



# Generating Climate Futures Through Collaborative Workshops: A Method Brief

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Across South Asia, narratives of climate risk pervade the discourses of development and economic change. States such as Nagaland are integrating climate adaptation into their policies through assessments like State Action Plans on Climate Change. Meanwhile, influential actors in the academic and civil society sectors are increasingly asking how climate change will influence notions of development. Some authors have explored how this trend creates regimes of anticipatory governance, particularly in at-risk regions like Bangladesh, where institutions organize resources and reorient the built environment in anticipation of climate disaster. While experts debate how to best mitigate or adapt to climate change, local communities are rarely asked to contribute to the broader discourse. During my year in Nepal as a 2021–2022 Henry J. Luce Scholar, I worked with several communities to explore their own future predictions and ask how these futures may complicate or contest expert-driven assumptions. In December 2023, as a Fulbright Scholar visiting The Highland Institute, a research centre in Northeast India, I hosted a workshop with similar goals. In this brief article, I share the methods and frameworks I used at these two distinct sites and gesture to some of the key resulting insights. I hope these community-driven predictions will be taken seriously as real indicators of the futures that persist in the imaginaries of groups at risk of climate change. Further, my aim is that this approach will be accepted as a means of challenging our assumptions about who can imagine the future and why.

**Keywords:** climate change, climate fiction, climate futures, community-driven climate predictions, imaginaries, South Asian climate risk, collaborative design, futurity

## Introduction

Experts extensively discuss climate change mitigation and adaptation, but the voices of local people are rarely heard. During my research in Nepal and India, I have worked with several communities to capture their future projections and discuss how they might challenge expert-driven preconceptions. I began my project in Kathmandu, where I conducted dozens of interviews with experts in the water and hydropower

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sectors to understand the baseline professional and institutional imagination of Nepal's climate future. I asked questions about the material qualities of the future they imagined for Nepal's hydrosphere, the likelihood of different scenarios, and the types of action that might be taken to bring about more positive futures. I framed these discussions along the language and timelines of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which denote a series of emissions scenarios from the least to the greatest temperature rise and mark specific dates as significant milestones, such as the year 2050. The experts I spoke to came from diverse fields, ranging from hydropower technology specialists to professional pundits and columnists well-known for their perspectives on climate change and the water sector. They also represented a range of radically different projections for Nepal's climate and water futures. Some experts shared that rainfall would likely increase overall, while others rejected that assertion. A few felt that groundwater overexploitation was the primary driver of drying rivers and the failure of some small hydropower projects, while others described a more direct connection between river flow, glacial melt, and rainfall patterns. I found a highly contested landscape of possibilities. My interlocutors imagined Nepal variously as a future energy exporter to India and Bangladesh, a desiccated desert landscape with no remaining glaciers, or even a state with a vast system of dams that could release water to lower-lying nations at market rates while controlling flooding. Still other narratives posited that hydropower development in the Himalayas would simply fail as hundred-year flood events became seasonal and infrastructure collapsed under the weight of water and excess siltation. My intention was not to confirm the veracity of these various claims but to understand the landscape of prediction itself and, in particular, establish who were the most significant groups and individuals predicting the future. My hope was that exploring this question might offer an understanding of what forms of power might be at work in the realm of climate knowledge and what implications that may have for the impacts of climate-related planning agendas in Nepal. Largely, I found that those with institutional (e.g., ministries and universities) backgrounds and connections, as well as those with a grounding in economics and international affairs, were most comfortable imagining different futures and making claims about various possibilities. Those with scientific backgrounds and affiliations, on the other hand, were far more cautious in describing potential futures, generally sticking to their areas of expertise and declining to offer speculations without evidence.

