ASEAN Journal of Community Service and Education

Empowering Indigenous Communities Through Livelihood Transformation and Local Knowledge Integration

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A B S T R A C T

This community engagement project focused on exploring the shifting livelihood practices of an indigenous community facing historical marginalization and cultural erosion. Centered on the Danuwar community of Tama Ghat, Nepal, the initiative adopted a multi-paradigmatic approach combining autoethnography and critical ethnography to understand and support local transformations. It documented how land scarcity, elite domination, and globalization have compelled the community to adopt alternative livelihood strategies, such as wage labor, seasonal migration, and small-scale entrepreneurship. While infrastructure development has improved material conditions, it has also accelerated the decline of traditional agricultural knowledge and endangered cultural identity. The program emphasized the co-construction of knowledge with community members, advocacy for land rights, and the revitalization of indigenous practices. Outcomes revealed a complex interplay between resilience and loss: although living conditions have improved, the sense of identity remains under threat. This project highlights the importance of integrating local wisdom into development efforts to foster inclusive, sustainable, and culturally grounded livelihoods.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indigenous communities continue to experience systemic marginalization, particularly in terms of land access, education, and cultural recognition. Many reports regarding indigenous communities have been well-documented (Sumaludin, 2024; Ali & Kamraju, 2024; Karmaker, 2025a; Karmaker, 2025b; Praja et al., 2025). The Danuwar community of Tama Ghat, located in Panchkhal Municipality, Kavrepalanchowk District of Nepal, represents one such group whose livelihood and identity have been deeply affected by development-induced displacement and socio-economic inequality (Scoones, 2009). Traditionally dependent on agriculture, forest resources, and river-based subsistence practices, the Danuwars now face increasing land scarcity, loss of indigenous knowledge, and an identity crisis exacerbated by globalization and elite dominance (Shahu, 2023).

As poet Giri poignantly expresses: *"I have come only to see whether you are 'you' / But, you have become unrecognizable."* (Pradhan in his book "A History of Nepali Literature", published by Sahitya Akademi, Bharat Printers, Delhi in 1984).

This verse encapsulates the psychological and cultural dislocation experienced by the Danuwars, reflecting the tension between traditional values and the need for present-day survival. Infrastructure development has brought material improvements (modern housing, access to media, and diversified livelihoods such as wage labor and small-scale entrepreneurship). Still, these gains often come at the cost of traditional values and self-definition. Despite their resilience, the community remains vulnerable due to structural inequalities and the erosion of collective identity.

This community service initiative was designed as a culturally grounded response to these interconnected challenges. Several examples community service are explained elsewhere (Qotrunnada & Nurani, 2022; Ariyanti & Nandiyanto, 2022; Hartantao & Nandiyanto, 2022; Rivky *et al.,* 2022; Shaffiyah *et al.,* 2022; Giani *et al.,* 2022; Artawati *et al.,* 2022).

The purpose of this study is to explore and document the transformation of livelihood strategies among the Danuwar community of Tama Ghat, Nepal, in response to historical marginalization, land dispossession, and socio-economic change. It aims to understand how the community adapts through wage labor, migration, and agricultural shifts, while also examining the implications for cultural identity, indigenous knowledge preservation, and community empowerment. The study further seeks to advocate for inclusive, rights-based development approaches that recognize local agency and promote sustainable, culturally grounded livelihoods.

Combining ethnographic immersion with participatory training and advocacy, the project sought to empower the Danuwar community by integrating indigenous knowledge into sustainable livelihood practices, promoting local agency, and supporting cultural preservation. The novelty of this initiative lies in its glocal approach (merging global insights with local wisdom) to foster inclusive and resilient community development rooted in cultural dignity and self-determination.

2. METHODS

This community engagement project adopted a qualitative, participatory approach to explore and support the transformation of livelihood practices within the Danuwar community. Grounded in interpretive and critical paradigms, the methodology served not only as a framework for understanding lived experiences but also as a practical guide for co-developing solutions in collaboration with the community. The approach combined narrative-

based inquiry, cultural immersion, and shared reflection, comparable to a brush, canvas, and color palette used to collaboratively paint a picture of change and resilience.

2.1. Philosophical Assumptions

The project was guided by several core philosophical assumptions. Ontologically, it is assumed that social reality is dynamic and co-constructed through the experiences and interpretations of both community members and facilitators. Epistemologically, knowledge was viewed as context-dependent and shaped through dialogic engagement. Axiologically, the process recognized the values and voices of the Danuwar people as central, honoring their worldviews and lived wisdom. Rhetorically, a reflective tone was employed to capture the richness of narratives and emotions involved in the journey toward empowerment.

