House, Household and Home: Revisiting Social Science and Policy Frameworks through Post-Earthquake Reconstruction Experiences in Nepal

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Abstract

Background: Nepal’s post-earthquake reconstruction process has raised a series of critical social science questions about how the concepts of ‘household’, ‘house’, and ‘home’ are differentially defined in the context of post-disaster relief, recovery, and reconstruction programmes. These definitions, in turn, inform both material outcomes and perceptions of them, with potential long-term effects in both structural and sociocultural terms.

Research issues/objectives: How have the different definitions of ‘household’, ‘house’ and ‘home’ as articulated in policy documents, and implemented in the field, shaped the process of beneficiary identification and its outcomes? We consider how those definitions have been understood and internalized by affected citizens, and how they influence both the material outcomes of reconstruction (what types of structures are built), and citizens’ experiences of the process (how homeowners feel about what they have built).

Methodology: Our study is based upon literature reviews, policy document analysis, and extensive ethnographic research (total 153 interviews) conducted in three earthquake-affected districts (Bhaktapur, Dhading, and Sindhupalchok) between 2017-2020 as part of our collaborative research partnership, ‘Expertise, Labour and Mobility in Nepal’s Post-Conflict, Post-Disaster Reconstruction’ (funded by Canada’s Social Science and Humanities Research Council in collaboration with Social Science Baha and the Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University). We also include findings from a 400-household survey about homeowners’ levels of satisfaction with the reconstruction process.

Key results: Our research shows that both ‘household’ and ‘house’ have been deployed as key concepts in different ways in the post-earthquake reconstruction process, with some ambiguity about the relationship between the two. This has led to a range of structural and sociocultural outcomes documented by our research, which vary in each community. Yet neither ‘household’ nor ‘house’ alone captures the full affective meaning of ‘home’ as experienced by people living through the process of reconstruction. Our paper brings their voices into conversation with the policy domain.

Keywords: private housing reconstruction, household, kinship, land ownership, ethnography, community-based research

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Introduction

Nepal’s post-earthquake reconstruction process has raised a series of critical social scientific questions about how the concepts of ‘household’, ‘house’, and ‘home’ are differentially defined. From the first days of immediate post-earthquake relief in Spring 2015, through subsequent phases of recovery and reconstruction, both government and NGO-implemented policies towards Nepal’s earthquake-affected citizens have vacillated between a focus on “the household” and “the house” as the meaningful unit for the allocation of aid to the nearly 1 million families ultimately determined to have lost their primary residence. Yet neither of these concepts alone captures the full affective meaning of “home” as experienced by people living through the process of reconstruction. Taking the shifting relationships between these conceptual categories and the actors that produce them as a starting point, our paper interrogates these categories, and assesses their impact on outcomes, through an analysis of ethnographic material collected between September 2018-February 2020 from several earthquake-affected districts of the country.

Immediately after the 2015 earthquakes, relief was distributed at the local level on an ad hoc basis. In this context, pre-existing economic and kinship-based definitions of “the household” familiar from the Nepal Census, Living Standards Survey, and various other surveys and development initiatives played a role in influencing decisions. However, the post-earthquake national reconstruction program has focused on the physical unit of “the house” and its linkage to land ownership as a prerequisite for reconstruction grants. Full recovery in the sense implicit in both the concepts of ‘owner driven reconstruction’ and ‘build back better’ might be understood as achieving a holistic sense of belonging in the transformed post-disaster environment that “home” conveys.8 Our data shows that in most cases, this has not yet been achieved in Nepal.

We suggest that this outcome is in large part due to two factors: (1) the disaggregated nature of governmentality in Nepal’s post-conflict, post-disaster context; and (2) the over-reliance on antiquated—perhaps feudal—notions of citizenship which rely on evidence of land ownership as the only legitimate basis from which to make claims on the state. In order to secure their claim to ownership and build their future living spaces, citizens have had to negotiate a

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8 Jeevan Baniya first articulated some of these problematics in his March 2018 blog post: https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/violentsway/2018/03/14/rebuilding-homes-or-houses-by-jeevan-baniya/
complex web of relationships with multiple levels of the state—many of which are also in a fluid process of formation—as well as a wide range of I/NGOs and private corporate interests. The objective is to prove themselves to be affected citizens worthy of resource investment.

These negotiations between citizens, the state, the built environment, and the landscape take place within a context of high mobility,\(^9\) which also complicates the presumed isomorphic relationships between “household”, “house” and “home”, instead creating a nested set of overlapping networks and structures. Much recent scholarship has highlighted the critical role that migration for labour and education plays in Nepal’s contemporary political economy and sociality (Childs and Choedup 2018, Sijapati and Limbu 2017). In the face of such mobility, our data shows that houses become important anchors for disaggregated household-based livelihood strategies when many members may not reside in the physical house itself, yet its existence remains central to their own ability to travel away from it. Attention to mobility reveals how reconstruction policies based upon sedentarist conceptualizations of the structural form of the “house” and the social form of the “household” as coterminous and fixed in place may miss critical dimensions of these categories at the experiential level.

