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Decentering climate in vulnerability analysis: On aspiration, striving, and the fullness of life in uncertain times

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ABSTRACT

Vulnerability is a core concept within the environmental social sciences. Yet contemporary discussions often focus narrowly on specific kinds of risks, especially relating to climate, with particular attention to avoiding loss and harm. We recast vulnerability as an experientially grounded, cross-cutting concept by arguing for two analytical shifts. First, we decenter climate by analyzing how vulnerability unfolds across interconnected spheres of life within a broader life trajectory. Second, we argue for an understanding of vulnerability that is far more than avoiding loss but always experienced in relation to the lives people have reason to value and strive to build. We illustrate this framing by recounting three in-depth life histories complemented with observations from a broader sample of 52 households in rural Nepal, a context that has experienced significant climate, environmental, and other shocks in recent years. Our work reveals how these more dramatic events intersect with a wide range of everyday human concerns — health, labour, debt, care for loved ones, and the need for social belonging. We argue that a more experiential and cross-cutting understanding of vulnerability holds potential to support development pathways that better address people's lived needs and aspirations in ways that recognize their sense of self and agency. More fundamentally, this framing provides insight into our shared human condition in present times, amidst mounting climate-related damages, a pandemic, wars, and continued political upheaval. If vulnerability is the propensity for loss and suffering, what lies in wait if it is to be addressed? To which future should we strive?

> "The specific path a life took was often decided in ways that were easy to discern… in the situation into which one was born, one's race and gender and caste… but people also carried deeper, and more clandestine trajectories inside their bodies, their origins often unknown… their modes of operation invisible to the eye." — A. Arudpragasam in *A Passage North*[1].

1. Introduction

What is vulnerability? It is a word we all know, yet its meaning often seems hard to pin down. Take a moment to reflect. How can it best be characterized — what is its essence, its core? What does it mean when people experience it in their lives?

The concept of vulnerability has been extensively discussed in the environmental social sciences, from analysis of hazards in the 1970 s and 80 s (Burton et al., 1978), to famine in the 1990 s (Watts & Bohle, 1993), to contemporary work on disaster risk reduction (Aryal, 2014; Cutter & Finch, 2008; Islam et al., 2020) and climate change (Ribot, 2014; Thomas et al., 2019). The concept has been key to debates instrumental in the evolution of different subfields, including political ecology (Watts, 2015) and resilience (Adger, 2006). It has been endlessly quantified, mapped, and assessed (de Sherbinin et al., 2019; Füssel & Klein, 2006; Pandey and Bardsley 2015; Adhikari et al. 2020). Analysis of

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[1] *A Passage North* is a fictional story about loss, memory, and trauma in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan Civil war. We read it as a story of vulnerability in its most intimate and personal aspects, at time when experiences of what it means to be human are laid bare (Arudpragasam, 2021).

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vulnerability is founded on the conviction that a better understanding of this condition and the people it affects can support policy responses that better target their needs.

Yet for all of this elaboration, contemporary discussions of vulnerability can feel limited, especially when seen from the vantage point of the present. Vulnerability is almost always presented as an abstract and depersonalized concept, valued for its instrumental utility: a means to define, characterize, and (so it is claimed) avert the risk of loss and suffering of some population, somewhere in the world (Eriksen, 2022). And while it is widely recognized that people often face multiple stressors at the same time (Obrien et al., 2004; Räsänen et al., 2016), disciplinary interests often continue to direct researchers' attention, leading to a disproportionate focus on climate-related risks and stressors and far less attention to the broader spectrum of challenges and stressors that define people's lives (e.g. Chattopadhyay & Sahu, 2024; Coral et al., 2024; Krishna, 2010; Ramprasad, 2019; Turner et al., 2023).

This detached, segmented framing of vulnerability stands in contrast to the feeling of our times. As Edgar Morin recently remarked:

> "…we must realize that the progress of knowledge, through the multiplication and mutual separation of disciplines, has caused a regression of thought… Linked to a dominance of calculation in an increasingly technocratic world, the progress of knowledge is unable to conceive the complexity of reality, especially human realities."[2]

For us, analysis of vulnerability feels different today than in years past. The COVID-19 pandemic, contemporary wars, political instability, and intensifying global climate change, all render the intimate, personal experience of vulnerability an increasingly tangible fixture of our lives. It is a vulnerability defined not just by material loss or lack of basic needs; it is defined, also, by the everyday emotional burdens that we all carry: our worry that we may not be able to protect that which we hold dear, of the dreams we fear we will not be able to achieve. Yes, we are not all equally vulnerable. Yet as risk and uncertainty become ever more palpable, the fragility of human life appears increasingly paramount. We need tools that can help us make sense of this reality.

It is in this context that this paper seeks to advance how we conceptualize vulnerability and its analytical importance in these uncertain times. Toward that end, we build upon recent discussions of the concept to argue for two key analytical shifts. First, we argue for a more experientially grounded, cross-cutting understanding of vulnerability, *a priori* and agnostic to the topical focuses that our fields of research often impose. Such a conceptualization of vulnerability is critical, we argue, for it allows us to appreciate more broadly what matters to people in the complex and interconnected challenges they face — climate, environment, political, health, and otherwise — and how they experience them in their lives. Second, we argue for an understanding of vulnerability that is far more than the risk of loss and suffering, but always experienced in relation to the lives people wish to have. To the extent that vulnerability is fundamental to the human condition, it is inextricably tied to our means of meaning-making, our values, and our hopes for the future. If vulnerability is the propensity for loss and suffering, what lies in wait if it is to be addressed? To which future should we strive?

This work emerged out of long-term qualitative research done by the authors in rural Nepal, a context with a succession of significant shocks in recent years: impacts of climate change, the Gorkha Earthquake of 2015, civil war, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic – all against the backdrop of rapid rural change (Khatri et al., 2023; Rigg et al., 2016; Sharma, 2021). Our present project began in early 2020 and proceeded throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of great social and economic disruptions in our study region (Gupta et al., 2021). Importantly, this time also coincided with great disruptions in our own lives – pandemic, health, and otherwise – experiences that gave increasing emotional resonance to the concept, through which we encountered it in an increasingly personal light.

We draw upon 52 semi-structured interviews, including 31 full life histories, that we conducted in the Ramechhap and Kavre Districts of east-central Nepal. In our conversations, people recounted diverse shocks they had faced, yet their stories told so much more. They spoke of struggles, intimate and personal; of frustration and humiliation; of hope and aspiration. While they talked of dramatic events – the earthquake, pandemic, and climate stressors – they were far more likely to talk about the everyday challenges we all share: of health, labour, financial stress, of a desire to care for loved ones, and a need for social belonging. These stories stood in stark contrast to many existing discussions of vulnerability that tend to focus on loss and harm (Tuck 2009) yet have somehow obscured the very substance of living, filtering out the most important parts of people's lives *as they understand them*.

