

Socio-economic impacts of rural road development in South Asia

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Started in 1994 by the 16 village development committees (VDCs) of Mustang District, the motor road connecting the district headquarters of Beni, Jomsom, and Lo Manthang in north-central Nepal is nearing completion. When completed in the fall of 2008, this road will provide jeep, motorcycle and tractor service to the 15,000 residents of Mustang from Pokhara to the Chinese border. Well-documented case studies, such as that of the Karakoram Highway in Pakistan, show that rural road development projects affect virtually all aspects of life in nearby communities. Using a holistic approach, this paper examines societal changes in agriculture, migration, health, education, environment and culture, to assemble a comprehensive picture of change caused by road development projects in these affected rural societies. Preliminary findings show that as modern forms of transportation become more available and convenient, traditional forms of transportation inextricably linked to community culture and heritage, such as horses, are rapidly replaced. Due to significant decreases in the cost of transportation, agriculture has become much more profitable. This encourages an expansion and diversification of crops and increases property values and migration to the region. Decreases in transportation costs also result in an expansion of health care in the region including ambulance service and a greater variety and quantity of available medicines. Educational professionals expect to see shifting patterns of attendance and a consolidation of students attending larger schools in the district. While various government regulations are being enacted such as vehicle efficiency standards and checkpoints, pollution and poaching are still expected to be exacerbated by the presence of the road. Tourism, a major economic activity in the region, is expected to undergo radical changes with a steep decline of foreign tourism and a steady increase in domestic tourism. This paper will use the road development project in Mustang as a case study and a lens for more general patterns of societal change caused by road creation projects in the greater scope of South Asia.