



Life in Nepal's Informal Settlements

An ARISE Photovoice Project

INTRODUCTION

The ARISE Hub – Accountability and Responsiveness in Informal Settlements for Equity – is a research consortium set up to enhance accountability and improve the health and wellbeing of marginalised populations living in informal urban settlements in low- and middle-income countries. ARISE works closely with, and is guided by, communities themselves: vulnerable people living in informal settlements who are often ‘off the map’. Through the Responsive Challenge Fund, ARISE partnered with local NGO PHASE Nepal to carry out implementation research to assess the status of living conditions and accountability in informal settlements through a mixed method study.

This book was produced with the support of community members residing in the Manohara and Namuna Basti informal settlements of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, with strong input from local co-researchers. Photovoice is a participatory research method used to gather the lived experiences of participants through photography and interviews.

Participants were selected with the assistance of co-researchers and provided with a two-day training on photography techniques, ethical considerations, and fieldwork execution. Participants used their own mobile phones to take pictures, and they were compensated for the use of their devices. They were divided into groups to cover various aspects of life in informal settlements. The images taken by participants were collected in three rounds, followed by in-depth interviews. Participants were asked to select five images that best represented their stories. The entire process was participatory, and co-creation with community members helped to explore predefined themes in greater depth.

This book is a selection of some of those images that describe the experiences and priorities of people living in informal settlements. The photos, taken by single women, co-researchers, daily wage workers, community leaders, and people with disabilities, cover themes such as living conditions, livelihoods, access to services, mental health, environmental risks, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), and vulnerable populations.

All names have been changed to protect the participants.

LIFE IN NEPAL'S INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

1. Living conditions
2. Livelihood
3. Access to services
4. Mental health
5. Environmental risks
6. WASH
7. Vulnerable groups



LIVING CONDITIONS





“This picture screams urban poverty...”

“This is my settlement, the place where we have been living since so many years. The houses are in dire condition, which are there just to provide roof above our heads. It does not protect us from scorching heat nor from shivering cold. We must endure the foul smell of the river passing through our settlement and always live in the threat of flood.”

Sarita B.K.

