Authors:

Title: Spatial Politics and Local Alliances Shaping Nepal Hydropower

This paper investigates the spatial dimension of power relations and the shaping of local alliances through a hydropower development project in Nepal. Through an in-depth case study research, it seeks to provide a grass-roots illustration on the role of space in shaping and reshaping power relations, and how it manifests in the formation of local strategic alliances. Taking the Upper Karnali hydropower project as a case study, the paper looks at: 1) the role of private sector actor as an ad-hoc decision maker in hydropower development in the country, 2) how hydropower development is perceived by those who will be most affected; and 3) how the two shape the localized dynamics in hydropower decision making and its implications for social justice. Viewing space as a process and a product of socio-political interface, it shows how local communities living along the Karnali River view the planned hydropower project differently, how these views are rooted in their relationship with the hydropower company, and how the latter is predetermined by local communities’ bargaining power in relation to the spatial location of their respective villages in proximity of the planned hydropower dam site. Unpacking the power relations shaping and reshaping spatial politics in hydropower decision making, our study presents the concept of spatial alliances as a theoretical underpinning to unpack the question on ‘why and how power relations emerge, sustained and reproduced’. It illustrates the messy realities where decision-making domains overlap and intersect, and how the localized spatial politics reveals spatial fragmentation with regard to local community’s view on the planned project. From a policy perspective the paper links this spatial fragmentation with the central positioning of local community as grass roots forces for inclusive development. Additionally, it raises the need to better understand and place local community’s views within the broader context of social justice.