



## Marginality: Concepts and their Limitations

Ghana S. Gurung and Michael Kollmair

NCCR North–South Dialogue, no. 12

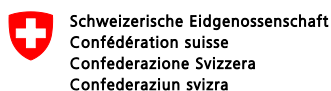
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Living on the edge of society: peasants in Far-West Nepal.  
(Photo by M. Kollmair)

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# Contents

	Figures	6
	Tables	6
<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Marginality</b>	<b>9</b>
	2.1 Definitions	9
	2.2 Societal marginality	11
	2.3 Spatial marginality	12
	2.4 Marginality overlap	13
	2.5 Marginality and vulnerability	13
	2.6 Marginality and poverty	14
<b>3</b>	<b>Marginality Indicators</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>References</b>	<b>21</b>
	<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>24</b>

**Figures**

Figure 1: The Marginality overlap	13
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**Tables**

Table 1: Main components of marginality definitions	11
Table 2: Suggested indicators of marginality	17

# 1 Introduction

The concept of **marginality**, a crosscutting issue in the field of inter- and transdisciplinary empirical research, is widely used by researchers in the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South in conducting their investigations. The relevance of this concept, especially for JACS South Asia, emerged during the identification of core problems and potentials in the initial JACS South Asia Work-shop: "Sustainable Development in Marginal Regions of South Asia" held in Kathmandu in August 2001 (Müller-Böker et al. 2004). As a contribution to the "global overviews", a brainstorming session was also held on the indicators of marginality in February 2003 among the IP6 research group at the Department of Geography, University of Zurich (Geiser 2003). These first inputs were discussed and refined during the ITC Workshop held in Kyrgyzstan in September 2003. A group exercise was organised to identify the different ideas underlying the "marginality" concepts, and to initiate a further debate within the Joint Areas of Case Studies (JACS) South Asia.

At the same time, it was decided that a discussion paper on the **marginality concept** should be produced that might promote further discussion and deepen understanding among researchers. The following paper was prepared for this purpose. Its main objective is to enhance understanding and common use of the concept in the field of inter- and transdisciplinary scientific research initiated by the IP6 in particular and the NCCR North-South in general. It briefly defines and describes the basic concepts of marginality, based on a literature review and inputs from the participants at the above-mentioned workshops, and attempts to provide some key answers to two pertinent questions: **What is marginality? What are marginality indicators?** At the end, a brief conclusion is drawn from an overall understanding of the concept.





## 2 Marginality

Marginality is generally used to describe and analyse socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access (societal and spatial) to resources and full participation in social life (Anderson and Larsen 1998; Brodwin 2001; Davis 2003b; Sommers et al. 1999). In other words, marginalised people might be socially, economically, politically and legally ignored, excluded or neglected, and are therefore vulnerable to livelihood change (Brodwin 2001; Geddes 1997; Larsen 2002b; Marcuse 1996; Müller-Böker et al. 2004; Perlman 2002; Sommers et al. 1999).

### 2.1 Definitions

The following common definitions of marginality may be used as a starting point to comprehend and examine the concept of marginality.

*Marginality can be defined as “the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation, at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political or economic), ... in mind, when one excludes certain do-mains or phenomena from one’s thinking because they do not correspond to the mainstream philosophy” (International Geographical Union (IGU), 2003:2)*

*“Socio-economic marginality is a condition of socio-spatial structure and process in which components of society and space in a territorial unit are observed to lag behind an expected level of performance in economic, political and social well being compared with average condition in the territory as a whole” (Sommers et al. 1999:7)*

Marginality is primarily defined and described by two major conceptual frameworks, i.e., societal and spatial<sup>1</sup>. The societal framework focuses on human dimensions such as demography, religion, culture, social structure (e.g. caste/hierarchy/class/ethnicity/gender), economics and politics in connection with access to resources by individuals and groups. In this regard, the emphasis is placed on understanding of the underlying causes of exclusion, inequality, social injustice and spatial segregation of people (Brodwin 2001; Darden 1989; Davis 2003a; Gans 1996; Hoskins 1993; Leimgruber 2004; Massey 1994; Sommers et al. 1999).

