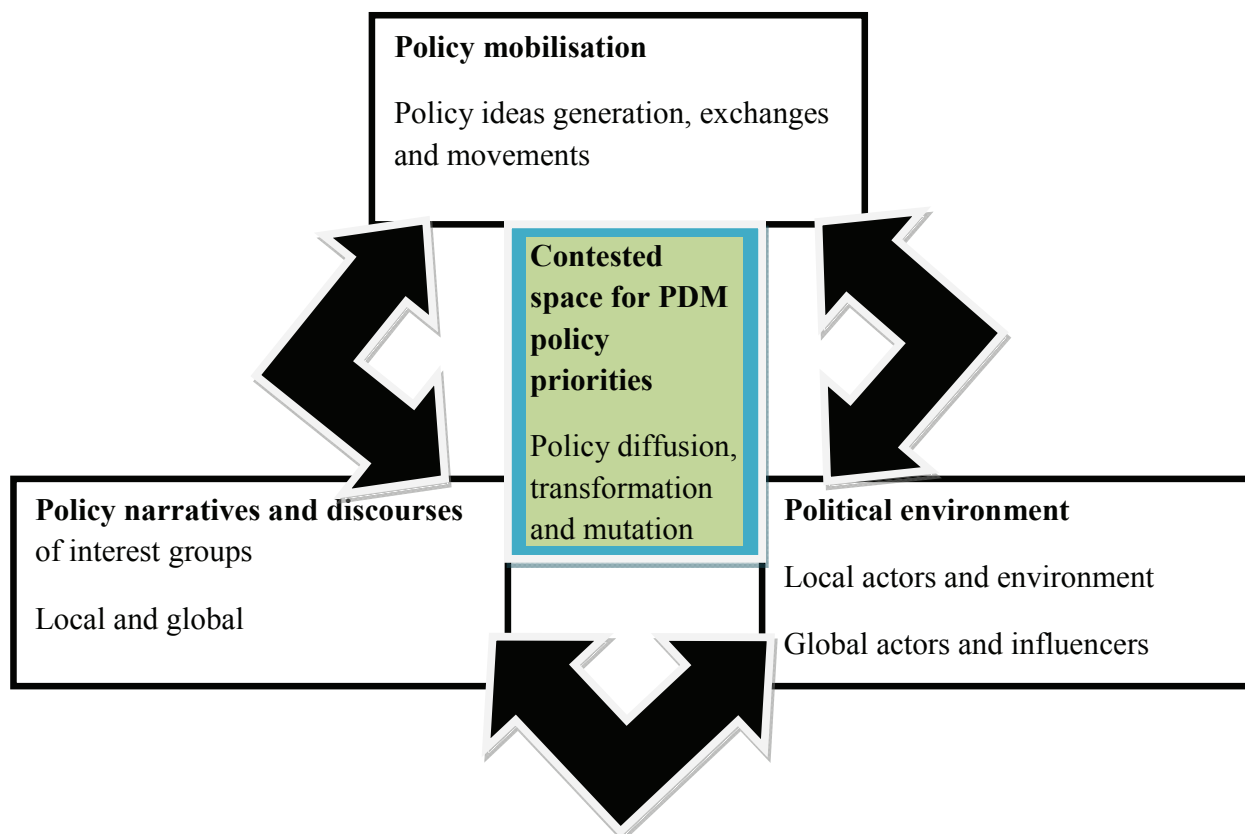

Figure 1. An analytical framework to study policy mobilities in PDM responses (it shows double arrowed aspirations of policy mobilities and a contested space for PDM policy priorities)
(Inspired from: McCann and Ward 2013, McCann and Ward 2012, Prince 2012, Peck 2011, McCann 2011, Jones and McBeth 2010, Newman 2005)

Recently heralded constitution of Nepal is the center of policy narratives of local actors and interest groups. Local political environment is a key of policy process and at the same time, it is central to the aspiration of policy mobilities in PDM responses. Donor agencies (and I/NGOs) are considered to be the next most influencing interest groups. PDM policy process can be significantly influenced by these two types of interest groups. There is another outer space of various political and social movements, resources mobilization processes, trade relations and geopolitical relations etc. that also can influence the policy process in Nepal. In our context, an analytical framework to study policy mobilities in PDM responses has considered them.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is realised that policy mobilities in post-disaster management after Nepal Earthquake is purely a power-laden and political process. Current dynamic changes (of post-constitution period) in Nepal offer a new political ground for various interest groups that are seeking to influence PDM policy process. There is a contestation among local and global policy networks in defining PDM policy priorities. At the same time, Nepal has entered into post-structural politics with an assemblage of multiple subjectivities of social and political identities. In this context, it is necessary to unravel discourses and narratives of interest groups through post-structuralist perspectives and engage policy mobilities approach to study the power-laden and political process of post-disaster management after Nepal Earthquake 2015.

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