2.2. Research Paradigm

Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, the project emphasized understanding social and cultural meanings (Parr, 2003). Specifically, it is from the perspectives of the Danuwar community. Simultaneously, it incorporated elements of critical inquiry to examine underlying power structures, historical marginalization, and systemic inequalities. This dual lens allowed for a deep engagement with both the lived realities and the structural constraints shaping the community's livelihood transitions.

2.3. Community Engagement Approach and Design

The project used a hybrid of autoethnography and community-based ethnography to foster mutual learning and co-reflection. The facilitator, drawing on personal experience and academic training, worked alongside local leaders, elders, and youth to explore shared narratives of change. The engagement process unfolded through iterative phases: problem identification, community dialogue, co-design of activities, and shared interpretation of outcomes. Data collection methods included prolonged field immersion, participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, and cultural journaling. Each stage emphasized ethical sensitivity and collaborative meaning-making.

2.4. Data Collection and Interpretation

Data were gathered through community participation, story circles, reflective journaling, and in-depth interviews. These qualitative sources were supplemented by analysis of relevant documents, reports, and literature on indigenous livelihoods and rights. Interpretive strategies included thematic coding and narrative synthesis, allowing for a textured understanding of challenges, adaptations, and aspirations. The analysis aimed not only to describe, but also to amplify the community's voice in articulating their own developmental path.

2.5. Ethical Considerations and Quality Assurance

To ensure credibility and integrity, the project followed key principles of ethical community engagement: informed consent, cultural respect, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Reflexivity was practiced continuously to minimize bias and acknowledge the facilitator's positionality. Trustworthiness was supported through prolonged engagement, member-checking, and co-validation of findings with community representatives. The process prioritized inclusion, especially of women and youth, whose perspectives are often underrepresented in both research and development discours

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Previous Studies

Livelihood refers to the strategies individuals and households adopt to sustain their lives, particularly in rural settings where dependence on natural resources is often high (Scoones, 2009). Sustainable livelihoods encompass not only material assets but also human capabilities and social networks, which are essential for poverty reduction and environmental management. In rural communities, agriculture, forest use, and small-scale enterprises form the backbone of subsistence economies, with households often combining multiple income sources to ensure survival (Ellis, 1999).

Three major livelihood strategies have been identified: agricultural intensification or extensification, livelihood diversification, and migration. Intensification focuses on increasing productivity through capital or labor investment, extensification involves expanding cultivable land, while diversification and migration serve as adaptive responses to socio-economic stressors. These frameworks help explain how marginalized communities, such as the Danuwar of Nepal, navigate changing conditions while striving to preserve cultural identity (Adhikari, 2003).

This study adopts the human capability approach, which views development as the expansion of freedoms and agency rather than mere economic growth. Education plays a critical role in converting capabilities into sustainable outcomes, yet communities like the Danuwar remain hindered by structural inequalities and a lack of access to formal education. As a result, livelihood insecurity persists, and traditional skills are undervalued in dominant development narratives (Parr, 2003).

Globally, the rights of Indigenous peoples have been supported through frameworks such as the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention in 1957 No. 107 by the International Labour Organization and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007. These documents affirm Indigenous autonomy, cultural preservation, and protection against discrimination, though implementation often lags behind political commitments.

In the Nepalese context, Indigenous communities have historically been marginalized through centralized governance, caste dominance, and the erasure of linguistic and cultural diversity. The declaration of Nepal as a Hindu kingdom and the imposition of Nepali as the sole official language exacerbated the exclusion of Indigenous groups. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal formally recognizes the rights of Adivasi, Janajati, Dalit, and Madhesi communities, ensuring participation, cultural protection, and identity-based autonomy (Constitution of Nepal in 2015).

These findings underscore the urgent need for community-based programs that are inclusive, participatory, and respectful of local knowledge. Interventions must be grounded in lived realities, with Indigenous voices shaping the design and implementation of development initiatives (Dahal & Aram, 2013).

3.2. Wage Labour as a Livelihood Strategy

The Danuwar community has traditionally relied on subsistence agriculture as its primary source of livelihood. Initially rooted in conventional farming methods, their current agricultural practices are carried out on small, privately owned plots or leased land, increasingly supported by modern tools and farming inputs. However, both field observations and community dialogues reveal that agriculture alone is no longer sufficient to meet household needs due to limited access to arable land and the rising costs of cultivation (Adhikari, 2003).

Historically, the Danuwars were entrenched in a feudal land system that rendered them vulnerable to land loss through cycles of debt and elite domination. Legislative efforts such as the Civil Code (Muluki Ain) of 2020 BS and the Land and Land Reform Act of 2021 BS were introduced to rectify these inequalities but have had limited impact on Indigenous cultivators in practice (Adhikari, 2003). Similar dynamics of marginalization can be seen in India, particularly among Dalit communities, where socio-economic restructuring has often been influenced by external interventions, including NGO-led religious conversions.