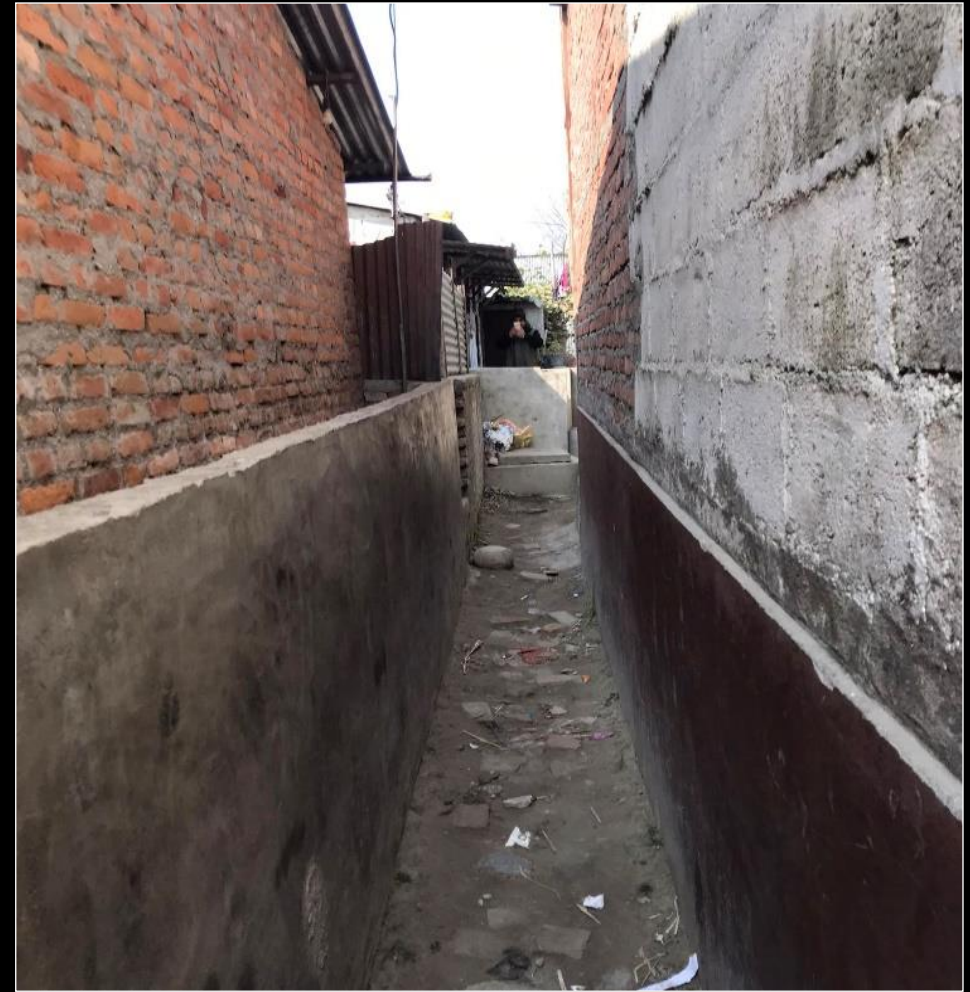
Co-researcher, Namuna Basti



In a city of concrete, we are using a bridge made from bamboo...

“The bridge connecting us to neighbouring settlements stands as a testament to our resourcefulness. The need to rely on a bamboo bridge for our transportation needs reflects the unique challenges of our community. Without this bamboo bridge, our journey to the other side of the river would be a daunting walk, taking more than half an hour by foot. It’s a stark reality of our daily lives, but also a symbol of our resilience and determination to overcome obstacles in our path.”

Niru Majh
Resident, Manohara Settlement



“I took these photos to highlight the cramped conditions of our alleyways. They are not only narrow but also lacking cleanliness. If only they were a bit wider, it would greatly improve accessibility. Currently, navigating through them is a challenge for both pedestrians and vehicles.”

Man Bd Dong
Resident, Manohara settlement

“In the narrow alley bathed in the sunlight, people lounged, enjoying the warmth amidst the occasional buzz of passing motorbikes and small vehicles. Concerned for their safety, I advised them against sitting in the middle of the narrow passage. However, they lamented the lack of space elsewhere. If only the alleys were wider, vehicles could pass freely, and there would be ample room for everyone to relish the sunshine.”

Mandira Majhi
Co-researcher, Manohara Settlement





“I captured these photos to shed light on the living conditions in our settlement. The first image is a picture of a home for a family of four. The structure hardly resembles a traditional house, lacking adequate natural light. Passing by, I often wonder how they manage to live in such conditions, forced to compromise on basic comforts. In the second and third photos, what appear to be storage units are dwellings for entire families. Constructed from galvanized zinc sheets, they offer little insulation, resulting in unbearable heat in summer and cold in winter. Sadly, many houses in our settlement are similarly constructed. It’s difficult to imagine the daily struggles these families endure just to make ends meet.”

Mandira Majhi
Co-researcher, Manohara Settlement

LIVELIHOOD





The heavy load of responsibility...

"I captured this photo early in the morning as these women were labouring, carrying sacks of sand to earn a living. They were transporting sand for the construction of houses in this settlement, sourced from the Manohara river, despite its polluted state.

Each woman shoulders the burden herself and sells the sand for a modest sum, typically around Rs.40-50 per sack. Most residents here rely on daily wage labour, engaging in demanding yet financially unrewarding tasks. These two women exemplify hundreds in our settlement who shoulder their responsibilities, often at the expense of their well-being and needs."

Sabita Rilee
Resident, Manohara Settlement



Unemployment and youths...

