

Functional but Disconnected: Can Janakpur's Security System Cope with Urban Growth?

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Abstract:

Nepal may be lagging behind other South Asian countries in terms of urbanisation levels, but the urban transition is now in full swing, particularly in the Kathmandu Valley and the Tarai region. Janakpur is no exception. Although recent statistics are not available, local actors concur in describing a rapid growth in population, as people from neighbouring villages move into the urban periphery. Such rapid growth will inevitably put infrastructure and institutions under strain.

One of the governance areas that may be affected by this urban transition is security – guaranteeing the right to personal liberty and security, enforcement of property rights, and peaceful coexistence. Cities concentrate people, power, and profits, and are thus arguably more prone to crime and violence. Furthermore, as new people move into the city, the capacity of both formal security providers and informal mechanisms of social control may be stretched. Crime levels in Nepal are low by international standards, but maintaining and further improving security both in the streets and in the homes requires constant vigilance and adaptation. Given that security is an essential precondition to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, how can municipal authorities rise up to the challenge?

In this seminar, we will present the early results of a detailed audit of the security system in the sub-metropolitan city of Janakpur. Data was collected since November 2018 by the two presenters as part of a PhD research. Following the research's bottom-up approach, we will first discuss how security is effectively provided in the city's 25 wards. We then consider how security providers are coordinated and governed, examining the contribution of local government bodies under the new constitution. As the local elections in 2017 prompted dozens of women to join ward committees, we also examine whether women and men approach security differently. We close with a brief overview of the literature on how urban security systems function in other parts of the world, with particular attention to the role of municipal authorities, in the hope of contributing some new ideas for cities to better cope with the security challenges of the urban transition.

About the Speakers:

Mireille Widmer is a doctoral researcher with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, Brighton, UK. She has over 15 years experience working on peace and security issues with NGOs, United Nations agencies, and academic institutions. Her interest in the urban stems from her election in 2014 to the steering committee of a local governance process initiated by the city of Geneva, Switzerland, where she facilitated the working group on safety and security in close cooperation with the municipal and cantonal police. She holds a Bachelor in International Relations from the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, and a Master of Arts in Peace and Conflict Studies from University of Sydney, Australia.

Bibha Karna is an independent researcher based in Janakpur. She holds a Bachelor in Arts and a Bachelor in Education from Tribhuvan University, and is fluent in Nepali, Maithili, Hindi and English. She is particularly interested in questions of security, women empowerment, and environmental degradation. She joined Mireille in November 2018 as co-researcher.