Explanation of the spatial dimension of marginality is primarily based on physical location and distance from centres of development, lying at the edge of or poorly integrated into a system (Larsen 2002b; Leimgruber 2004; Müller-Böker et al. 2004; Sommers et al. 1999). This concept is intended for use in gaining insights into the influence of physical locations and distance on the livelihoods of individuals/groups and the space itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Spatial marginality is also referred as **geographical** or **physical** marginality in the literature (IGU, 2003; Goussal and Lezcano 2003)

These definitions clearly indicate that marginality is a **process** that emerges and evolves with time, in various types and scales, in a socio-economic and geo-political environment. Thus it reinforces and reproduces the state of marginalization to a great extent (Kirkby 2000). Colonization, apartheid and ethnicity can be taken as examples of situations where one group assumes superior status. In this process, marginalised people are often condemned for making their living in marginal environments despite the fact that they are unlikely to have access to resources needed to overcome restrictions imposed by marginal environments (Kirkby 2000; Larsen 2002a).

Marginality as defined by the IGU (2003) is seen to be a **dynamic** concept, since each region has potential to overcome the situation that is perceived to be marginal or unsatisfactory. However, the negative consequences of marginality can even serve as the starting point for innovations and potentials. As Japanese innovation and development after the Second World War has illustrated, marginality can even provide an extra edge to start development (Mizuuchi 2003; Davis 2003a). Indeed, the surroundings of Mount Everest, one of the most inaccessible and environmentally harsh regions of Nepal, inhabited by an ethnic minority (Sherpa), has now developed into one of most prosperous tourist destinations, with much better access to basic infrastructure and services (health care, communications, education and transportation) than most of the other mountainous areas of the country. This illustrates clearly that the scale of investigations is important in understanding the complexity of marginality in a given space. In focusing on human needs, attention needs to be paid to marginality within the spatial and societal dimension of mountains rather than the mountains per se (Müller-Böker et al. 2004:252).

Marginality occurs across human settlements, from the most isolated geographical settlements to the most highly developed metropolitan cities (IGU 2003; Sommers et al. 1999; Larsen 2002b; Müller-Böker et al. 2004). However, the type and **scale** of marginality may differ depending upon the physical and social settings under which marginality occurs. For instance, marginality in developed regions is more prevalent in the context of societal (e.g., care services deficit) than spatial (Larsen 2002b) issues, whereas both spatial and societal marginality are widespread in less developed regions due to differential access to infrastructure, innovations, technology and communication (Goussal and Lezcano 2003; Müller-Böker et al. 2004). The type and scale of marginality as stated in the IGU (2003:3) is highly influenced by the changing role of volatile economic, political and social change as well as technology and communication that create marginality, both in developed and less developed areas and countries.

Table 1: Main components of marginality definitions

Component of definition	Conceptualisation
Scale of investigation	Multiple scales; scale dependent
Characteristics	Dynamic process; often negative connotation, potential frequently neglected
Spatial dimension	Remote in physical sense; poor infrastructure
Societal dimension	Outside the mainstream of society; invisibility in official statistics, media and research
Overlapping dimensions	At the edge of systems; exclusion

## 2.2 Societal marginality

As indicated earlier, societal marginality is interpreted according to social conditions. Disparities are often a result of exclusion from the 'mainstream'. Here the scale and state of social, economic and political disparities between the marginalised and the mainstream are examined in relation to equitable and legitimate access to resources and decision-making processes. Marginality could be better understood if the so-called 'mainstream' was clearly defined. Furthermore, the marginalisation process within marginalised groups should not be neglected (Dain 2003; Larsen 2002b; Perlman 2002).

Societal marginality is by and large reflected in underlying social conditions. These conditions are: poor livelihood options (lack of resources, skills and opportunities), reduced or restricted participation in public decision-making, less use of public space, less sense of community, and low self-esteem (Brodwin 2001; Larsen 2002a). Marginalised people are usually discriminated against, stigmatized, ignored and often suppressed by the mainstream on the basis of race, gender, age, culture, religion, ethnicity, occupation, education and economic status (Larsen 2002b).

As stated earlier, marginality occurs spatially and socio-economically across the globe in different intensities and typologies (IGU 2003), creating various forms of vulnerability for marginal regions and people. For developing countries, physical vulnerabilities are more likely to be the main concern as a result of population dynamics, political instability, intensification of agriculture, degradation of land resources, poor access to technologies and slow industrial growth. Moreover, marginality can further be exaggerated by “non-democratic regimes, corrupt officials, dualistic economics, religious fundamentalism, ethno-linguistic tribalism, and sectarianism” (Sommers et al. 1999:21). All these factors may contribute to marginality, and the effects on marginalized areas and people are likely to get worse “as increased globalization leads to bipolarization and segmentation of the national work force” (Sommers et al. 1999:21). Although technology may help to mitigate some of the spatial marginality, societal factors (age, gender, ethnicity and immigration status) are likely to persist (Mehta 1995; Kirkby 2000).