“I took this picture because the people in it mirror my own situation. All four of them used to work as masons, but due to the current recession and a lack of construction activities in Kathmandu Valley, they’ve been jobless for a few months now. Instead of idling away and dwelling on unnecessary thoughts, we pass the time by playing cards. We’re unfamiliar with other recreational activities, and to engage in them, we need money—something we’re short of. Living in an informal settlement and lacking formal education, we’re not likely to find regular jobs. It’s becoming increasingly difficult for us to sustain our livelihood with the limited options available to us.”

Man Bd. Dong
Resident, Manohara Settlement

Coping with Unemployment and Social Struggles...

“I clicked this picture to showcase the harsh reality of life in the informal settlement., where job opportunities are scarce, leaving many youths idle. This idleness not only contributes to social issues like substance abuse but also exacerbates mental health problems, placing additional strain on already struggling families. The lack of employment and educational opportunities further compounds the vulnerability deepening the socio-economic crisis we are facing.”

Dev Gurung
Namuna Basti Settlement



“This is Dev Gurung, a 63-year-old man and my inspiration. Despite the challenges of living in an informal settlement, Dev Uncle has taken on the profession of livestock rearing and runs a hotel within the community. Despite limited space for goat rearing, he manages this responsibility adeptly, providing for his entire family. His story exemplifies rising above adversity and making the most of available opportunities.”

Sujan Rai
Resident, Namuna Basti





“I admire her greatly, so much so that I couldn’t resist capturing her in action. She’s my neighbour and the only true businesswoman in our settlement. Her journey began with just a single sewing machine, but now she provides employment to other women in our community and supplies garments to areas beyond our settlement. Through the employment opportunities she’s created, several women now experience economic freedom.”

Aasha Majhi
Resident, Manohara
Settlement

ACCESS TO SERVICES





Women and the 'Dhunge Dhara'...

“The women in the picture are from my settlement. Each morning, we walk for about 45 minutes to reach the *Dhunge Dhara* (traditional Tap), the sole source of clean drinking water for us. The tap is crucial for those of us who can't afford to buy water. We spend around an hour each day waiting to fill our jars. It's a laborious task, and we only manage to fill two jars. We attempted to connect our settlement to the government drinking water system, but our status as informal settlers hindered us. We manage during the monsoon season, but the dry season presents a challenge. During this time, it takes us nearly 3-4 hours to collect water, eating into the time we need for household chores, forcing us to cram maximum household work into limited time.

Suntali Gahatraj
Resident, Namuna Basti

“This hand pump was built 17 or 18 years ago through the collective contributions of the settlement's residents. It has been a crucial water source for almost everyone in the settlement, primarily used for drinking in the past. The water from this hand pump has been tested and found to be safe for general use. Some people still use it to cook their food, but many now purchase water in jars. Despite the availability of other water sources, there are still residents who drink from this hand pump. Unfortunately, it is slated for removal because it obstructs the construction of a road in this area.

While the removal has been postponed for now, it is likely to occur soon, thinking about which makes me sad as I think this hand pump is the symbol of our community resilience and it carries our history.”

Ishwori Tamang
Resident, Manohara Settlement





“This water tank is one of the water sources for our settlement. Unfortunately, our settlement lacks a reliable water connection for household use or drinking purposes. Only a few households have installed hand pumps, which are the sole regular water source available. We've reached out to the Mahankal drinking water system, requesting regular water supply to our settlement. After much effort, they agreed, but the supply is inconsistent. Nonetheless, we manage to receive water sometimes, at a cost of Rs. 6000 per tanker, which fills the tanks shown in the picture. It's uncertain if the same rate applies to other settlements. Due to our status as informal settlers, we might be charged a higher rate. This discrepancy is also apparent in our electricity costs, where we pay a higher rate per unit. People in our settlement purchase this water primarily for drinking purposes, at Rs. 15 per water jar. A single jar lasts us for 4-5 days.”