We began to sense that something deeper was at stake: our very understanding of vulnerability itself. Rendered less as an abstract concept, a means to analyse some group's risk of loss, we increasingly came to see vulnerability as a more universal and cross-cutting phenomenon, infused across diverse areas of life – a foundation for understanding what it means to be alive and human in uncertain times.

Our contributions have significance for both theory and practice. Methodologically, a more open-ended approach can better characterize people's lived experiences of vulnerability by attending to what really matters to them in the course of their lives. This has clear value, for it moves beyond a more limited focus on avoiding loss to address a broad set of conditions that help people to pursue what they value and wish to achieve.

Such a framing is also of value in and of itself. If risk and uncertainty are inherent to living, it is worth understanding vulnerability in its many manifestations. In the discussion, we reflect on how a shared recognition of vulnerability can also be a starting point for positive change: for it is in honest reflection of our past and present that we can construct new futures. In so doing, we recast vulnerability as a more generative concept – a concept that can connect our disparate struggles, makes us more attentive to a common sense of humanity, and serves as a better frame to advance toward a shared vision of human thriving.

1.1. Theoretical antecedents for decentering climate

A long history of scholarship has sought to grapple with the relative influence of climate and other "natural" hazards on human vulnerability (Eakin & Luers 2006, Watts, 2015). While many researchers have concerned themselves with identifying populations at risk to specific stressors (often called the 'risk-hazard' approach), "critical" social science perspectives have asked broader questions about the social processes that place people in a position to be harmed as well as the implications of this loss in people's lives.

Within "critical" approaches, one dominant strand is the "political economy" tradition. Research in this area has sought to understand the social processes that make people susceptible to loss and injury, well before a shock or stressor occurs (Blaikie et al., 2014; Ribot, 2010; Taylor, 2015). This perspective recognizes that vulnerability is typically differentiated across different segments of society, yet it is not merely that some disadvantaged groups may be more at risk (Fischer & Chhatre, 2015). Rather, such work seeks to understand the societal structures – the nature of labor relationships, social hierarchies (for example relating to class and caste), financial authority, political processes, and assets and land ownership, to name a few – that perpetuate poverty, render some groups without power, and give them limited capacity to respond when disaster strikes (Sapkota et al., 2016; Barnett, 2020; Ribot, 2014; Watts & Bohle, 1993). Core to this view is the recognition that people often experience multiple social and environmental stressors at once (McDowell & Hess, 2012; Gentle and Maraseni 2012; Obrien et al., 2004), and that many people are unable to build up a "buffer" to protect

[2] Published in *Le Monde*, January 2024: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/01/24/edgar-morin-faced-with-the-polycrisis-humanity-is-going-through-the-first-resistance-is-that-of-the-spirit_6460205_23.html.

themselves against shocks – thus creating a vicious cycle that perpetuates loss (Sapkota et al., 2016; Ramprasad, 2019; Swift, 1989).

While work in the political economy tradition has often focused on larger-scale societal structures, other traditions, especially feminist and decolonial approaches, have given greater attention to personal and affective experiences of vulnerability. Such work has often analyzed the nature of interpersonal relationships and subjectivities that shape status and power in society (Arora-Jonsson, 2011; Eriksen et al., 2015) as well as in the household, thus influencing women's ability to protect their needs (Kabeer, 2011; Nichols et al., 2020). Work in this area has given particular attention to the subjective and often highly personal aspects of vulnerability and embodied experiences through which people make sense of environmental changes (Chakraborty and Sherpa, 2021; Kothari & Arnall, 2019; Nightingale et al., 2022; Woroniecki et al., 2024) and respond to them in their daily lives (Castro & Sen, 2022; Gupta et al., 2021; Quealy & Yates, 2021). In so doing, this work has argued that greater attention to cultural values, place attachments, and affective dimensions through which people experience change holds potential to challenge technocratic approaches to climate adaptation in favor of more democratic, locally resonant, and just policy responses (Chakraborty and Sherpa, 2021; Tschakert et al., 2017).

Taken together, these bodies of research have already "decentered" climate in vulnerability analysis in several respects. By analyzing social structures that shape exposure to loss as well as the personal and affective ways that loss is experienced, these traditions direct attention toward the eminently human dimensions of vulnerability. We see value in going even further, as we shall now explore.

1.2. Toward a more general understanding of vulnerability

What is at stake in analyses of vulnerability? As scholars have long argued, framings of vulnerability matter because they shape avenues for societal action (O'Brien et al., 2007; Ribot, 2014). By framing vulnerability as a social phenomenon, scholars working in critical social science traditions suggest it may be possible to target deeper societal causes of vulnerability and broader values and aspirations, thus identifying ways to create more just and transformative futures (Borras et al., 2022; Fedele et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2022).

Yet research, like vulnerability itself, is produced in a social context. It is worth pausing to reflect on how researchers' own positionality may delimit what constitutes a meaningful focus of analysis. Contemporary discussions, we argue, risk misrecognizing people's own experiences of vulnerability, thus perpetuating injustice.

Research into the social dimensions of climate change has seen a rapid growth in scholarly attention in the past two decades; it is now the domain in which vulnerability is most extensively discussed in fields connected to this work.[3] As a foremost *global* concern, relating one's research to climate holds potential to increase recognition. And thus, even accounts that draw attention to diverse social and economic challenges that vulnerable people face still frequently frame their work in relation to climate. Work on "multiple exposures" often has the form of "*x climate risk* + *y social phenomena*", where the *y* is staged as an analytical device to show that the effects of *x* are not the unmediated outcome of biophysical events but shaped by social realities. When Ribot states that "vulnerability does not fall from the sky", it is worth noting that his title is still pointing toward the sky, if even to make a rhetorical point of where vulnerability does not come from (Ribot, 2010).[4]

This focus underscores the currency of climate as a key arena of policy focus. Perhaps, too, it points toward a more subtle "othering" characteristic of much vulnerability research (Thomas & Warner, 2019; Eriksen, 2022; Mikulewicz, 2020). It is certainly the case that much work on vulnerability has focused on certain groups understood to be poor and marginal, typically people either directly dependent upon the environment for their livelihoods or who lack the ability to get out of harm's way when disaster strikes. Academics, educated middle-class people in (primarily) global north institutions, often express great empathy and conviction, yet most lack their own embodied experiences of acute exposure to disaster (Sultana, 2022; Weatherill, 2023). It is as though the concept of vulnerability – framed as a social phenomenon, yet told with reference to environmental stressors – exists in some other realm than "ordinary" human experience, distinct from the routine human struggles of health, love, and social belonging that form the substance of everyday life (Castro & Sen, 2022; Scoville-Simonds, 2018; Chakraborty et al. 2023). Being vulnerable appears as an exceptional state, belonging to some "other" population of poor and marginal, groups whose primary focus is to get by unharmed rather than to grow and thrive.