Ultimately, we suggest that the experience of post-earthquake reconstruction in Nepal has highlighted conceptual difficulties with the existing legal definitions of ownership and residence, and challenged people’s sense of belonging at the affective level. This is an ironic outcome for a program that was promoted as an “owner-driven” model of reconstruction,\(^10\) pushing us to think further about how the definition of “ownership”—and the material and social units in relation to which it is defined—matter for both social science analysis and policy outcomes.

The key lessons learned are that government agencies focused on disaster risk reduction—whether from earthquakes, landslides, floods, storms, or other forms of natural disaster—should put in place clearly defined rubrics for identifying “households” and “houses” \textit{before} disaster strikes. Known relationships between these two entities should be specified in a typological form that aids planners and providers in considering the full range of potential linkages between the social, material, and legal elements of “the home”. These rubrics should be developed through community consultation, with reference to relevant social science literature. They should consider kinship arrangements, common culturally and regionally

\(^9\) Remittances account for over a quarter of Nepal’s GDP, with hundreds of thousands of workers migrating out of the country every year (MoLESS 2020). Rural-urban internal migration is also widespread.

\(^10\) As highlighted in the National Reconstruction Authority’s (NRA) ‘Guiding Principles’: http://nra.gov.np/en/pages/view/HqNcTEU5o4CaHvaHHQ5wc87ZbBCbZ7Rm5khpD35bct0
specific residential patterns, actual uses of domestic space, and existing relationships between physical structures for human habitation and ownership of the land upon which they sit.

Of course no rubric can predict all variations, and flexibility will be required. However, if care and resources are invested in developing adaptable frameworks for beneficiary identification, with community consultation, pilot testing, and verification carried out during “disaster intervals”, these frameworks may be implemented in a systematic manner when needed. In the Nepali context, these rubrics should be established in line with the mandates and institutional mechanisms of the new National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Authority (NDRRMA), and further scaled at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, with the potential for variation at certain levels of the typology in each locality. Finally, information about these and other elements of recovery and reconstruction plans, policies and guidelines, should be communicated early and often (before, during, and after actual disaster) at the local level in language community members can understand.

**Methodology**

Our research was funded by a Partnership Development Grant from Canada’s Social Science Research Council, “Expertise, Labour and Mobility in Nepal’s Post-Conflict, Post-Disaster Reconstruction: Construction, Finance and Law as Domains of Social Transformation”. The partnership includes colleagues with backgrounds in anthropology, art history, community and regional planning, development studies, economics, educational studies, engineering, geography, law, political science, policy studies, and religious studies.

The research team began with a review of relevant policy documents, media, and scholarly literature from anthropology, geography and other social science fields, and then conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three sites. The study districts of Bhaktapur, Dhading and Sindhupalchowk together demonstrated important variations, including in terms of demography, geography, economy, rural-urban dynamics, and proximity to state presence, which influenced the reconstruction process in each site differently. Findings from these sites were augmented by Shneiderman’s ongoing ethnographic research in Dolakha district. We also conducted a quantitative survey of 400 households in Dhading and Sindhupalchok

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11 Watanabe and Kimura (2018) propose “disaster interval”, or “interlude” to translate the Japanese concept of *saikan*, following sociologist Nihei Norihiro (2012) who argued that we must work creatively in the time between disasters, rather than only launching interventions post-disaster.

12 See [https://elmnr.arts.ubc.ca/](https://elmnr.arts.ubc.ca/) for project information.

13 See Shneiderman 2015 for background; she has continued to work with the same communities after the earthquake.
focused on satisfaction levels with the reconstruction process.\textsuperscript{14} This paper draws primarily on our core qualitative research, but is complemented by key preliminary findings from the quantitative survey. Throughout the research process, diverse members of the partnership team provided input on research design and contributed to analysis.

Research was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, from March to May 2018, the team primarily conducted interviews with individuals at the household level. In the second phase, from September 2018 to January 2019, the focus was on key local institutions and individuals, as well as government agencies and other relevant organisations. The quantitative survey was also conducted during this time period. A third phase focused on national level organizations in Kathmandu took place from mid-2019 through early 2020, and also included a research visit to Dhading district. The research team conducted formal and informal interviews with 153 individuals across three districts, and observed interactions in and around the district headquarters, mainly in banks, around public infrastructure (police stations, road construction projects, local schools, hydropower projects, etc), and cultural heritage sites under reconstruction. Interviews were conducted in Nepali and translated into English by team members for presentation publication.\textsuperscript{15}

Results

Defining ‘the Household’

According to the Nepal Living Standard Survey 2010/11, the Central Bureau of Statistics has adopted the definition of “household” based on the United Nations guidelines stated in “Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Rev 2” (UN, 2008). These guidelines define a “household” as, “arrangements made by persons, individually or in groups, for providing themselves with food or other essentials for living” (CBS 2011). A household may consist of one or more persons who may be related or unrelated, and may have a common budget. The same definition of household is employed in the Population Monograph of Nepal 2014, Annual Household Survey 2014/15 and Nepal Labour Force Survey 2008. The latter further clarifies that two factors must be present to produce a household: dwelling under one roof and eating together. Neither one on its own is sufficient: “People who live in the same dwelling, but do not share food expenses or eat meals together, are not members of the same household …Likewise, people who eat together but do not live in the same dwelling are not members of the same household.” (CBS 2009).

