

AIPS Fellowship Final Report

Project Title: Assembling the Development Frontier: Caste, Climate Vulnerability and Agrarian Politics in the Indus Delta Region, Pakistan

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1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

This project examines how neoliberal logics of community development entangle with socio-ecological relations in Sindh, a space that has long remained a frontier of agricultural extraction, ethno-nationalism, and now acute climate disasters. Through ethnographic research methods, this project explores how pre-existing hierarchies such as caste profoundly condition climate vulnerabilities, and how these dynamics are reshaped through the development frontier. Looking beyond the misfortune of a disaster-prone location on the world map, this research sheds critical light on the socio-ecological processes and relations that create unevenness in climate vulnerabilities within the same geography. Development aid has long remained a cornerstone of state-building in Pakistan, providing a legitimating rationale for governing elites who embraced the presence of agencies as they set up shop in Islamabad during the era of post-WWII developmentalism. By studying how structural identity-based inequalities and agrarian dynamics of land and labor entangle with neoliberal community development projects that condition lived experiences, this project offers insights into these complicated dynamics in Pakistan, and broader South Asia.

Aid-driven projects carry more than funds to local spaces, they carry neoliberal aspirations of upward mobility and organizing societies that have profound impacts on local contexts and communities. Understanding how brokers of development, both in government offices and the NGO sector, influence development discourses provide imperative insights on local and global practices. In rural settings, small farmers and agricultural laborers are at the frontlines of both climate disaster and community development projects, making it imperative to understand the varied effects of diverse structural inequalities within these groups as we work toward reducing climate risk and migration at macro and micro levels. By making the lived experiences of low-caste agricultural laborers the focal points of this study on climate vulnerability, this project centers those groups who have been historically underrepresented and excluded in development policy and processes, more so in the context of Pakistan. Caste is an underacknowledged form of structural exclusion that operates in a similar register as race and plays a pivotal role in organizing the lives of people in South Asia, as well as millions of people in diaspora communities living across the Global North and South. Examining development through this lens adds critical light on questions of nationalism, identity, agrarian politics, and labor dynamics in Pakistan.

2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

- i. Research sites identified and contacts established in selected rural districts in Sindh, the city of Karachi and Islamabad.

- ii. Qualitative fieldwork conducted with rural communities in Sindh including semi-structured individual interviews, group interviews and plot walks.
- iii. Interviews conducted in the city of Karachi with government line department and ministry officials within the Sindh secretariat, particularly working in areas of development, planning and climate change.
- iv. Interviews conducted with NGO and development sector professionals based in Islamabad and Karachi.
- v. Archival research conducted at the National Archives in Islamabad.
- vi. Initial research findings presented through virtual participation at the American Association of Geographers (AAG) 2023 conference.