And yet, if vulnerability has often been a story about the plight of others, the storytellers – in this case, researchers writing papers – have surely experienced their own destabilizing moments, sometimes prompting reflections of their own vulnerability. Eriksen writes about how the death of loved ones shaped how she related to the experiences of people in the contexts she researched (Eriksen, 2022). The dramatic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic caused many researchers to reflect upon shared experiences of precarity (Gómez Becerra & Muneri-Wangari, 2021; Gonda et al., 2021). For some, it catalyzed a renewed conviction of the need to pursue global challenges through an ethic that emphasizes a shared sense of humanity (Oldekop et al., 2020; Schipper et al., 2021).

Our current work builds on these sentiments to reframe the concept of vulnerability as one that is inherent and universal, *a priori* and apart from current climate debates, a critical concept for grappling with our shared human condition in these uncertain times.

Several key works provide intellectual inspiration for this work. First, we draw on Jakimow's argument in her book "Decentring development" (Jakimow, 2015). She makes the case that to understand how development works, it is necessary to decenter development practice as a focal point of analysis. Rather, it is only in deep appreciation of people's lives and experiences that we can understand what development accomplishes, often by reshaping people's very intimate sense of self. In much the same way, our work directs attention away from a prescribed focus on climate (or any other given shock) toward the fullness in which people understand their lives. To do so, we also find inspiration in Singh's use of life histories (Singh et al., 2019) and Chakraborty et al.'s use of storytelling (2023) to better understand the ways that climate intersects with people's life experiences and trajectories (see also Maîtrot et al., 2021; Tebboth et al., 2023).

For us, the shifts proposed by this article are not simply analytically useful, but grounded upon deeper ethical convictions – the view that foregrounding people's voices to articulate their felt experiences is fundamental to recognizing them as full, complex, and worthy human beings (Benjaminsen et al., 2022; Fraser 2010). This also aligns with recent work that has increasingly focused on the intimate and personal, where vulnerability is seen as a foundation for cultivating a shared sense

[3] Of course, the term vulnerability is widely used in a variety of fields, from psychology to epidemiology. Our work engages with discussions in development studies, agrarian studies, urban planning, and the environmental social sciences, broadly defined.

[4] Ribot's extensive work on vulnerability makes it clear that he, too, views vulnerability as a more general phenomenon. We merely wish to point out the centrality of climate within current debates, even among researchers that would wish to challenge this focus. Critical readers may notice that our title does the same as Ribot's!

of humanity. As Eriksen (2022) asks, "Is my vulnerability so different from yours?" For her, recognizing personal experiences of vulnerability that we all live in and through can be a way of cultivating compassion, which she argues may be a key resource for pursuing shared socio-environmental transformations. For others, vulnerability has been embraced as a methodological predisposition: exposing the researcher's own vulnerability can disturb power relationships and open up avenues for mutual understanding (Jakimow, 2020). Other work has seen vulnerability less as an affliction and more as a source of strength – for it is in acknowledging weaknesses that we can better come to terms with our condition as humans, sustain intimate connections, and address our most fundamental needs (Kulick, 2024).[5]

Finally, we are drawn toward the growing recognition of the close interconnection of multiple spheres of life and the desire to advance toward a better life. Recent work by Dyson and Jeffrey (2024), for example, documents how young people in North India seek to envision and build lives beyond 'mere survival' toward a broader sense of purpose and fulfillment. Chakraborty et al. (2023) show how experiences of climate are always navigated in relation to diverse strategies for survival and advancement across generations. Such work aligns with our own attempts to reframe vulnerability away from a focus on loss toward a conceptualization that more fully engages with people's hopes – the ability of people to pursue lives that they have reason to value.

We develop these themes in the empirical material that follows.

2. Methods and study area

We conducted intensive qualitative enquiry in the Ramechhap and Kavre Districts in the middle hills of east-central Nepal – a country that has experienced multiple significant shocks in recent years. This includes the Gorkha Earthquake of 2015, a devastating event which left 9 thousand people dead and 3 million people homeless (NPC, 2015). The country's civil war, which ended in 2006, brought acute experiences of violence, fear, and loss. The COVID 19 pandemic resulted in a widespread reverse migration of people back to their home communities, disrupting livelihoods and exacerbating hunger for many (Khatri et al. 2023). Finally, the country is identified as particularly vulnerable to climate change, due to changing rainfall patterns and heightened risk to various stressors, with high levels of poverty (GoN 2021). All of this has occurred against the backdrop of rapid changes in rural society, including a growing prominence of off-farm employment, demographic shifts resulting from wage labor migration, and improved access to consumer goods and markets as a result of infrastructure development (Khatri et al., 2023; Rigg et al., 2016; Sharma, 2021; see also section 4).

Insights from this paper are built upon the team's long-term experience living and researching in the region. Primary data is drawn from three villages – Ratmata (Kavre District) and Sirandanda and Deurali (Ramechhap District).[6] Ratmata is well connected to Kathmandu; it has comparatively good access to education and healthcare, with a significant growth in commercial agriculture. Deurali is subsistence-oriented, with overall high levels of food self-sufficiency and good access to state services. Sirandanda is remote, with greater water stress, more acute poverty, limited public transport, and high levels of outmigration. Our goal is not to compare vulnerability across these contexts. These villages reflect a diversity of conditions that have shaped people's lived experiences and life trajectories.

We interviewed 52 households in 2020 and 21. Of this, we conducted full life history interviews with 31. We selected households that vary according to socio-economic status, livelihoods, and caste and ethnicity, and we spoke with adults of different ages and genders. Caste refers to a hereditary system of social stratification in Hindu society. Ethnicity entails membership in culturally distinct groups, usually outside the Hindu caste hierarchy. In Nepal, lower castes and minority ethnic groups have often had less land, limited political power, and fewer opportunities to advance socially or economically. Gender is also an important determinant of life opportunities. Historically, women have had limited agency to define their roles in the family or society yet bear a substantial role in caregiving and childrearing. We reflect on how these societally defined roles are changing in section 4 below.