\textsuperscript{14} Full results of the quantitative survey are forthcoming in Shrestha et al (n.d.).

\textsuperscript{15} See Limbu et al 2019a and Suji et al 2020 for research details.
Population Monograph further informs us that, “This definition of household has been used in population census of the country since 1952/54” (CBS 2003).

This long-operative definition of the household based on separated kitchen or cooking space matches with Nepali conceptualizations of the household in lived experience, as expressed in the term chulo, which literally means ‘hearth’. Roughly synonymous to chulo is the term bhancha which refers to kitchen. The phrases “chulo” or “bhancha chuteko” (separate kitchens) were commonly used across all of our field sites to designate a separate household unit in practice: a group of people, related or unrelated, who both dwell and eat together. However, our interlocutors also understood that not all chulo are gharduri, the formal term for a legally registered ‘household’. These differences significantly affected flows of post-disaster resources.

The very first relief payments of NPR 100,000 (USD 892.22)\(^{16}\) were provided to households who lost a family member in the earthquake, followed by NPR 30,000 for funeral rites. Then, cash grants of NPR 15,000 for temporary shelters\(^{17}\) and NPR 10,000 for winterisation relief were provided to “earthquake-victims” identified in the initial damage assessments\(^{18}\) with, priority given to “red-card” holders with “fully damaged” houses (TAF, 2016). Later, an NRA-led CBS survey reassessed damaged houses to identify beneficiaries for private housing reconstruction grants of NPR. 300,000 and retrofitting grants of NPR 100,000. Soon thereafter ideas of the ‘household’ came into play when “beneficiary cards” were issued to a single gharmuli (household head) for the entire beneficiary family. The 2015 Post Disaster Needs Assessment did not offer a clear definition of household, stating only: “The total number of houses to be reconstructed has been calculated on the basis of number of households made homeless” (NPC 2015).

These definitional ambiguities became challenges in lived reality for many of the participants in our research. For instance, in Bhaktapur, we documented multiple household units—or chulo—living in the same house, understood in terms of the physical structure of the building. Usually, these household units comprised of multiple brothers living together with their

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\(^{16}\) Conversion rate, NPR. 1 = USD 0.0089, (Converted date 25th Dec, 2018).

\(^{17}\) Cash grants for temporary shelters were NPR. 15,000 for households in the “fully damaged” category, and NPR. 3000 for those in the “partially damaged” category.

\(^{18}\) First, an informal assessment was done by VDC/municipalities. Then, a formal damage assessment was conducted by the relevant DDRC (District Disaster Relief Committee), which categorised victims according to fully damaged, partially damaged and normal/undamaged houses, represented by red, green and yellow cards, respectively. But due to widespread complaints about inconsistencies in the assessment survey, a follow-up CBS survey led by NRA was conducted in 2016.
families in different storeys/apartments or rooms of their father or grandfather’s house. Many of these families were separated and cooked in separate kitchens. If we abide by the legal definitions above, these latter kinds of families should be considered as separate households despite living under the same roof. However, the separate ownership of these families over the house property was not recognized as legally registered individual gharduri in many cases. This was because many people had not transferred ownership from their fathers or grandfathers into the current generation’s names, a process which would have enabled recognition of the multiple chulo, converting each of these to gharduri. In some of these families, property had not been partitioned for two generations or more. Some participants had joint-ownership certificates with their brothers over one house property, and in some cases, property ownership was legally recorded in the name of one brother or an uncle also.

Defining “the House”

Meanwhile, Nepal’s Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) defines “house ownership” as the legal status of owning a house or part of a house or apartment that usually is used by the household (Kayastha and Shrestha 2003). Yet it’s made clear that, “There is no standard definition of residential house, ownership of house and its type in the country,” and that, “this causes problems in comparing data obtained from different sources” (Kayastha and Shrestha 2003: 175). Minimally, a “house refers to a structure where household is using it as a shelter and which is closed or surrounded by walls or curtains made of many types of materials such as mud, wood planks, bricks, stone, concrete, etc. A house may contain any number of rooms, but it must have a separate way to get inside. It is noted here that a house may have contained more than one household” (Kayastha and Shrestha 2003: 175).