Dev Gurung
Resident, Namuna Basti



“When I arrived at her house, I found her sitting in a condition of distress. I asked her what had happened, and she explained that she was suffering from fever and a common cold but hadn't seen a healthcare provider. She mentioned that if there were healthcare services within our settlement, she would have sought help. Unfortunately, we don't have any healthcare providers within our settlement. There are a few private clinics nearby, but they are expensive. Either we must spend our time and money even for general illness or continue from suffering without seeking any health care.”

Mandira Majhi, Coresearcher, Manohara Settlement



She is an elderly member of our settlement, and most days during winter, she lies outside her hut. She has been suffering from mental illness, and due to poor living conditions, she usually suffers from physical ailments like skin burns, wounds, and cuts. However, she hasn't sought any healthcare as she is not in a state to do so by herself. Most of us here are daily wage earners, so we cannot support her financially. She has repeated health problems, so one-time help is not enough. If there were any dedicated healthcare providers for people like her, it would be better. I feel so sorry for her, but I can't do much. She is indeed suffering and waiting to get cured.

Nimalu Sherpa, Resident, Namuna Basti



“This is us praying in church on Saturday afternoon. The church is in Manohara settlement, and we visit it every Saturday without fail to pray for better health. Whenever someone falls ill in our area we pray to God during our prayer meetings, and they get healed. We don't have to wait for Saturday for prayer; if someone isn't feeling well or has any health issues, they can directly call the pastor. The pastor then prays together with the ill person through a video call, and our illnesses are cured. We have immense faith in our God, and if we get sick, the church is the first place we visit.”

Sujan Rai, Resident, Namuna Basti



“The building in the picture is of a community support organisation run by a Korean church. They provide treatment to needy people and offer support to ultra-poor families. Because of this organization and our faith, we can receive at least basic treatment in our own settlement. They also provide food to children from vulnerable families and take care of their sanitation and hygiene. We are very thankful to have this kind of healthcare support in our area.”

Shankar Majhi, Resident, Manohara Settlement

EDUCATION





“Every morning when I see these children all dressed up and going to school, I feel sad. Not because they are going to a private school to get a good quality education, but because I am not able to provide this level of education to my own children, only if I had enough money and financial stability.

I am a single mother living in an informal settlement, struggling to make ends meet, so I can't afford to send my children to a good school. If there were good schools in or near our settlement with reasonable fees, it would be much easier for me. Both my sons have to travel around one hour every day to reach school. I think the government needs to be more sensitive in the education sector.

Government schools should provide quality education so that people like us don't have to worry so much about our children's future.”

Sarita B.K, Co-researcher, Namuna Basti



“I took this picture to showcase the only school in our settlement, which is also the only government school in Ward Number One of Manohara informal settlement. Children from outside the settlement also come here to study. It's a government-operated school, and we had to struggle a lot to establish it in our settlement. However, we feel that the local and provincial government isn't giving priority to this school because it's situated inside the informal settlement.

Regardless of the school's location, the government should remember that it's providing education to the most vulnerable group in the community. We are happy and proud that our settlement has a government school, which is a very rare case in the context of the Kathmandu Valley. However, we've been saying that it would be better if this school were updated to meet the needs of the time.”

Rashmi Ghale
Resident, Manohara Settlement

MENTAL HEALTH





“I took this photo to highlight the mental trauma I've endured as a mother due to the unsafe structures around our settlement. The baby in the picture belongs to my neighbour, and he was approaching this uncovered borehole when I snapped the photo. His mother intervened shortly after. Behind our settlement, a new road is under construction, mainly for a newly planned settlement. However, the structures are incomplete and hazardous. Unfortunately, little attention is given to this matter because they don't value our community. I have a young child myself, and I'm constantly worried about their safety. This constant worry is taking a toll on my mental health. I'm always stressed, thinking about what might happen if my child were to get caught in one of those holes. Sometimes, I wonder when I'll reach my breaking point. We live in constant fear of eviction, flooding, and now these unmanaged structures. I hope that at least these structures will be managed soon, as completing the construction of the road would ease travel for the new settlement.