## 2.3 Spatial marginality

The dimension of spatial marginality is usually linked to the geographical remoteness of an area from major economic centres (location), and refers to areas that are difficult to reach (access) in the absence of appropriate infrastructure and therefore isolated from mainstream development (Brodwin 2001; Müller-Böker et al. 2004). According to Leimgruber (2004), a marginal region is defined as an area lying at the edge of a system. Hence, spatial marginality indicates the relative distance from economic and service centres, but regional disparities might persist nationally at different scales regardless of geographical remoteness (Jussila et al. 1999b; Müller-Böker et al. 2004).

The spatial dimension of marginality is a relative concept, where the scale (e.g. from isolated location to national and global level) seems to be the most important factor to consider. We may find marginalised areas on all spatial levels, depending on which level we choose to compare units. Comparing all nations, we may come up with results indicating 'developing countries' as typical marginal areas. But in analysing one of these countries on its own, substantial differences may be observed between the capital and rural areas. Likewise, marginality within the capitals of different countries can also be observed.

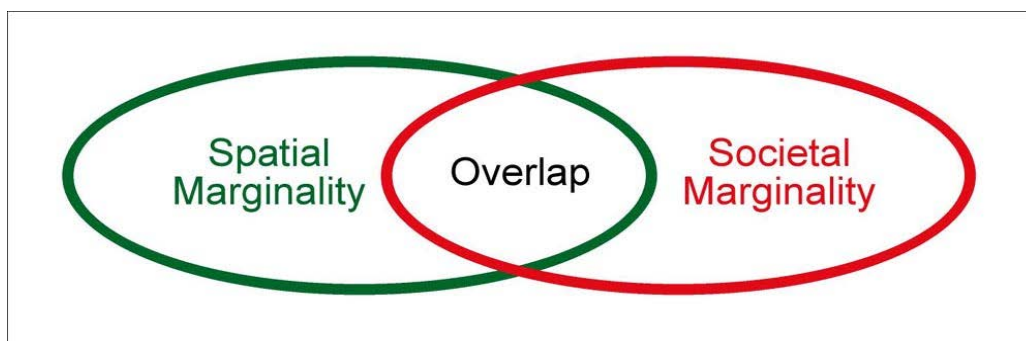
Macro-spatial marginality applies to regional disparities in living standards between communities in central locations of economic activity and those in remote areas or the periphery, with poor resource bases (Leimgruber 2004), where marginality primarily manifests as a result of spatial disadvantages (Larsen 2002b; Massey 1994; Sommers et al. 1999). In this case, market forces may play a dominant role, as they produce inequalities in competitiveness resulting from locational or physical limitations (Mehta 1995).

Micro-spatial marginality represents “distressed localities within relatively small territories such as the built-up areas of cities and metropolitan regions” (Sommers et al. 1999:18). This typology is mostly due to social vulnerabilities that are often aggravated by hegemonies associated with the dominant political and socio-cultural order. Here, ethno-cultural distinctions, migration status and economic bipolarization seem to be prominent vulnerability factors in marginality when compared to other factors such as history, age and gender (Davis 2003a; Sommers et al. 1999). Here spatial marginality is more the result of the social process of marginalisation than a precondition.

The in situ-spatial marginality refers to “unequal development within very small geographical units” (Sommers et al. 1999:19) where poor and marginalized households and prosperous households share neighbourhoods and the disparities between them in standards of living are evident. In industrialized countries, such marginalities are consequences of many vulnerability factors such as ethnicity, immigration status and labour segmentation (Larsen 2002a), whereas in developing countries, “margins are generally a function of class and occupational segmentation of the urban population” (Somers et al. 1999:19) represented by domestic servants, porters, guards, street peddlers and wage labourers.