As the reconstruction program was launched, the NRA made provisions for private housing grants of up to NPR. 300,000 to registered beneficiaries. These were to be distributed in three ‘tranches’, with the first tranche issued after verification of ownership, and the subsequent two issued after approval by an NRA engineer that the houses were reconstructed according to earthquake resilient building codes. Despite, or perhaps because of, the well-known issues with these definitions, the NRA issued vague guidelines at the central level that confused beneficiaries, as well as its line agencies responsible for managing the process of grant access (TAF 2016). Likewise, the criteria for beneficiary households introduced in late 2015 were not based on the separation of cooking space, but rather the pre-earthquake

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19 The program was first announced with 2 lakh per household, which was later revised upward when Prachanda became Prime Minister in September 2016.
existence of physical structures. Questions arose about who owned the land on which the house sat, and who was legally entitled to rebuild each structure.

These questions diverted the focus from the full kinship unit of the household(s) living in each house to individual members with the legalised status of property ownership. NRA’s *Private Housing Reconstruction Grant Distribution Procedure, 2072* stipulated that households needed to have legal certificates of land ownership or ‘*dhanipurja*’ predating the earthquakes to be eligible for the housing reconstruction grant. Those households who had not partitioned their house property, but had been living separately before the earthquake were also eligible, but conditions were applied. They first needed to confirm their separated status through a public inquiry, partition their share of land, and gain legal ownership certificates for it (NRA 2015). Such criteria that relied upon the legal criteria of land ownership to define house-ownership made grant access difficult for many people whose houses had been destroyed. No legal distinction was made between house ownership and land ownership: in other words, even if a family had built their own house with their own resources by mutual agreement on land formally registered to someone else, there was no straightforward way for them to claim ownership over the house for the purposes of reconstruction without also partitioning the land.

Reconstruction guidelines therefore reified the notion of *gharduri* as the only legally recognizable form of “household” by linking it in a one-on-one manner to an individual physical unit of the ‘house’, and further to the land on which it sits. Donor organizations promoted this strategy, believing that restricting eligibility to a clearly defined *gharduri* would enhance accountability, as well as creating a natural cap on the number of eligible households—both strategies to limit and protect their financial exposure.\(^{20}\)

The resulting guidelines therefore had difficulty accommodating the ground reality of multiple household units that were living together in one house—as is common in urban areas—or conversely, as is often the case in rural areas, single households spread across multiple housing units. Hence, in the case of compact urban settlements like Bhaktapur, people were at a disadvantage because multiple households were living under one roof, but they were not eligible for separate reconstruction grants. By contrast, in rural areas such as Sindhupalchowk and Dhading, multiple family members were able to apply for the grants by showing that they were living separately in different houses before the earthquake—but only

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\(^{20}\) Interview with JICA officials, February 2020.
when their land title deeds matched their actual pattern of residence, which was often not the case.

A different definition of households as taxable units can be found in the *House and Land Revenue Tax Act 2019* (NLC 1962). The taxation criterion distinguishes individuals owning different storeys or parts of the same house as separate taxable units. At the same time, it clarifies that even if an individual owner has multiple houses in different areas, it is considered as one taxable unit. If similar criteria were applied to define households in terms of reconstruction, it may have captured both the situation of multiple households living under one roof in Bhaktapur, as well as the situation of one household owning multiple houses units in rural Dhading and Sindupalchowk.

However, the definitions of “household” and “house” actually deployed in reconstruction have created a range of complications for citizens. Further, these definitions have in many cases led to restructuring of kinship relations, as our subsequent ethnography shows.

*How to be a “Household”*

In Bhaktapur, it was difficult to come to a consensus, as there were rampant family conflicts over the ownership of tiny plots of land. Even for joint-grant access, people needed to obtain ownership documents by transferring the house property from the previous to successive generations.

Moreover, households with joint ownership were eligible for only one grant, and all parties had to proceed through the documentation process jointly. If even one householder backed out then everyone else would be ineligible for the grant. A man in Bhaktapur expressed his frustrations with this process:

“I told him (my younger brother) that if we can come to an agreement with each other, we can get NPR. 150,000 in the second tranche by showing the house design map of my new house. Out of that, I told him that I’d give 50,000 rupees to mother, 50,000 to him and keep 50,000 for myself. Otherwise, if he wanted to make a house with that money, then we would make whatever kind of house we can afford with the money. If it is not enough, we can add a little more money for it. But he has not replied. Without his consent, we cannot take out the money...” - (P1_InachoBhaktapur_2018-03-15_BL)

Another Bhaktapur resident concurred, “Now, every brother owns a right over the house. The house is also very small, how do we divide it? Such problems exist among 60-70% households here. That’s why it is difficult to come an agreement.” - (P2_Bhaktapur_2018-03-16_BL)
Although most common among brothers, such issues also occurred between unrelated households inhabiting the same physical structure. For example, one co-author spoke with a man in Golmadhi, Bhaktapur, who said that he was having a problem as a second-floor homeowner because those who owned the first floor did not want to build due to lack of resources (P3_Bhaktapur_2018-03-16_BL).