We began data collection in each village with exploratory meetings with local government representatives, who referred us to individuals with in-depth knowledge of the village's history, geography, and economy. With their help, we developed village profiles covering social, economic, environmental, physical, and demographic aspects. Using these profiles as a guide, we visited different hamlets and interviewed households that reflect diverse income sources, caste, and geographic location. Some households were selected simply because someone was available at the time we walked near their home. Others were chosen purposively from suggestions of earlier respondents. We conducted all interviews at participants' homes. We spoke with whomever was available when we visited. Our full sample included 25 upper caste households (11 Brahman and 14 Chhetri), 5 lower caste households, and 23 from indigenous ethnic groups. Our sample of primary respondents includes 35 men (4 of whom were accompanied by their wives, who spoke much less) and 17 women (all interviewed independently).

We followed a semi-structured interview checklist focusing on livelihoods, shocks and stressors (environmental, economic, social, and otherwise), and personal experiences. During life history interviews, we asked respondents to share a detailed story about their life. As the conversation unfolded, we asked people to reflect on challenges, milestones, and "turning points" – both negative and positive – to understand their decisions, motivations, and aspirations (Maîtrot et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2019). As much as possible, we let the conversation flow freely so that people could focus on what matters to them.

The authorship team comprises researchers based in the United States, Europe, and Nepal, including two co-authors who grew up in rural Nepal. While the field team's local connections have helped to build trust, we also recognize that researchers living in Kathmandu can seem far away from village life. We have done our best to make people comfortable during conversations. We have been particularly careful when discussing emotionally distressing issues and ensuring that people speak only about what they want to. This research has been approved by two ethical review boards (University of Minnesota and the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad).

Section 4 discusses broad trends in the study region, based on overarching accounts in our data. Section 5 presents three life history vignettes. The stories were selected because they include individuals from different livelihoods, socio-economic status, and genders. While all are unique, they exemplify many prominent themes we found in our data.

We recognize that peoples' lives are multilayered, and always in a process of interpretation. We have simply done our best to recount people's experiences as they have conveyed them to us and to interpret them as accurately as we can.

3. Changing experiences of vulnerability and aspiration in the middle hills of Nepal[7]

Living conditions and aspirations have changed greatly in the study villages over the past generation. Historically, most were relatively disconnected from markets, and households depended on subsistence

[5] See also the "Engaging Vulnerability" research program at Uppsala University: https://www.engagingvulnerability.se/.

[6] We use pseudonyms for all villages and individuals described in the text to protect anonymity.

[7] Our text cannot capture the complex and multifaceted changes in contemporary rural Nepal; we simply do our best to highlight broad trends that we found in our data. For further discussion, see especially Sharma (2021).

farming. In drier villages such as Sirandanda, food insecurity was greater than today, often exacerbated by uncertain rains. During our interviews, people often recalled experiences of hunger and anxiety from years past.

The last three decades have brought significant changes to the region through growing market integration and migration. Overall, poverty and deprivation have decreased, while food security, nutrition, and education have all improved – similar to patterns observed elsewhere in Nepal (Morioka and Kondo 2017, Sharma 2021). People's aspirations have also expanded. Today, many people hope their children will achieve off-farm employment in government service or long-distance migration. Such dreams hold a promise of greater material comfort and social esteem. Yet while some households do achieve a more prosperous life, many fail to achieve their hopes and are caught in cycles of debt and desperation (see Pain et al., 2024).

In our interviews, we asked respondents to recount their life journeys starting with their childhood. People often spoke of poverty and hardship, tempered with youthful aspirations for what they thought they might achieve in their lives. Most started with little money and limited education. They had their bodies, their labor, and, for some, access to land.

Life trajectories are shaped by social status and existing assets, which is itself rooted in much longer histories of power and marginalization. Higher caste households tend to have more and higher quality land as well as other productive assets (see Regmi 1976). Such households are often better able to position their children to transition to more secure off-farm employment through better education and opportunities for future employment. Those with fewer assets often stretch their financial limits investing in their children with the hope of achieving a more secure life later on. Many incur substantial debt and continue to rely upon agriculture, thus leaving them exposed to the vagaries of climate and other environmental stressors (see Khatri et al. 2023; Sapkota et al. 2016).

Risks and burdens vary between genders as well. Men are more likely to travel long distances for work and they often labour in dangerous conditions. They bear societal expectations to provide for their families, which can result in a sense of social shame when they are unable to meet expectations. Women are more likely to have their own income sources than in the past, and in the context of male-outmigration, manage a growing number of household tasks. Yet many still have limited agency to make strategic decisions within the household, especially regarding household finances (see Rajkarnikar 2020; Doss et al. 2022). Moreover, as women take on greater responsibility for household economic activities, particularly farming, their social roles in providing food, childcare, and elderly care persist, and their time and labor are increasingly burdened (see Maharjan et al, 2012; Ghimire et al., 2021).

Agriculture continues to be important to rural livelihoods, and most households continue to engage in subsistence farming. Increasingly, some have diversified into cash crop production. For farmers with irrigation and access to Kathmandu markets, especially our study village Ratmata, income and living standards have improved substantially in the past generation. In other villages, people feel that gains have been modest, and cash crop production also carries risks: nearly all respondents engaging in cash cropping discussed challenges such as variable rainfall, pests, and wildlife as continual threats.

Most households we spoke to perceive off-farm employment to be a better prospect for economic advancement. In villages that historically were more remote, such as Sirandanda, people often worked as farm labourers or porters. Today, economic growth has led to increased opportunities for skilled employment (e.g. masons, carpenters, and drivers) in regional towns. Long-distance migration to Kathmandu and internationally has grown significantly, and most households we interviewed had at least one family member that has migrated for work in recent years. Migrants often expect that they will earn good wages and then settle into a more comfortable life at home. While some succeed, many do not. In our interviews, people often described taking large debts to pay recruitment agencies, only to get trapped in cycles of debt with repeated stints abroad. Many report labouring in unsafe conditions, enduring degrading treatment, and missing their families at home. While some spoke of hope and relief derived from stable off-farm income, we also heard narratives of desperation among those who feel that, despite years of hard work and sacrifice, their situation has not improved.

Health was the most significant and profound household-level distress that people described in our interviews. Nearly half of our sample households reported a significant health issue in their families in recent years. Many result from accidents at work: falls from trees, vehicle accidents, fire, and electric shock. Heart conditions, liver dysfunction (linked to alcoholism), and diabetes are common. While basic health care has expanded in recent years, many still travel to Kathmandu to seek specialized care. Struck with illness or injury, people will do whatever they can to help a loved one. Treatment can drive well-off households into debt, and for poorer households it can be devastating (see also Krishna 2010). Health problems also reduce people's quality of life through chronic pain, immobility, and the inability to work.