Aasha Majhi
Resident, Manohara Settlement



“This is ‘Ajmal’. He has been suffering from mental illness for four years now. He lacks a sense of belonging, and it saddens me whenever I see him. It's unfortunate that at such a young age, he has to live with this condition. Mental illness is a significant issue; every day, even in our settlement, we hear about cases of mental sickness, and suicide rates are increasing. I'm not sure if it's because of our status as informal settlers, family issues, or other factors, but mental illness is becoming increasingly visible. Something needs to be done immediately, or the situation will only worsen. Many people don't talk about mental health due to existing prejudices against it, so it's essential in our community to raise awareness about mental health issues.”

Bhesh Kumari, Resident, Manohara Settlement



“Whenever I come across this pole, I get panicked and anxious, remembering the moment when my husband was paralysed due to an electric shock from it. The electric wires in our settlement are poorly managed. Although he is the one who suffered the shock, our whole family is bearing its burden. That incident has had a huge mental impact on both me and my husband. He is confined to his bed, and I need to work day and night to manage the household and earn a livelihood. I am constantly stressed because of our situation, and sometimes I fear I might collapse due to the stress. Being informal settlers, the fear of eviction adds to our mental burden. We have nowhere to go and no support at all. What should I do with my husband in this condition if we need to leave this place?”

Rashmi Ghale, Resident, Manohara Settlement

ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS





Every year, we suffer from floods...

“Our settlement doesn't have a wall or any direct border with the riverbank, making it risky to live near the river. In this picture, you can clearly see the difference between the two sides of the riverbank. On one side, the embankment has been constructed, but not in our settlement, which makes us even more prone to flooding. Every year, we suffer from floods. Although no lives have been claimed by the flood, the physical and financial losses are huge. Adding to our challenges, we don't receive any kind of support, as the representative of the ward in which we live doesn't recognise us. They claim that there is no informal settlement in our area.”

Sunil Gahatraj
Resident, Namuna Basti



“These two pictures were taken by me to illustrate the environmental risks and vulnerabilities of our settlement. Most of our houses are situated right on the riverbank. In the first picture, you can see houses on the verge of collapse, yet people are still living in them because they have nowhere else to go and lack the finances to afford rent. In the second picture, you can see a few vacant houses that were damaged by flooding two years ago. We don't know where those people are living now, but they left with heavy hearts. Sometimes I wonder how much trouble we need to bear. We already live in poor conditions with the constant fear of eviction and the recurring flooding issue. If our settlement were a regular one, the river embankment would likely have been constructed already. But just because we are informal settlers, we are treated as second-class citizens with no support whatsoever.”

Nimalu Sherpa
Resident, Namuna Basti



“In this picture, I wanted to show how some houses try to deal with flooding and land erosion caused by the river current. Although it's not very clear in the picture, if you look closely, you can see stacked sacks filled with sand. The homeowners have filled these sacks with sand from the river as a temporary means to prevent soil erosion beneath their house and hopefully avoid floodwater from entering.”

Anjita Khatri, Resident, Namuna Basti



“Despite several incidents of flooding, we have not received any support or solutions from the government, and we are not in a position to invest ourselves. So, we decided to construct these concrete walls just in front of our houses to prevent floodwater from entering. It's not a permanent solution, but it's the only thing we can do ourselves. In our settlement, you can see that most houses have these structures, and newly built houses have raised the height of the foundation to cope with floods.”

Shova Tamang, Resident, Manohara Settlement

WATER SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WASH)





“This spot is right next to the bamboo bridge. The garbage here is a result of people from the settlement littering. While the municipality does collect garbage, their visits aren't frequent, so people resort to dumping their waste beside the river. Unfortunately, the municipality vehicles never pick up this garbage, leading to the river getting polluted. If a large bin were placed here, people would likely use it to dispose of their garbage, making it easier for the municipality to collect. However, no one seems to be appealing to the authorities for such a solution. When people's homes become too cluttered with garbage, they resort to dumping it around the river.”