In rural contexts, people struggled with the converse problem, where one household was in many cases already spread across multiple houses or small _goth_ (shed) before the earthquakes. This situation was evident in Dolakha district, where immediately after the earthquake the number of households seeking registration as ‘earthquake-affected’ in one then-VDC rose from the standing census figure of 1005 to 1268 (Rapid Survey of Suspa-Kshemawati needs post-earthquake 2015). The difference in these numbers is largely made up of households who were already separated into more than one _chulo_ at the time of earthquake, but as in the Bhaktapur cases described, had not updated their land ownership papers. Before the earthquake, many families did not perceive it as necessary to transfer land ownership in order to legitimize additional physical structures built by different family members on their property. At the level of practice, there was a clear distinction between ‘house ownership’ and ‘land ownership’, but this was not reflected in the legal realities citizens encountered after the disaster.

In order for a familial unit who had separated from their parent’s or grandparent’s family to formally transition from _chulo_ to _gharduri_, enabling that unit to receive its own earthquake-affected identity card, a publicity inquiry, or _sarjiman_, was required. Before the 2017 election of new local governments, this process was handled by the VDC, and afterwards by the newly elected ward officials within the municipality or rural municipality. An application had to be filed in person at the VDC level, and reviewed at the DDC level, with 7 witnesses who themselves possessed a _gharduri_ card in the same Ward supporting the claim. Any one witness could only confirm 2 people. All this was to ensure that the immediate community members confirmed that this particular residential unit deserves to be recognized as a _gharduri_ on its own terms, and to prevent absentee householders from commandeering resources. However, in many cases political party affiliation played a role in this process: in our Sindhupalchok field site, a ward chairperson as well as NRA field engineers told us that multiple family members of the same household were able to secure beneficiary cards due to their connections to the ruling party.
The rise in household numbers was critiqued in the Nepali press at the time as well as by donors as relief transitioned into a formal reconstruction program (see for example Parajuli 2016). For instance, in the Dolakha case just mentioned, relief implementing organization Plan Nepal responded to the proliferation of new chulo by limiting the number of household units to which they would offer resources. That move was met by a collective community complaint to the VDC secretary, which was ultimately successful in securing equal resources for the full number of households, including newly registered chulo. These details suggest a community critique that echoes long-standing scholarly critiques of the neo-classical “household” model (Kabeer 1991) – as community members self-consciously sought to define what a “household” should be in administrative terms for the purposes of securing resources. By reconstituting kinship relations and the residential patterns with which they were linked, community members found a way to shape their experience as recipients of humanitarian aid.

Indeed, many community members were aware of the strategic way in which they might manipulate these definitions. One interlocutor in Dolakha said, “When relief is forthcoming we split, becoming several households, but when we have to pay taxes we unite, becoming a single household” (Shneiderman interview with KT, December 2017). Such strategic action seems to have led to charges of “false victims”, which members of this project have argued elsewhere is a term that does not adequately recognize people’s experiences of hardship (Limbu et al 2019b). While acknowledging that such actions are intended to receive maximum benefit from existing regulatory systems, we can also see how they are a means for actors to express agency and protest the limitations of the system as they experience it.

*Producing a ‘house’*

Having secured reconstruction grants, families then struggled with how to build a physical structure in keeping with the approved building codes with numerous designs for ‘earthquake resistant building’.²¹ Our research has generated further detail about the process of negotiation between expertise and local knowledge, but that is the topic of another paper forthcoming from our partnership (we will be happy to discuss it in Q&A). Here, we consider the material challenges of producing the physical structure of a ‘house’ in a manner that complies with regulatory requirements, a process through which relationships between citizens and a wide range of government agencies come into view.

²¹ Terms categorized by DUDBC, [http://www.dudbc.gov.np/buildingcode](http://www.dudbc.gov.np/buildingcode)
The Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) published a building catalogue focusing on rural housing reconstruction in October 2015, which was subsequently adopted by the NRA. Four main types of rural house designs were promoted: stone and mud mortar masonry, brick and mud mortar masonry, stone and cement mortar masonry, and brick and cement mortar masonry. Volume II of the catalogue was published only in March 2017 with 17 house designs to support both rural and urban reconstruction. Meanwhile, urban reconstruction remained in limbo. People in rural areas also faced problems since the house designs and materials were not in line with their needs and available resources. According to the project director of CLPIU at DUDBC, the second volume was a revised version which considered alternative construction materials and people’s cultural needs. Later, in mid-2017, the NRA also published a *Corrections/Exception Manual for Masonry Structures* and *Repair and Retrofitting Manual for Masonry Structures*, which addressed many problems of non-compliance, enabling additional houses to qualify for further housing grants. However, even after revised house designs for urban reconstruction were introduced, the reconstruction process in Bhaktapur did not speed up (cf. Suji et al).