## 2.4 Marginality overlap

Social and spatial marginality occur everywhere, from highly developed to less developed areas around the globe, with a resulting overlap between the two. The border between spatial and societal marginality is blurred as a result of this overlap (see Figure 1). In particular, societal marginality in terms of age, gender, race, ethnicity and social hierarchy is prevalent even in the most geographically isolated locations or those distant from major economic and service centres. Similarly, marginality exists in the context of urban slums in metropolitan cities (both in developed and less developed regions) where geographical proximity to services might prove irrelevant (Müller-Böker et al. 2004).



**Figure 1:** The Marginality overlap

The overlap between spatial and societal marginality is not only within a specific space and social setting, but also at all scales, ranging from individuals to the global community and at particular geographical sites to the global level. Thus the prevalence of marginality can be observed among families, communities and countries, ranging from households to the nation-state and global levels.

## 2.5 Marginality and vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability originated in work on famine and food security in the early 1980s and has gained importance in interdisciplinary research since then (e.g. Chambers and Conway 1992). It encompasses both external (exposure) and internal dimensions and stresses the active role of people in developing coping strategies and improving their resilience in the face of natural and societal risks (Bohle 2001).

Marginality is closely related to the vulnerability of both people and environment as “it victimizes location and communities that are characterized by one or more factors of vulnerability” (Sommers et al. 1999:13). The most commonly recognised vulnerability factors appear to be a poor location and scarcity of natural resources (Hurni et al. 2004), and people’s inability to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from daily life struggles (Kirkby 2000). However, vulnerability is most evident when spatial and societal marginality overlap.

Physical vulnerability factors are somehow seen to be less challenging (particularly in industrialised regions/countries) than social vulnerability factors related to increasing mobility, transportation, communication and other technologies (Larsen 2002b; Sommers et al. 1999; Müller-Böker et al. 2004). Social factors such as historical background, ethno-cultural characteristics, minority status, immigration status, age, gender, and educational status are emerging as critical factors making communities and places even more vulnerable to marginality (Davis 2003a; Sommers et al. 1999:14; Mehta 1995) regardless of spatial and social settings. A growing trend of exclusion and discrimination based on race, residency (e.g. Favela), style of dress, place of origin and gender was (up from 53% in 1969 to 89% in 2001) observed in Brazil (Perlman 2002).

Some of the social vulnerability factors such as immigration status and ethnicity are of particular importance to marginality (Sommers et al. 1999). With increasing mobility, immigration status is regarded as one of the most insidious vulnerability factors in marginalization and exploitation worldwide, as reported by Sommers et al. (1999:15). Immigrants who arrive unofficially seeking (low-wage) employment face various types of discrimination such as stereotyping, exploitation and even violence, as they lack political and legal recourse (Brodwin 2001; Mizuuchi 2003).

Gender, age and disability are important components in vulnerability to marginality, both in industrialized and less developed countries. Indeed, gender inequity is a constant challenge or persistent problem that undeniably affects the employment and income potential of women (Mehta 1995) and their ability to overcome limitations. In many cases, women suffer from drudgery due to the social roles they are expected to play and the need to combine farming activities and/or professional work with household chores like fetching water, gathering firewood, doing laundry, and caring for children. Clearly, female-headed households with many children are particularly vulnerable to marginality, as the highest percentage of households below the poverty level in the United States consists of single mothers with children (Sommers et al. 1999:16). Similarly, the elderly and children in Europe normally lack care and caring resources by comparison with young people (Brodwin 2001; Larsen 2002a).

The relationship between age and marginality in developing countries is rather different. The elderly are generally respected, and both the old and the very young are cared for by extended family and community members, even though they are the first to suffer, particularly in times of economic and political stress (Jussila et al. 1999b). Nevertheless, the trend in modern Japan indicates that economic forces contribute to isolating the older generation despite cultural traditions that honour and value elders (Mizuuchi 2003:5). This trend seems to be evident worldwide in many transitional countries as well as in metropolitan areas in developing countries.

## 2.6 Marginality and poverty

Marginality and poverty are often used synonymously, as both describe a situation from which people want to escape or which they want to turn into an opportunity. Often measured only by economic indicators (e.g. 1 US\$/day), poverty means lack of or limited access to shelter, food, clean water, health care, education, jobs, representation

and freedom, and living day by day with an uncertain future. In other words, poverty is a “state of economic, social and psychological deprivation occurring among people or countries lacking sufficient ownership, control or access to resources to maintain minimal acceptable standards” (UNDP 2001:10; see also: Coudouel et al. 2004; Gerster 2000). The reasons behind these constraints or lack of access to resources are examined in detail under the conceptual framework of marginality (Larsen 2002a; Leimgruber, 2004; Müller-Böker et al. 2004; Sommers et al. 1999); thus the issue of marginality emerges whenever poverty is investigated, and vice-versa.