During the course of my interviews, I also grew interested in the contrasts between numerical and narrative descriptions of climate change. In *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, James C. Scott (1998) identifies the ways in which forest maps in late eighteenth-century Prussia and Saxony created hierarchies of vision by focusing on limited species while ignoring dense biological and cultural context. Scott describes these maps as a form of 'tunnel vision' that simplified an 'unwieldy reality', allowing the forest to be brought under the control of the institutions that envisioned it. Maps that exclusively identified species and relationships of interest became the material from which management plans were drawn. In the contemporary climate discourse, signifiers like '400 PPM' are often used to make sense of and simplify the complex and unwieldy reality of the global climate to inform the public and drive policy agendas. Originating from scientific institutions, these values are decontextualized from the often ambiguous and intricate science surrounding them and granted deterministic weight. The complexity of the worlds they represent—worlds of immense variability and local change—is lost in their simplistic rendering. As they are increasingly positioned at the top of a hierarchy of information, much like Scott's forestry, they create a way of seeing and managing climate change through which highly controversial solutions such as geoengineering become plausible. During my interviews, I typically situated our discussion in relation to these numbers—for example, asking about the state of Nepal in 2050 or at 400 PPM. Participants were often more comfortable describing the future when given a more concrete scenario to work from, and these numbers represented familiar ground in a context where development agencies and international NGOs frequently use them. They felt more able to develop a future scenario when doing so in relation to a value and, subsequently, to discuss potential policy changes. It became clear that these numbers indeed seemed to offer a way of thinking that was more deterministic and managerial in nature, resulting in more detailed and expansive imaginaries as compared to when I posed non-numerical questions or statements.

To provoke and contextualize this sense of abstraction, I began to consider how I might invite more imaginative and descriptive modes of thinking about the future, especially among other communities. I also began to wonder how groups of non-experts would respond to these numbers or even circumvent them in their speculations, and what these alternative ideas might offer to the broader aims of climate justice or adaptation. As a more contemporary and regionally specific example of a failed expert-driven environmental project, the promotion of shrimp aquaculture in the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest spanning India and Bangladesh, has frequently resulted in worsening inequalities and permanent damage to the landscape (Paprocki 2018: 955-973). Mindful of Scott's and other instances of large-scale projects that neglected local opinion, I hoped to find an approach that might both invite speculations from different communities while also interrogating the frameworks of knowledge that underpin climate change. I therefore decided to explore the idea of climate fiction storytelling through a series of workshops, a practice that seemed to offer a way of imagining that did not rely on purely scientific or expert-driven information.

### Methodological Intervention 1: Kathmandu, Nepal

With these aims in mind, I then sought to engage with a very different group of communities: students, young adults, and those in creative industries with little to no environmental or water-sector expertise. I began by organizing a climate fiction-writing workshop with QC Bookshop, one of Nepal's foremost English-language publishers, who generously supported my work by offering a teaching space and inviting applications (Fig. 1). We collaboratively selected around a dozen participants with a range of backgrounds,



**Figure 1:** Participants in the climate-fiction workshop in Kathmandu discussing different prompts for imagining the future, Spring 2022

namely students between the ages of 17 and 24, several of whom were originally from rural localities outside of Kathmandu. Over a period of several months in the spring of 2022, I developed and led a climate fiction storytelling and writing workshop with the group. During each weekly session, I would typically start by situating our imaginary in time by providing a projected date, such as 2025, 2050, or 2100. Then, I would give prompts or areas of focus. For example, I asked the participants to imagine that they were time travellers sent to the future, and they had to report back what they saw. I frequently explored questions of utopias and dystopias, asking participants to imagine best- and worst-case scenarios for the country. I also provided weekly prompts for at-home writing and worked with each student to edit their stories. Ultimately, the writers and I crafted an open-access digital anthology, which I published on my website and shared throughout Kathmandu, including at a public reading.

The final anthology, in-class discussions, and extensive body of written work by each student represented a collection of different imaginable climate futures of Nepal, inspired both by the encounter between taught concepts like climate fiction and Afrofuturism and the lived experiences, cultural frameworks, and approaches of each writer. Different anxieties and aspirations arose through this work. The alienation posed by technology amidst a crumbling environment repeatedly appeared. International politics, power, and colonialism were also major concerns for the writers. In one story, Nepal becomes the 51st US state after suffering an environmental catastrophe. In another, Nepal is subsumed by China. I also shared a variety of outside perspectives with the participants, both in the form of expert information on climate change and climate fiction from authors around the world, including Thailand and the US. The participants frequently contested assumptions in this body of work about what an environmental crisis might look like by pointing to Kathmandu itself. When I shared Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, a novel showcasing California communities beset by water shortages and pollution, students pointed out how some of the descriptions matched their daily lives. We ended up discussing how, in Western media, climate disaster often resembles what contexts in the Global South already look like, due in no small part to the offloading of the environmental costs of production to other countries. When provided some of the numerical values that I described earlier, the students also discussed and negotiated how those numbers were abstracted from contexts like Kathmandu and the surrounding areas, which they often felt defied prediction due to the immense variability and complexity of Nepal's environment.