In Bhaktapur, people had to follow both the government’s building codes for earthquake resistant homes and a second set of ‘cultural codes’ promulgated by the municipality and the Department of Archaeology. The “Physical Infrastructure and Construction Standard related Regulation, 2060” stipulated that houses within the heritage area of Bhaktapur should follow traditional Newari designs. Many people found this to be “impractical”, especially the criteria for “jhingati” tile roof with 25-30-degree slope and building height limitations of 35 feet (28 feet if a heritage monument was nearby). People said that any house that did not abide by these codes would not get the *Ghar Nirman Sampana Praman Patra* (House Construction Completion Certificate). Without this, the house could not be used as an asset for banking or real estate transactions.

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24 KII no. (Project Director-CLPIU), 03 July 2019, Kathmandu.
27 Traditional tiles made of clay.
As one Bhaktapur resident explained:

“Nobody can make the kind of house that they (government officials) want. They tell us to make our house in such and such structure with such type of roof. How can we do that?! On top of it, the price of materials is increasing everyday—people may or may not have that kind of money. Some people only have ½ ana land or less, if they have to leave half of the land to follow the guidelines, then where would they make the house?”  (P4_Bhaktapur_2018-03-12_BL)

Another interlocutor shared details about the tension between ideas of ‘traditional’ lifestyles and modern realities as embodied in the material design of the house:

[According to the ‘cultural codes’]... the height should be 35 feet for a three and half storied building, with a traditional style slope roof. But if we make the sloped roof, we will not have a place to put the water tank ... To follow the standard, our lifestyles should be like in the past. Now, our daily life is not possible without a water tank on the roof which supplies the water for toilet, bathroom, and kitchen. In the past, it was not needed because there was a public water tap ... But now life is not like in the past. Every household uses water from the water tank and that is placed on the top of the roof. Although we are living in the heritage site areas, it is difficult to live our life as in the past. The standards set by the Department of Archaeology and the Municipality have been obstructing the reconstruction process. The engineers should also design houses with complete space for a water tank, or they have to build a cemented water tank which is adjustable with the traditional slope roof. That would help us to meet our needs and the government standards at the same time.”  (P5_Bhaktapur_2018-03-19_MS)

In Dhading, we encountered a different set of issues. Soon after the earthquake, state presence was at a minimum due to the difficult terrain, so people did not expect much support from the government. Despite the absence of government intervention, the disaster had already taught people that they needed to make their houses stronger for the future. The most ingrained lesson in people’s minds was that the upper storey should not be heavy, as it posed a risk of collapsing on them during the earthquake. Hence, people rejected their traditional style of stone houses and instead proceeded to rebuild their own houses, using lighter materials like wood and CGI sheets to build their upper storeys.

People invested great time, effort and money to rebuild and repair their old houses. The cost was reported at NPR 400,000 to 500,000, with some participants even reporting up to NPR
900,000 because of the increased cost of construction materials and transportation. Nevertheless, people were willing to spend money as they felt ownership and belonging in these houses. Foreign remittances also helped to finance these costs. However, there were also poor households who could not afford to make such structural changes and only made minor repairs. This was long before the reconstruction program was rolled out.

These houses that people had built on their own initiative were mostly of two storeys with an additional attic space below the roof. They had enough space to accommodate household members and their guests and store firewood, agriculture equipment, and crops. These homeowners quickly rebuilt their houses in whatever ways they felt were earthquake-resilient before the NRA program reached them. When the house design maps prescribed by the government entered Northern Dhading through the National Society for Earthquake Technology (NSET) Baliyo Ghar (Strong House) program in late 2016, about 1.5 years after the earthquakes, another phase of reconstruction began.

Many people were initially against building these baliyo ghar. An NSET official working in the rural municipality described the initial response that he faced:

“At first, when we came to teach people, they got angry. They said things like, ‘This is my house, I will make it however I want. It’s no business of yours. Your organisation gives you your salary, so get going on your way.’”  

(KII_Dhading_2018-04-07_NR_MS_PCS_BL)

The main problem was that most people had repaired and were living in their old houses already. Hence, they felt no immediate need to build an additional house. Moreover, within the 3 lakh budget envelope, it was very difficult for people to build more than a one-roomed house compliant with the building codes. However, as people began to understand what was on offer, attitudes began to shift. Participants described how their motivation increased after they understood that building a separate one-roomed house would provide access to funds. Further, there were a range of rumours about the consequences of not enrolling in the house reconstruction program, or failing to complete reconstruction, which scared people into compliance. These included rumours that the first tranche might need to be returned; that land

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28 With core funding support from United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Baliyo Ghar is a five-year (October 2015–September 2020) Cooperative Agreement for Housing Reconstruction Technical Assistance implemented by National Society For Earthquake Technology-Nepal. The program was implemented in 4 districts (Kathmandu, Dolakha, Dhading and Nuwakot). See http://www.nset.org.np/nset2012/index.php/programs/programdetail/programid-93
ownership certificates would be seized; and that children might be barred from receiving birth certificates and citizenship documents.

Amidst these rumours, some people also believed that the new government designed houses might actually be a stronger alternative to the previous houses. Although they might not withstand big earthquakes, at least they might have enough time to flee.