Man Bahadur Dong
Resident, Manohara Settlement



“These are the utensils used by an elderly couple in our settlement. Both are unwell and unable to manage much on their own. It's distressing to imagine how cooking with these might be impacting their health and well-being. This couple is among the most vulnerable in our settlement. Maintaining hygiene standards is a distant dream for them, as they struggle to even have enough food to fill their stomachs day to day. Their house lacks proper walls and is situated close to the river, which emits a foul smell 24/7. I wonder how they are coping with this additional burden. They don't have anywhere else to go, and there is no government support for people like us.”

Sarita B.K., Co-researcher, Namuna Basti



“Since we're not connected to regular water supply, most households have installed hand pumps like the one in the picture to manage water for household use. The water in the bucket appears yellowish due to its poor quality from the hand pump. While some households can afford to attach electric motors to extract water, most people rely on manual pumping, which is laborious. For drinking water, most households purchase water jars from shops, while some travel around 45 minutes to fetch drinking water from natural sources, which is free of cost.”

Sabina Majhi, Resident, Manohara Settlement



“In the first picture, we are constructing a communal hand pump supported by PHASE Nepal. This initiative will ease our water management for household purposes. In the second picture, an elderly woman from our settlement is washing her clothes. Despite the need to pump water manually and carry it to the clothes washing spot, she emphasised the importance of staying clean and wearing clean clothes. These photos highlight that not all people living in informal settlements endure poor WASH situations. Although we face difficulties, we are striving to overcome them through our collective efforts.”

Anjita Khatri
Resident, Namuna Basti

VULNERABLE GROUPS



“This is one of the elderly members of our community. I took his picture when he was returning home from a hospital visit. The paths in our settlement are not user-friendly, as you can see in the photo. We don't have black-topped roads, so they become very muddy during the winter, making it difficult, especially for the elderly, to walk. The road in the picture is the main path, so it's a bit wider, but the alleyways are narrow and uneven. If it's hard for me to move through those alleyways, how do people with disabilities or elderly individuals manage? We don't have direct access to road connections, so everyone, regardless of their vulnerability, needs to walk ten minutes to reach the nearest bus stop. In summary, our settlement is not ideal for living, especially for the elderly, but they don't have any other option. The government should think about the welfare of these groups of people living in informal settlements.”

Ishwori Tamang
Resident, Manohara Settlement





“In the picture, we see a father and son. The son is seated in a wheelchair, while the father is beside him. These two are the only occupants of the small house in the second image. Despite being over 70 years old, the father must care for his son, as there is no one else in their family. They used to live in very poor conditions, but with community support, this one-room house was built. Now, at least the son can come outside to bask in the winter sun. However, they rely solely on disability and old age allowances, which are not enough to sustain their livelihood. These two are just examples of people living with disabilities in our settlement. Some don't even receive any disability allowance because they are unable to visit their district to obtain a disability card. I wish the government could provide assistance to these individuals, regardless of where they live or their status. While taking the picture, the father expressed his constant worry about his son's future after he is gone.”

Man Bd. Dong, Resident, Manohara Settlement

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The ARISE consortium

Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom

Community-based organisations in Manohara and Namuna Basti informal settlements

Our co-researchers Sarita B.K, Mandira Majhi and Ramesh Tamang

Research team member's: Alisha Karki, Anjita Khadka, Barsha Rijal, Bikash Koirala, Dr. Jiban Karki, Jyoti Lamichhane, Rudra Neupane, Situ K.C and Samikshya Nepal

Hayley Stewart and Kate Hawkins of Pamoja Communications

Our special gratitude to all our participants and community members who have supported us directly or indirectly throughout the process



This work was supported by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The GCRF Accountability for Informal Urban Equity Hub (“ARISE”) is a UKRI Collective Fund award with award reference ES/S00811X/1