Our interviews also revealed significant psychological suffering. Years of financial distress, fear of not meeting the family's basic needs, unsafe working conditions, and separation from loved ones carry a heavy toll. Alcoholism is common. Many women are trapped in situations of domestic abuse with few opportunities to escape.

Households have experienced several significant shocks in recent years. During the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake, some sustained injuries and many lost their homes. At the time of our research – more than five years later – some people we spoke with were still living in temporary shelters. Many have taken debt to rebuild. People often shared memories of these events, with acute emotional reactions from recalling the past.

Climate stressors are common. Sirandanda in particular has experienced prolonged water stress with recurrent crop failures. Elsewhere, recent years have seen waves of pests which appear to have been exacerbated by climate change. This includes the "fall army worm" (*Spodoptera frugiperda*) that has severely impacted maize crops in some villages. Many report that extreme weather events such as hailstorms, floods and landslides are increasingly common.

Our research coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in 2020, which resulted in sudden lockdowns. During the initial months, some experienced food insecurity due to closed markets and loss of income. Commercial farmers could not sell their products and many incurred debt. Migratory labourers recounted harrowing ordeals traveling to reunite with their families. Their jobs abruptly ended and there was no money to be made. And there was simply no place that people could imagine being at such a time other than with their family at home.

These stressors are real and significant; our discussions almost always provoked emotional responses – of fear, loss, and, sometimes, desperation. Yet, it is also clear that most people do not perceive their lives to be defined by such events alone. People also spoke extensively about their hopes and dreams, and what they value in their everyday lives. Perhaps most important are people's families – the people that they care about and who care about them. Such relationships are a great source of strength during times of distress, and a fundamental part of how people articulate what matters in their lives. We have also been moved by the drive that most people have. People strive relentlessly, and they continue to find creative ways to respond to the challenges they face despite continued adversity.

The vignettes below give a snapshot of the lives of several people we encountered during our fieldwork. They illustrate how people have sought to build lives in contexts of uncertainty, the challenges that they have faced, and their hopes and aspirations. In so doing, the stories point toward the ways that people experience vulnerability across a broader life trajectory. Section 6 thereafter explores the implications of our work for understanding vulnerability.

4. Personal stories

4.1. Krishna

Krishna was born to a Newar family, a part of an indigenous ethnic group, in Sirandanda Village of the Ramechhap District 40 years ago. His family had migrated from another region several generations ago and, as an outside ethnic group from another area, were able to acquire only limited agricultural land, which was both unirrigated and of a low quality. Sirandanda is located in the rain shadow of a nearby range with uncertain rainfall – an ongoing source of anxiety for many in the community. As one of Krishna's neighbors opined to us earlier this year, "it is difficult to plough the barren land when we are not sure whether the rainfall will occur on time… it has been almost 6 months since it last rained".

During Krishna's childhood, the village was remote, a 10 h walk to the nearest bus service. Krishna recalls the hardship that his family endured. On a good year, their food production could only sustain them for 4–5 months, and much less when rain was scarce. He remembers periods of hunger and cycles of debt. They earned some cash through local wage labor or working as a porter, yet meeting their basic needs was a constant concern.

Krishna was among the first generation of children in his village to attend school. Yet with few opportunities for skilled employment, he left school at the age of 14 and decided to migrate to Kathmandu for work. He hoped for a more comfortable life with stable income and savings to send back home. Things were not as he expected. It was extremely difficult to get a job. He eventually became a dishwasher in a small restaurant earning only enough to eat and pay rent in a shared room.

At the age of 17, Krishna began to hear rumors about possibilities of making large sums of money abroad. With the help of a friend, he contacted an employment agency. He borrowed money from a money lender in his village to pay the agency, and he eventually signed a two-year contract for a job in Qatar. In our interviews, he recalled such excitement upon receiving his visa, only to see his hopes dashed once again. "It was quite a happy moment when I left from here [Nepal] ……. [silence] …….I was excited to go, but it is a different life there [in Qatar]. It was a sad time." When he arrived in Qatar, he found himself working as an unskilled laborer lifting heavy equipment in a motor garage. The job was grueling, the work was physically difficult, and he felt far away from family and friends at home.

He worked there for two years and returned home after finishing his contract, now an older man with modest savings. His family arranged a marriage with a woman from a neighboring village, and in time they had two sons. In the initial years of his married life, he continued to live in the village working odd jobs as a local laborer. However, there was just not much to do in the village, and he did not see good opportunities for advancement. He explained some of the limitations in our interview, "I would like to pursue commercial agriculture such as goat farming. But there is no water here… I do not have the courage to try". Subsistence agriculture and local wage labor provided only just enough to get by, yet other options seemed risky, especially for someone with limited capacity to invest to begin with.

In the coming years, Krishna undertook repeated trips for work abroad in Dubai, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia. During good times, he earned comparatively good money and was able to send savings home. Yet he also faced harsh working conditions and a growing sense of exhaustion. In 2012, while working in Malaysia, Krishna began to experience intense pain in his groin, which left him incapacitated and unable to work. He felt terrified and unsure of where to turn. He did not speak Malay or English and he had heard rumors of kidney theft in Malaysian hospitals. He did not dare to seek treatment there. Instead, he returned home to Nepal, spending his meager savings for treatment and eventually borrowing money from friends and relatives for surgery.

After recovering, Krishna decided to travel abroad for work, this time to Saudi Arabia. Yet again he fell ill, this time with stomach problems. He believes that his employment contract entitled him to treatment in the country, but his employer insisted he travel home to Nepal. To break the contract before the employment period was over, he had to pay the employer to get his passport back to travel home. The timing was terrible. His illness coincided with traveling restrictions from COVID-19, and he was forced to wait in Saudi Arabia for five months without income. Since returning to Nepal, he has been able to receive treatment at a private hospital, once again exhausting the savings his family had.

Krishna's story is in many ways similar to other migrant laborers whom we have interviewed in the study area. Limited employment options combined with the uncertainties of small-scale farm production leave few opportunities at home. From his initial hopes to the grinding realities of years' hard labor, Krishna pursued a life that he hoped would bring a measure of prosperity. In the end, he found himself close to where he started.

Today, Krishna lives in the village where he grew up with his wife and family. A lot has changed since his childhood. The village has a road, electricity, and connections to agricultural markets. But much remains the same. Agriculture remains precarious: even in good years he is unable to grow enough to feed the family, and several recent years have seen particularly low production due to drought.