From all of these statements, we can see that many of the challenges in the reconstruction process have been due to unclear definitions of households which led to faulty assessments, as well as lack of clear and timeley communication about building codes and reconstruction policies. As one DLPIU official in Sindhupalchok stated, “It is all due to the mistakes of the past that we are facing the current challenges.”

Nonetheless, prodded with rumours, incentives and some hopes of better resilience, Dhading residents began to build houses as per the government standards—often in addition to their already repaired previously standing house. This led to the rise of “one-roomed houses” in the NSET program area, based upon the one-roomed stone-masonry design included among the 17 design models catalogue by the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) and NRA. These one-roomed houses complied with the regulations and were affordable within the grant amount, as they required less labour and materials compared to bigger house designs. Building these houses cost about 1 to 2.5 lakhs or more (depending on the stones and wood resources that people owned). After reconstruction expenses, people were usually left with some profits. Some interviewees admitted that they were building the one-roomed houses just to access the grant money.

The reconstruction program reached our Sindhupalchok fieldsite earlier due to its relative proximity to roads, so people had not yet rebuilt old homes in the same way as in Dhading. Their relatively quick enrolment in the reconstruction program led to a different set of challenges, as they built one-roomed houses under the supervision of engineers from various I/NGOs and the NRA. These initial houses were built under the belief that these were the only approved designs—only to learn later that there were advisory alternatives. Along with this misconception, the affordability and efficiency of these houses made them convenient to build for homeowners as well as for involved I/NGOs and the NRA within the given deadlines. These organizations were concerned with demonstrating a visible and quantifiable reconstruction output within their project timelines. In this process, the ethos of “owner-

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29 The original deadline for the completion was mid-July 2018, but this was repeatedly extended.
driven” reconstruction that intended to allow people to rebuild houses according to their own chosen design seems to have lost its essence. Later in Sindhupalchowk, these house designs were corrected and new designs for larger houses of up to two storeys were introduced. Even the initially built one-room houses had to be retrofitted at the foundations. This trapped people in a seemingly unending cycle of building and rebuilding, which also led to conflicts between family members about disparate housing outcomes:

“Nowadays, everyone is making two-two houses. First, they built one. Then, they made another one with DPC [approved foundation technique], so that it would be passed... If the house maps had arrived earlier, we wouldn’t have to build two-three houses. It was difficult for us. We had to rebuild again and again.” - (P10_Sindhupalchowk_2018-05-11_BL)

For all of these reasons, people seemed to lack a sense of ownership over these one-roomed houses. They called them sarkaar ko ghar (the government’s house), or anudaan ko ghar (grant house).

Like in Dhading, most people in Sindhupalchowk also felt that these houses would be somewhat stronger than the pre-earthquake houses. However, in both sites, people were largely sceptical if they would actually be “earthquake-resistant”:

“Earthquakes destroyed many strong houses, how would this house resist it? However, most people have trust in it. Engineers have brought this design thinking that it is strong. They are also trying, let’s see how strong this design will be.” - (P12_Dhading_2018-04-10_MS)

One of the major factors that made the new houses stronger than previous ones was the wooden joints at every two feet interval around the walls. Many participants said that it was the only major difference between the old and new houses. However, people were especially doubtful about the use of untreated raw wood in these bondages that were liable to rot when it rained. For them, the use of cement and iron rods would have made the houses more resilient, but people did not have the money to buy and transport such construction materials.

Hence, the new houses were widely felt to be inadequate. Most people had plans to modify these houses by adding a storey or extending the porch to make more space in the future, leading to our considerations below about what might make these “grant houses” into “homes”. Our quantitative survey data confirms that grant recipients felt that freedom of
choice in the building process was more important to their overall satisfaction with reconstruction than the material qualities of the finished structure itself.\textsuperscript{30}

**Discussion: Becoming Home?**

The distinction between “house” and “home” has been articulated in a range of ethnographic contexts, including in relation to post-disaster reconstruction elsewhere. For example, Robert Barrios notes how in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras, many beneficiaries of government and NGO-sponsored reconstruction, “refused to recognize the structures as homes, repeatedly referring to them as shoebox or matchbox houses” (Barrios 2014: 337). This was due in part to structural faults, but also because the houses were constructed on small parcels of land that, “could not accommodate growing families” (Barrios 2014: 337). Similarly, in her recent work on tea plantation houses in Darjeeling, Sarah Besky suggests that the difference between the material structure of a ‘house’ and the site of belonging embodied in a ‘home’ lies in the affective labour required to produce the latter through maintenance over time (Besky 2017). Such maintenance includes investment in the physical structure of the building, but this is oriented towards, “turning a house into a fixed space of intergenerational belonging” through making it, “a suitable space for welcoming extended families during festivals” (Besky 2017: 626). It is indeed this long-term work that many earthquake-affected families in Nepal are now embarking upon – and where they see limitations in the houses that they have built through the reconstruction program.