Currently, only a minority of Danuwar households retain surplus land for commercial agricultural production. The majority have turned to wage labor as a primary livelihood strategy, engaging in manual work across local construction sites, farms, or urban centers. Although often physically demanding and precarious, wage labor has provided more consistent income compared to traditional farming, enabling access to basic goods and services. Consistent with Sen's perspective on development as the enhancement of individual agency and capability, the Danuwars have demonstrated resilience by navigating structural limitations through the strategic use of their labor and local knowledge.

3.3. Present Livelihoods: Better than The Past

The evolution of the Danuwars' livelihood practices is visibly reflected in shifts in housing, clothing, dietary habits, and domestic technologies. The transformation from traditional thatched huts to brick-and-cement structures, often topped with tiled or zinc-sheet roofs, represents not only material advancement but also an elevated sense of self-worth and security within the community. Household amenities such as televisions, gas stoves, pressure cookers, biogas systems, and refrigerators have become increasingly common, signaling an overall improvement in living standards and daily convenience.

Dress patterns have similarly shifted, with younger generations favoring modern styles over traditional attire. These material and aesthetic changes reflect deeper socio-cultural transitions, including a growing aspiration toward modern lifestyles and societal acceptance. For many Danuwar families, such developments symbolize tangible progress and a departure from earlier experiences marked by hardship, food scarcity, and social marginalization (Adhikari, 2003).

These transformations align with Sorokin's theory of cultural dynamics, which highlights the influence of both internal motivations and external pressures in shaping social change. Likewise, conflict theory underscores that social order is constantly in flux, driven by contradictions, tensions, and adaptive responses. The Danuwars exemplify both views: they are active agents of change as well as responsive subjects, navigating structural constraints while simultaneously reconstructing their collective identity through everyday practices.

3.4. Cultural Erosion and Identity Crisis in Development

In the context of postmodern development, identity has become increasingly fluid, shaped by evolving narratives, dynamic knowledge systems, and accelerated socio-economic transformations. Michel Foucault's insights into power and discourse emphasize that truth is not fixed but continually reconstructed through social and institutional forces, making identity inherently unstable in modern societies. This phenomenon is evident within the Danuwar community of Tama Ghat, where older generations struggle to cope with the pace and direction of social change.

While the youth increasingly embrace new livelihood opportunities, technologies, and urban lifestyles, many elders express unease, fearing the erosion of cultural norms, rituals,

and intergenerational memory. For them, modernization is not only an economic shift but a perceived existential threat to their ancestral identity. Despite ongoing efforts to preserve traditions (through oral narratives, religious ceremonies, and seasonal festivals), community members acknowledge that essential elements of their cultural heritage are fading, especially as younger members migrate or disengage from traditional practices (Shahu, 2023).

This intergenerational tension signals a broader identity crisis, wherein the community finds itself torn between maintaining cultural continuity and responding to evolving socio-economic demands. Such a dilemma calls for development strategies that avoid one-size-fits-all models and instead prioritize culturally grounded, community-led approaches. Anchoring development in indigenous knowledge systems and local identity not only supports economic resilience but also safeguards the community's dignity and sense of belonging (Sherma *et al.*, 2024).

3.5. Discussion

The Danuwar community of Tama Ghat has experienced a substantial transformation in its livelihood strategies, shifting from a traditional reliance on hunting, fishing, and foraging to subsistence agriculture. Once recognized as skilled cultivators of the fertile tar lands, they have gradually lost access to productive land due to elite dominance and inequitable land distribution. Although state-led land reforms (such as the Civil Code (Muluki Ain) of 2020 BS and the Land and Land Reform Act of 2021 BS) were introduced to address these injustices, their impact has been minimal in practice (Adhikari, 2003). The resulting marginalization has led to chronic poverty, political exclusion, and cultural disenfranchisement.

In response, many Danuwars have turned to wage labor as a core survival mechanism. Daily wage work, though labor-intensive, offers a relatively stable income and often includes meals, making it one of the few viable livelihood strategies available. To align with market demand, the community has shifted from traditional rice cultivation to short-cycle, high-value crops such as cauliflower, potatoes, and tomatoes (Adhikari, 2003). These adaptations highlight the Danuwars' resilience and capacity for innovation despite limited institutional support.

Nonetheless, poverty continues to influence intra-community dynamics. Competition over scarce resources, gender-based exclusion from land ownership, and reliance on informal income sources (such as the production of homemade liquor by women) underscore persistent structural inequalities. Government restrictions on forest access have further eroded traditional sources of income. These hardships have been especially burdensome for women and youth, prompting a wave of labor migration to urban areas and abroad in search of better economic opportunities.