His story also speaks of the agony and indignity of health crises. Due to his illness, Krishna is physically weak, and he experiences chronic pain. He works in the village as a wage laborer when he is able yet earns little. His wife shared with us separately that she has received money from her maternal family to make ends meet, but she has not told her husband to protect him from feeling ashamed. Standards of living have changed since years' past, and it is not possible to meet them as a wage laborer. Diets have changed from locally grown crops like maize and millets, and food for purchase is increasingly seen as a necessity. As his wife shared, "Kids do not eat if there is no rice. What to do? […chuckles…]. They only want to eat rice".

Our interviews also point to many of the things that Krishna values. Throughout his stints abroad, Krishna has maintained a strong connection with his family in the village, especially his wife and parents. He traveled home when he could to spend time with them and work on the farm. "I was happy when I came to Nepal. I was very happy," he recalls. The affection his family has for him, in turn, is clear. As his wife told us separately, "whenever my husband was here with us, we felt comfortable and had courage.".

During our conversations, Krishna looked at the ground and avoided eye contact. He often appeared sad and with little energy. At the end of our last meeting, we asked if he could recall the best time of his life. His face softened, he smiled, and looked up, "My marriage." He recounted the festivities, time getting to know his new wife, and the sense of togetherness that he felt with his family and community. For someone that has spent so much time away from the village, it appears that the most meaningful and important aspects of his story remain with his closest relationships at home.

4.2. Chandrakala

Chandrakala, a middle-aged woman living in Ratmata Village, is the third daughter of seven sisters. She is Brahmin (high caste). Her father passed away when she was only three, and her mother struggled to feed the family with the little land they owned. With few options available for support, her relatives helped to arrange her marriage at age seven. Since child marriage was illegal, the ceremony was held during the cover of night to avoid attention of authorities. Chandrakala does not have any memories of this time.

In her early teenage years, she remembers a life of toil taking care of livestock and domestic chores. In her early 20 s, she gave birth to two children – first a girl and then a boy. Looking back, she recalls a sense of anxiety rather than joy, "What would I feel? I thought about what I would do to feed them."

Over time, Chandrakala and her husband separated from the joint

family and began their own household. This was an important milestone, representing their growth and recognition in society. Yet Chandrakala remembers it as a time of insecurity. They had to manage their new life independently, and she feared that she and her husband would not be able to do it by themselves. As she explained, "No one was there to guide us. I feared our big decision. How could I do anything? What would I do? Where should I go?… It was a painful and difficult time".

In the 1990 s, development in Chandrakala's village progressed quickly. Her village received many basic amenities: electricity, road access, and schools. Good transport to Kathmandu enabled many households to shift toward cash crop production, which yielded good profits. With increasing cash flow, many households invested in bigger homes and consumer goods, like TVs. However, these improvements passed Chandrakala's family by. They were unable to shift to commercial vegetable farming and continued to live on local wage labor and small-scale goat rearing. This provided enough to get by, but few opportunities for material advancement.

Chandrakala remembers this as a very dark period of her life. Her husband drank frequently and was often away. She tried her best to manage the household and take care of the children. Her husband's condition continued to deteriorate. Increasingly, he was unable to work and was seen around the village in an intoxicated state. Eventually he attempted suicide by ingesting poison. He initially survived, sustaining severe kidney damage. During our conversations, Chandrakala recalled the hardship in vivid detail, his illness and pain, and sustained attempts to get treatment at extraordinary cost. Eventually he passed away. This was the very hardest time in her life. As she recalled, "If we could only have saved him…. My only prayer was his life.".

The financial burden of her husband's treatments left her in debt. "Everything that I earned from livestock rearing and farm labor paid for [his] treatment". But it was not enough. She took loans from a local money lender at a very high interest rate. With no prospects to pay it off, she eventually sold 2 ropani of land (roughly 0.2 ha) – about 1/3 of their total land.

In the coming years, Chandrakala suffered her own health challenges. She accidentally received an electric shock which immobilized her left arm. She also described to us other neurological difficulties, perhaps epilepsy, telling us "my mind is not well. I shout without any reason". Today, she rests often. Due to her health situation, she discontinued livestock husbandry and it has become increasingly difficult to work as a laborer.

Chandrakala's son got married in 2013. This gave her hope, as she recalls, "I felt I will have happy moments in the future." Her daughter-in-law helped to ease the toil by helping with household chores as well as other forms of support for her disabilities. In time, her daughter-in-law gave birth to two grandchildren. Meanwhile, Chandrakala began to spend more time on the farm. She started small-scale commercial vegetable production, thus providing a new source of household income.

When the Gorkha Earthquake struck in 2015, she recalls returning home as quickly as she could, only to find her house destroyed. Her family lived in a temporary shelter for some years, and they later rebuilt the home with help from government housing support. Their new house was built with concrete – modern, and a step up for the family – yet costly, and they took additional loans to afford it. Following completion of the home, Chandrakala's family found themselves embroiled in a land dispute. They discovered that the land where the house was built, which they had long used, was in fact legally titled to a neighbor for reasons that they do not fully understand. This has caused an endless headache, and the neighbor now demands payment for the land. "How could we do that? We do not have any money".

Chandrakala also described other stressors that they have faced: erratic rainfall that severely damaged their potato crops a few years back, while the fall armyworm significantly diminished maize crops. During the pandemic they lost a lot of money from crops that they could not sell. She also discussed a landslide that hit another side of the village some years back; she is worried that her house is also under threat, but she does not believe there is anything they can do about it. Notably, however, these other stressors appear less important to her than other more personal aspects of her story, especially the loss of her husband, her health, and disability.

When we spoke with Chandrakala, she spoke slowly, and appeared older than we might have expected. Yet she was engaged and articulate throughout our conversation, offering extensive details of different challenges and describing her interpretations of them, sometimes with an acerbic tone. "How would I get happy moments?" she replied rhetorically when we asked her to reflect on more positive memories.

Like Krishna, Chandrakala's narrative reveals a lot about the wrenching experience of health crises – both her husband's and her own. As a woman, she has had limited agency to define her own path, yet has had to shoulder the responsibility of daily caregiving. Today, she is increasingly dependent upon her son and daughter-in-law, "I feel bad for them as they must take care of me most of the time.".

At other times in the conversation, however, she struck a positive tone. Her son previously migrated abroad and was able to send money home to help settle their debts, which she believes will continue to improve over time; "I am hopeful" she said. She has been able to receive medical help, and she now takes medicine to ease the pain and other symptoms. She says she is feeling much better than in the past.