Some of our interlocutors in Sindhupalchok reflected:

“The house is okay, but it is very small during the festival and ritual events when relatives visit us. Now, our main problem is we are worried about managing sleeping place when our relatives visit us. We have only one sleeping room and that is only enough for our own family.” (P13_Sindhupalchowk_2018-05-10_MS)

And in Dhading:

“... people have many belongings such as big bamboo baskets, mats and such, but there is no place to store them... When relatives come, where to make them sleep and where to sleep ourselves? The new house will only be good for a kitchen room. Due to the wooden joints, the house might not collapse and it may be strong, but it is very small.” (P8_Dhading_2018-04-08_MS)

\textsuperscript{30} Shrestha et al. (n.d.).
Likewise, a participant referred to living in such situation as *vedabakhra jastai hune*—living like goats and sheep. (P14_Sindhupalchowk_2018-05-11_BL)

However, through plans to extend the existing one room houses or engage in other forms of maintenance, it is possible that they will become homes yet. Much remains to be seen, and there is a wide range of opinions about the long-term impacts of the reconstruction experience on identity and belonging. Two members of the same community in Dhading held conflicting views about the long-term prospects of their house becoming home.

An older villager who had retired from the Nepal army said,

“What sort of cultural identity would this narrow one roomed house reflect? It will instead ruin our culture. People are busy building houses now and they do not know about it, but once the reconstruction is completed then they will realize that this house does not represent the identity of our community”. (P16_Dhading_2018-04-09_PCS)

In contrast, a younger co-villager in his mid-30s who ran a small timber provision and carpentry workshop suggested that,

“I think this house is fine sir. If I build my house in our traditional style, then maybe in the future our children may not like that house. They may say, ‘I do not want to live in this type of house’ and may run away from home.” (P17_Dhading_2018-04-08_PCS)

These statements show how ideas of home, modernity and belonging are being negotiated from a wide range of perspectives through the reconstruction process, with meaningful differences across generations. Experiences of mobility play a key role in framing such perspectives; feelings about what makes a house home are shaped by whether individuals actually live under the roof much of the time, or only return to it for festival and other special occasions.

**Conclusions and Recommendations: Reflections on Ownership and Citizenship**

To summarize, many people had ambivalent feelings about the reconstruction process during the time of our research. Although people were happy to have some kind of housing, and optimistic about its potential seismic resilience, often the structures were felt to be inadequate for their domestic, familial and cultural needs. This was despite the exhausting and frustrating experience of working to comply with the regulations required to participate in the reconstruction program.
One woman in her mid-30s who had lost her baby daughter in the earthquake summarized her feelings around the constant confusions in the house design maps in this way:

“Yes, we have to be satisfied now, we’ve made houses three times, I’ve also become old and weak now.” (P18_Sindhupalchowk_2018-05-05_BL)

These sentiments call into question the extent to which the reconstruction program in Nepal has in fact been “owner-driven”. Rather, although legal land ownership has been the criteria by which eligibility for subsidies has been determined, the constraints within which ‘owners’ have had to produce a ‘house’ recognized as legitimate by the authorities has actually had the effect of weakening their sense of affective ownership.

The insistence on fusing recognition of home ownership with land ownership reflects a very old operating principle of the Nepali state: that legitimate citizenship is based on land ownership. The re-assertion of this principle through the post-earthquake reconstruction program is ironic just at the moment that Nepal was supposed to be completing a process of political transformation, which among other changes, was to put in place new definitions of inclusive citizenship. We suggest that the process of reconstruction has enabled the state to reassert antiquated notions of land-based citizenship by enrolling citizens in a process that constrains the possibilities for affective ownership by refusing to recognize the distinction between ‘household’ and ‘house’. This may be in part an unwitting outcome of the donor community’s desire to find an easy pathway to beneficiary ‘accountability’ by limiting eligibility criteria.

Further, we can see how the built form of the house itself—whether in the one-room form found all over rural areas of central Nepal now, or in the multilayered tight urban spaces of Bhaktapur—mediates between family, government, and environment. People’s relationships with their houses are fluid. For some, these reconstruction houses may come to serve as the conceptual anchor for mobile, shape-shifting households understood as a set of kinship relations—but fall short of becoming the day-to-day ‘home’ in which all members of the household actually reside. Yet the material forms that people have built also shape their experiences of ownership, belonging, and citizenship. It remains to be seen what it will take for sarkar ko ghar to become home.

We conclude by restating our three primary recommendations in point form:

- Government agencies focused on disaster risk reduction should put in place clear rubrics for defining “households” and “houses”, and the relationships between them.
These rubrics should be developed through community consultation before disaster strikes, in line with the mandates and institutional mechanisms of the new National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Authority (NDRRMA), and further scaled at the provincial and municipal levels.

Information about elements of recovery and reconstruction plans, policies and guidelines, should be communicated early and often at the local level in language community members can understand.

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