Despite these challenges, the Danuwars maintain deep indigenous agricultural knowledge passed down through generations. Their expertise in seed selection, seedling management, and land stewardship remains largely unrecognized by formal institutions. This knowledge system reflects a combination of empirical-analytic skills, historical memory, and critical insight. Yet, in the absence of formal agricultural education and state recognition, such wisdom risks being lost.

The cultural fabric of the community is also in flux. While globalization has introduced modern housing, clothing, and food preferences, traditional ceremonies and rituals continue to shape daily life. This coexistence represents a hybrid cultural identity in which localization and modernization intersect, often in tension (Shahu, 2023). As the Danuwars navigate this in-between space, they are caught between preserving ancestral legacies and adapting to new economic realities.

Among younger generations, aspirations have shifted toward non-agricultural employment, particularly in the military or in Gulf countries. However, limited access to higher education and systemic marginalization hinder upward mobility. Additionally, the widespread adoption of imported hybrid seeds has led to a decline in local seed use and traditional farming systems, eroding both biodiversity and cultural meaning (Adhikari, 2003). This raises concerns not only about environmental sustainability but also about the community's autonomy in defining its development trajectory.

In summary, the Danuwar experience reflects both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of rural transformation under conditions of inequality and cultural disruption. While their adaptive strategies demonstrate strength and ingenuity, these must be complemented by inclusive, community-led development interventions. Efforts must focus on recognizing indigenous knowledge, promoting gender equity, and ensuring community agency through education, land reform, and participatory planning. Only then can livelihood advancement be achieved without compromising cultural identity or collective dignity.

3.6. Implication

The long-standing marginalization of the Danuwar community, particularly regarding inequitable land distribution, highlights the urgent need for structural transformation through inclusive and rights-based development. Despite their ancestral ties to the land, the Danuwars have historically been denied fair land ownership, rendering them vulnerable to poverty, political exclusion, and cultural invisibility (Adhikari, 2003). Although some progress has been made in raising gender visibility, women in the community remain largely excluded from land tenure and financial autonomy, perpetuating intergenerational inequality. These conditions call for urgent agrarian reforms that emphasize equitable and scientific land redistribution to empower historically disadvantaged communities and ensure their full participation in local development processes.

Beyond land rights, the integration of indigenous knowledge into policy and development practice is vital. The Danuwar community holds a wealth of localized wisdom in agriculture, ecological management, and community resilience. Recognizing and institutionalizing this knowledge can provide a culturally relevant foundation for sustainable development (Dahal & Aram, 2013). Local governments and academic institutions must work together to embed indigenous knowledge systems into school curricula, vocational education, and community training programs. Doing so not only reinforces cultural identity but also prepares younger generations to adopt environmentally sustainable and socially viable livelihood practices (Scoones, 2009).

Faced with globalization, the Danuwars have adopted a form of glocal adaptation, balancing traditional values with modern techniques to navigate socio-economic change. However, this adaptation must be managed carefully to avoid cultural erosion. As Sherma *et al.* (2024) emphasize, safeguarding indigenous wisdom is inseparable from ethical, inclusive development that respects local agency and avoids top-down imposition. Development must be understood as a co-created process, rooted in ancestral legacies yet open to contemporary innovation.

Culture itself is not static; it evolves across generations, adjusting to new realities while preserving essential elements of collective identity. Rituals, ceremonies, and oral traditions continue to serve as the cultural anchors of the Danuwar people, even amid rapid modernization. The erosion of such practices would not only weaken cultural memory but also diminish the community's capacity for self-determination. Therefore, cultural

preservation must be treated as an integral component of any sustainable development initiative.

It is both a moral and constitutional obligation for the state to protect Indigenous communities and ensure their meaningful participation in all stages of development. Token inclusion is not enough; genuine empowerment through access to decision-making structures is essential to preventing further marginalization and preserving Nepal's cultural diversity (Constitution of Nepal, 2015; UNDRI, 2007).

The extinction of communities like the Danuwars would not only mark the loss of a people but also erase an irreplaceable thread in the cultural fabric of the nation. Upholding the principle of "Let us live, and let others live" should guide inclusive, respectful, and sustainable development at both national and local levels.

4. CONCLUSION

This community engagement initiative revealed the complex intersection between livelihood transformation, cultural resilience, and systemic marginalization within the Danuwar community. Through participatory methods, the project identified wage labor, adaptive farming, and migration as key survival strategies, while also exposing threats to traditional knowledge and identity. The findings emphasize the importance of integrating indigenous wisdom into education and policy to promote sustainable, inclusive development. Empowering communities like the Danuwars requires not only material support but also recognition of their cultural heritage and agency. Sustainable progress must be both locally grounded and socially just, preserving identity while enabling advancement.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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