She also has important relationships that she values deeply. She has a close bond with her sister, whom she likes to visit and who provides support when times get hard, and a neighbor that she visits regularly, "I feel light when I talk to Tara [my neighbor] as she listens to me and my pains. When she is not there, I pray to God to heal all my pains and continue doing my work. I have also started to work and do *parma* [reciprocal labor exchange for agriculture] as much as I can so that I forget the pains as I remain busy.".

4.3. Rama

Rama, age 40, was born in a village of the Ramechhap district. She is Chhetri (a higher caste group), yet her family was poor and owned only a small piece of unirrigated land. To make ends meet, her parents worked as wage laborers for more wealthy households in the village. As a child, Rama recalls hungrily waiting for her parents to return from work so they could eat the food purchased from the day's labor. It was a hand-to-mouth existence, with the continuous threat of inadequate food.

Rama did not go to school. As she recalls, "During that time, daughters were not encouraged to go to school. Later, I joined adult education where I attended evening classes after finishing household chores and cooking dinner. But people said that it was not secure for women to walk at night… [As a result] I quit. Now I can hardly write my name".

Rama was married at the age of 25, and she moved to her husband's village. Her husband had inherited two small parcels of land, yet it was not enough to support their growing family's needs. They supplemented their own food production by sharecropping, earning half of the produce from working someone else's land. They also worked as unskilled wage laborers. She remembers a life of hard labor, "I had to work even after 3 days of delivering my first child.".

Working conditions improved when they started to work in the Swiss Aid District Road Support program (DRSP) in 2005. This program sponsored the construction of a new regional road through employment with contracts and good wages. Rama and her husband both worked on the project for several years. With secure employment, the program gave her and other laborers greater bargaining power against landlords and contractors. Locally, wages began to rise.

Still, Rama's family continued to face significant economic challenges. They needed cash for clothes, school fees, food, and, occasionally, meat for dinner. In times of scarcity, they were forced to borrow money from self-help groups and relatives. While these sources helped them to avoid high-interest money lenders, small loans accumulated, and Rama's husband eventually decided to work abroad. He borrowed

money from relatives to pay a labor agent who secured him a job in Saudi Arabia in 2014. He returned home after his two-year contract, earning just enough to repay his loans.

Rama's house was severely damaged by the 2015 Gorkha earthquake. For two years, she and her four children lived in a temporary shelter. In 2018, they built a new house financed by a government subsidy, the sale of a buffalo calf, and a loan. During our conversation, she estimates that her remaining loan will take several years to repay.

Overall, however, Rama's economic condition has improved. As more people have migrated from the village, Rama's family has been able to expand agriculture, eventually acquiring a large, irrigated parcel that supports 2–3 crops per year. Its proximity to the village has reduced her labor, and her children – now aged between 10 and 20, contribute agricultural work. She reports that this has greatly improved their family's food security, as they no longer need to buy many of their basic foods from the market.

Rama has also invested in a small grain grinding machine, from which she earns cash or grain in exchange for grinding grains for others in the village. Improved road connectivity enabled her to sell milk from her buffalo in a nearby small town. These activities have given her a regular income stream. While her husband continues to work as a wage laborer in the area, most of her income comes from her own entrepreneurial activities.

Although their family's well-being has improved, they continue to face challenges. She reported that damage to crops by monkeys has reduced their maize and paddy harvests, and they must spend time and labor to guard their fields. The 'fall armyworm' damaged much of her maize crop in 2021. She is concerned about landslides, as her new house is located just below a steep mountain slope. She shared, "we cannot sleep during rainy nights… If mud slides from above our house, it will bury us… I do not think we will get away from that fear in this life".

For now, at least, Rama's life is relatively secure. Her life mirrors the upward trajectory of many people we spoke to in the study area – where gradual improvements in wages, productivity, and working conditions have brought improved security and prosperity over time.

We felt a sense of vitality in our discussion with Rama. She insisted on taking us to see her land – the land where she sharecrops with her children. She beamed with pride as we walked around the fields: irrigated land near the village, with rich fodder trees along the edges. She came from a life of hardship, food insecurity, and hard labor. Today, her family is food secure with improved working conditions – in no small part due to her own initiatives. She spoke with great affection for her children and is proud that her kids are growing and playing a bigger role in farming and household matters. She has a healthy family, with four growing children, poised to enter the next phase of life in the years ahead.

5. Discussion: From vulnerability as loss toward a broader vision of thriving

The stories above highlight the highly personal ways that life trajectories evolve, marked by intimate experiences of aspiration, hope, worry, and loss. In each case, lives are defined by far more than exposure to specific stressors, shocks, or even sequences of them. It is in the interstices of everyday life, through the accumulated effect of people's decisions interacting with circumstance, that life is experienced in its full richness. It is here that people live in and through vulnerability: in the precarious state where achievements are always uncertain, basic needs are never fully secure, and experiences of pleasure, joy, and fulfillment wax and wane over time. It is here that the concept of vulnerability gains resonance, not simply as a tool to predict the risk of loss, but as a way to understand what matters to people the most amidst the inherent precarity of the human condition.

The concept of vulnerability has long been discussed in the environmental social sciences, and for good reason. At its best, it invokes an ethical imperative to protect those most at risk (Ribot, 2014). Yet as a larger agenda, we believe this work remains unfinished. Much work on vulnerability continues to focus on specific areas of interest, especially climate, with a particular focus on avoiding loss and harm. These framings risk misunderstanding how people understand their own lives and priorities. To address this, we have argued for an experientially grounded, cross-cutting, and open-ended understanding of the concept – one that attends to what people perceive matters most in their own lives.

Confronting climate change has become a central focus of development in recent years (Dellmuth and Gustafsson 2021). By all projections, climate impacts will continue to intensify, resulting in dislocation, loss, and harm (IPCC 2022). Even so, it is easy to wonder if rhetoric may overshadow people's own priorities. Critical social scientists have long cautioned about the risks of business-as-usual, technocratic approaches (Kehler & Birchall, 2021; Ojha et al., 2016, Nightingale et al. 2020), and they have frequently argued for more transformative action that targets "root" causes of vulnerability in the face of climate change (Fedele et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2022; Quealy & Yates, 2021). But what if, we ask, the most urgent issue is not climate at all?

In rural Nepal, climate surely does matter, and addressing climate uncertainties could create new avenues for more secure rural livelihoods. All of the cases above mention climate related stressors in some way. Even so, climate-related issues are mentioned less than other concerns. Even as climate impacts intensify, we cannot assume that climate (or any other stressor) will rise to the top of people's concerns. A more open-ended framing of vulnerability makes it possible to prioritize what really matters for people on their own terms, and to identify pathways that can help advance those goals.

