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Roads, Responsibilities and the Public Good: Negotiating the bureaucratic space of road users' committees

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Abstract: This paper examines the administration of everyday life through the lens of road users' committees—groups of people created to administer the construction or improvement of local road sections. While the users' group modality is rooted in a longer history of coerced labour for state projects in Nepal, in the 1990s it was embraced by both international donors and the Marxist-Leninist led government as mechanism of local empowerment. Users' committees extend bureaucracy into everyday lives, enrolling residents not as “economically rational” profit-maximizing neoliberal subjects, but rather as self-governing managers of the public good—active participants in bureaucratic assemblages of offices, documents and technocratic procedures. In practice, we find diverse forms of engagement and contestation in these bureaucratic spaces. Members negotiate inter-generational conflicts, rival authorities and competing understandings of development and state responsibility to acquire land and marshal support for projects. Committees also skirt, bend and defy rules, pooling public funds to illicitly hire private contractors, for example, or manufacturing community contributions in documents. The capture of user committee funds can also come under local and official scrutiny, prompting critique, contestation and governmental response. While users' committees are increasingly viewed as inefficient, corrupt, and evidence of declining community solidarity, we argue that the negotiations, manipulations and even non-participation at work in users' committees offer more complex insights into how people are re-negotiating their relationship to the Nepali state and particular imaginaries of the public good.