Outside of the fiction workshop, I also explored how non-narrative forms of mapping and worldbuilding could be used to generate climate futures. Partnering with Utopia Kathmandu, an organization dedicated to supporting entrepreneurs and urban designers, I hosted an event series based on depicting Kathmandu in the year 2100 (Fig. 2). Instead of using written narratives to explore the future, I focused on physical representations of the built environment. Utopia invited artists, local activists, entrepreneurs, and urban planners to join, and we curated small groups to ensure maximum mixing of disciplines and backgrounds. We then provided materials like paper, cardboard, old magazines, and recycled items like used pens or empty containers, and asked each group to design what they felt Kathmandu would look like in the year 2100. The designs that resulted showcased a mixed set of outcomes, both positive and negative. Some involved ecosystem-based water processing, more environmentally friendly agriculture, and waste disposal, while at the same time displaying worsened inequality, especially between economic classes. The dialogue between people from different backgrounds on these issues was one of the most interesting parts of this process, generating speculative cities with a mix of social, aesthetic, and infrastructural concerns. After leaving Nepal, I had the opportunity to work with communities in Bangladesh through a second grant from the Luce Foundation. I began in Dhaka, where I held a similar future-design challenge, and ended in Chattogram, where I hosted a discussion and storytelling workshop with students from the Asian University for Women. Once I returned to the US, the latter project turned into a remote workshop over several months, following the structure of my climate-fiction workshop in Nepal, resulting in another open-access anthology.

Throughout these projects, the greatest challenge has been to convince participants that they are allowed to predict and speculate about the future, a process typically assumed to be the province of experts and those in positions of power. Participants often respond to my prompts and questions with statements of





**Figure 2:** Participants building speculative designs at Utopia Kathmandu, Spring 2022

uncertainty and self-doubt, citing a lack of the necessary expertise to make accurate predictions about the future. I bridged this gap by reframing the process as a deeply personal one, especially for youth facing a changing world, and articulating the act of imagining the future as one of agency, through which alternate worlds might one day be brought into being. Challenging the normative assumption that scientists and

institutions are the only actors able to map the future has been at the core of this method. Within the climate discourse, there is significant and justified worry about ill-intentioned groups promoting inaccurate or misleading science. In part, the rigidly scientific approach to climate prediction has resulted in a sense of exclusivity for the act of speculation itself. However, many of the discussions I have prompted in these workshops have centred on the fact that even IPCC projections and scenarios still outline a myriad of possibilities, which are defined by the types of action we take or do not take; in short, proving that even at the core of scientific climate prediction, the creative capacity to imagine alternative worlds is still central to the realities we will ultimately face.

## Methodological Intervention 2: Nagaland, India

In December 2023, at an event at The Highland Institute in Kohima, Nagaland, I hosted a short workshop on imagining climate futures as a component of the *Tasting Tomorrow*<sup>2</sup> and *Intersubjective Ecologies Lab*<sup>3</sup> international projects. The discussion was attended by participants from across the world, including Brazil, the US, Europe, and different regions of India. I separated the workshop into two sections, starting with a discussion based on several prompts and key climate facts, followed by a collaborative exercise in which participants were asked to build physical representations of the predicted future of their community. The dialogue and workshop were centred partly on agricultural and food-based futures, thinking through how we might navigate a climate change world in these sectors as a lead-up to the climate analogue modelling associated with the *Tasting Tomorrow* project. My intervention was meant specifically to open up broader and more creative modes of thinking about climate futures, especially given the heavily science-driven notion of climate analogues.