If notions of vulnerability have often been loss-centric, this is not surprising. Negative outcomes capture attention and galvanize responses (Drèze & Sen, 1989). Scholarship has long focused on avoiding the most adverse possible outcomes from loss – destitution, forced migration, starvation, and death (Blaikie et al., 2014; Watts & Bohle, 1993). Yet, such work risks losing sight of myriad other challenges that impinge upon people's quality of life – many of which can only be understood through people's personal and affective experiences of living (Tschakert et al., 2017). What is defined as loss is always a question of values. And the values that define loss are always tied to broader judgements about needs and aspirations. When studying vulnerability, we must therefore ask who gets to define those values, which experiences of hardship are perceived as worthy of analysis and action, and whose hopes and aspirations are given priority.

And it is here that engaging with people's lived experiences, hopes, and aspirations matter the most: to develop responses that recognize people's needs as full, complex human beings. To be clear, this does not mean that people are always able to express their hopes and aspirations. Extensive scholarship has argued that experiences of poverty and marginalization often limit people's capacity to want and desire (Nussbaum 2001, Mosse 2010). Still, our interviews consistently showed people's capacities to articulate a clear and lucid perception of their condition. In a deep sense, people's lived and emotional realities point toward what is most fundamentally important in their lives, what they value, and what makes life worth living.

Thriving is not a residual category, something that exists where loss is not. Loss-centered framings of vulnerability risk being a ship without a rudder — a poor guide for getting from our present state to where we want to be. They are also a misrecognition of how people see themselves. As the stories above reveal, people do not merely lurch from shock to shock; avoiding loss is not necessarily, or even usually, the main driving force of life. Hopes and aspirations push people forward. Honouring people *as they see themselves* is far more than diagnosing the causes of failure; it requires acknowledging what people strive for and value, and creating supportive conditions that enable their fulfillment. People are not simply at risk of the most catastrophic outcomes of stressors; they are, in a deep sense, at risk of not having secure and meaningful lives.

The idea of well-being has been extensively discussed across the social sciences (e.g. Hojman and Mirand, 2018; Edwards et al., 2016);

we do not have space to delve into debates here. Recent discussions have moved from more "objective" measures of loss (for example, monetary value of damages) toward a greater attention to subjective experiences and place-based values (e.g. Tschakert et al., 2017; Chakraborty et al. 2023). Our work contributes to these discussions by showing how experiences of uncertainty, loss, hope, and aspiration unfold across a broader life path. Critically, life trajectories are always influenced by broader societal structures. Caste, ethnicity, gender, wealth, and economic conditions shape individuals' horizon of opportunities as well as their challenges. Analyses of vulnerability must necessarily attend to the social-structural factors that affect people's life journeys and experiences, often in highly differentiated ways.

Still, our work also revealed many striking commonalities across people we spoke with. This includes issues that have often been bracketed off from analysis of vulnerability in the context of climate change, but which are of deep significance to people. We are struck, for example, with just how fundamental health is — this is the single, greatest issue mentioned by most respondents. Nothing will compromise one's economic outlook more; it is health that defines the very basis of one's physical ability, pain, and pleasure. Conditions of labour are also fundamental: it shapes people's ability to fulfill basic needs, their safety, and enjoyment through a large portion of daily life. Family, togetherness with loved ones, and social belonging were the most prominent ways that people articulate what they value most in their lives.

These observations are not surprising — are such aspects not fundamental for all people? This is precisely our point. Yet somehow, this realization came to us like a quiet change in our thinking. The past five years, since we began working on this project, have seen remarkable disruptions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we – like many other academics at the time – woke up to a renewed sense of the precarity of living. Fear and loss were an ever-present feature of life; death was everywhere. These events also coincided with several other destabilizing personal challenges faced by our authorship team. We clung hard to the people we love and asked deep questions about what really matters. Was it the next published paper that would diagnose the plight of others with carefully articulated theory? In the broader scheme of things, what was the value of our work at all? We are, of course, well aware that our material conditions are far better than many of the people we have interviewed. Still, it was these experiences that reshaped how we understand vulnerability in our own lives — rendering it less as an analytical tool, but as an emotionally resonant condition that stands at the core of what it means to be a human. It is through this shift that we began to see vulnerability less in terms of the abstract risks, but in the many fundamental things that people value, and which makes life bearable and worth living for us all.

Perhaps we will look back at the period of great growth in vulnerability literature in the 2010 s as a time of relative comfort – a time of political shifts, but still a time when middle class academics based at (mostly) global north institutions could focus their attention on climate's effects somewhere else. This relative sense of security may prove to be the exception rather than the norm. If the present moment feels different — amidst wars, political upheaval, the not-so-distant memory of a global pandemic, and, yes, mounting climate-related damages — perhaps this draws all of us closer to the existential experience of vulnerability that is characteristic of living in much of the world, and which has been throughout most of history.

6. Conclusion

The present paper aims to advance theoretical understandings of vulnerability. We have proposed two shifts. First, we decenter climate by analyzing how vulnerability unfolds across multiple spheres of life within a broader life trajectory. Second, we argue for an understanding of vulnerability that is far more than the risk of loss and harm, but always experienced in relation to the lives that people value and wish to build.

These shifts have important implications. Methodologically, a more open-ended approach has potential to broaden the analytical lens beyond areas of predefined interest (climate or otherwise) to better identify what matters to people in their own lives. For practice, this has potential to better identify development pathways that respond to these priorities. Above all, we see these shifts as ethically important: by engaging with lived experiences of loss, fear, hope and aspiration, it becomes possible to develop responses that recognize people's agency and respond to their needs as full, complex, and worthy human beings.

Seeing vulnerability as a fundamental aspect of the human condition, one that is intimate and real in our own lives, has helped to dissolve implicit divisions in our understanding of the concept. This has placed a much wider range of human experience within the remit of vulnerability analysis and granted greater depth to our understanding of how it is experienced in others' lives. In so doing, it has rendered the concept of vulnerability with greater clarity and resonance, and in far more human terms. There is indeed something about vulnerability that strips away pretensions, occasioning a sober recognition of our present state and limitations. Perhaps it is in this reflection of this fragility that we can identify pathways from past and present to the futures we wish to have in these uncertain times.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Harry W. Fischer: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Kamal Devkota:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation. **Divya Gupta:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dil B. Khatri:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The interviews include sensitive personal data. Therefore, the original interview transcripts will not be made publicly available.

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