Before starting the workshop, I wrote several numbers and climate facts on the board, including ‘400 PPM,’ ‘1–3 metres of sea level rise,’ and ‘1.5–5 degrees.’ I started by discussing these numbers and their variability, and then initiated a broader discussion about the participant’s personal views of the future. In contrast to the precise predictions on the board, I asked the group about their own vision. I used several prompts, including ‘What is the best-case scenario for climate change in your community?’ ‘What is the worst-case scenario?’ and ‘What kinds of changes would have to happen, or may happen, to bring these futures into being?’

These questions sparked a dialogue that began with questioning why future thinking and speculation might be relevant and for whom. Some participants felt that imagining the future was less helpful as contrasted with thinking through the real and historical conditions of communities. Meanwhile, others shared that the aspirations and fears available through speculation were helpful means of considering alternative ways of being and making the world. One aspect of our discussion focused on whether utopian writing, or imagining a better future, would inspire more climate action as compared to dystopian or negative writing which may engender feelings of hopelessness. Another participant brought up the notion of climate anxiety, and the discussion ranged towards how this idea is often situated generationally and across boundaries, with many communities sharing similar perspectives despite different backgrounds and locations. For example, younger participants based across both Europe and South Asia felt a great deal of fear and concern over the future of the global climate. They also talked about a sense of connection across space, stating that climate change has a unifying quality that will only increase as its impacts become more obvious. That said, participants also acknowledged and described social inequalities tied to the environment that will worsen over time, recognizing that climate change will have varying impacts.

I then asked participants to use a collection of materials to build representations of the futures they thought were plausible or interesting, while continuing to discuss our products and the broader themes. Several participants created highly abstract pieces that signified hope and new ways of being in the

2. <https://www.tastingtomorrow.org/pages/about.html>, accessed 28 March 2024.

3. <https://highlandinstitute.org/2022/10/31/the-intersubjective-ecology-laboratory/>, accessed 28 March 2024.

community, while others wrote text on paper that spoke to more negative potential outcomes, including simply the word ‘extinct.’ Most participants thought about the communities they were a part of, and these ranged from Europe to India to South and North America. Both the discussion and the workshop component led to a conversation centred on personal experience of these contexts, which generated new speculations about climate change when placed into dialogue with significant numbers from scientific discourses. The discussion and resulting work proved to be a provocative and exciting means of imagining these futures, bringing the picture of climate change away from a set of numerical abstractions that suggest managerial understandings towards a more empowered and collaborative means of speculating based on lived experience.

## Reflections

Nagaland and Kathmandu are different contexts, with historically distinct communities and unique environmental circumstances. However, as part of the broader Himalayan watershed, they are linked both by the substance of the environment and the pervading regional discourses of climate change. During the two interventions that are the focus of this article, I was struck by the similarities that emerged during dialogues with participants. Namely, a feeling of possibility that resulted from imagining the future outside of and in contrast with more scientific approaches seemed to be present in both dialogues. In both spaces, discussions about the actions that might be taken at the community level and the role of community-driven speculation itself rose to the fore of the conversation, suggesting that the framework of creative storytelling offers a sense of empowerment.

The forms of solidarity created in these spaces have also been a crucial and unexpected outcome of the project. Whether working with students from Afghanistan or Nepal, activists, or entrepreneurs, a sense of collectivity and affiliation has typically arisen, especially as I share the anthologies and images of other communities’ speculated worlds. Shared urgency always attends to any discussion of climate change, but asking people to build a world according to their fears or desires has seemed to generate a sense of cross-boundary and intergenerational meaning, enriching the networks resulting from these workshops and creating an ongoing community of past participants.

The question of hope is always a key element of these dialogues—hope not only for the world and its communities in the time of climate change but also for the work that has yet to be done to bring more just and sustainable futures into being. It is my own hope that these methods and questions can be considered as a means not only of understanding culturally sited imaginaries of the future in a classically academic sense but also as a collaborative means of engaging in key dialogues and even producing platforms that bring new voices and forms of solidarity to the forefront of the climate debate.

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