This interpretation of poverty reflects the fundamental indicators of marginality, even though conceptual and application differences exist between the two concepts. In fact, marginality deals primarily with the process of marginalization, whereas poverty emphasises focuses more on the situation in light of inequity (Gerster 2000).

In many respects, the root causes of poverty such as inequality, vulnerability and exclusion (Dain 2003; Mizuuchi 2003; UNDP 2001) are closely linked to spatial and societal marginality. Dain (2003:22) states that extreme inequality in wages and social exclusion contribute to poverty, particularly where the poor remain in the informal market, the traditional sector, and at the margins of the modern economic sector, unable to overcome poverty and adopt the new urban-industrial values of the developed capitalist societies. Here, there seems a high likelihood that the poor will become marginalised – not only the poor with a low social status but also those who have higher status.

When poverty is understood as a relative concept, the borderline between marginality and poverty becomes blurred, as both concepts analyse the issues in relation to the mainstream from the perspective of inequality in accessing income, goods and services. As one looks at type and scale, the picture becomes much clearer in making the distinction between the two concepts because marginality is not always associated with poverty. For instance, individuals and/or groups might be economically rich and physically as well as psychologically strong, yet they could be socially marginalized based on societal values and norms. Here, wealthy *dalits* (so called untouchables in Hindu society), gay people, gangs, and drug dealers are classic examples. They are not poor, but they are marginalized. Likewise, poverty analysis is often restricted to absolute terms, whereas marginality may cover a wider spectrum.





### 3 Marginality Indicators

The indicators listed in Table 2 provide an overview of both spatial and societal marginality, although they could be challenged. These indicators can help us to understand social, economic and political disparities within, among and between individuals, groups, and regions. Each indicator in isolation may not alone provide a sharp picture of marginality, but as a package they can help to illustrate the overall picture and to deepen understanding.

The indicators in Table 2 are based on brainstorming within the IP6-Group (Geiser 2003) with additional input from the literature (Davis 2003a; Darden 1989; Jussila et al. 1999a and b; Larsen 2002a and b; Leimgruber 2004; Müller-Böker et al. 2004). Most of the records corresponding to these indicators can be obtained from United Nations (UN) organisations, concerned governments and research institutes. However, they can only provide an overview of marginality (mostly at the national level), and therefore further investigation and analysis for validation within the context of particular regions and communities is required. Specific indicators (such as the number of people with access to telephones or bank accounts, etc.) need be developed for detailed studies, considering the widespread 'invisibility' of marginalised people in official statistics. A more general problem with the identification of indicators is the focus on processes inherent to the concept of marginality.

**Table 2:** Suggested indicators of marginality

Subject	Indicators
Societal	Child labour; gender inequalities; social exclusion; human rights violations
Infrastructure	Access to clean water; distance to transportation, bank, and communication facilities; energy supply
Health	Life expectancy; infant mortality; under- and malnutrition
Education	Literacy rate, gross enrolment ratio
Political	Participation in elections; corruption index; security status (violence, crime)
Economic	GDP per capita; unemployment rate
Environmental	Environmental pollution; condition of natural resources
Development Index (existing)	Human Development Index (HDI); Gender Related Development Index (GDI); Human Poverty Index (HPI)



## 4 Conclusions

Both spatial and societal marginality persist around the globe, even though their type and scale of occurrence may differ depending on the physical and social setting. The core challenge for marginal areas and marginalised people lies in poor access to physical and social infrastructure, information, technology and other care services. Further-more, the vulnerability of marginal regions and people is likely to increase with growing globalization and international competition for trade and development. Thus it is imperative to address marginality by fully exploring options to reduce social, economic and political disparities among and between marginal regions and people. In this way, marginalised people might be empowered to turn disadvantages into potentials by improving their livelihood options and bargaining power and promoting cooperation, understanding and appreciation of differences, where diversity can serve as a force in overcoming marginality.

Thinking of marginality as a process, including the notion of overlap, can enhance understanding of the dynamics of the process and the correlations between spatial and societal marginality. Moreover, this can also contribute to understanding of the relationship between marginality and poverty as well as the implications for vulnerability in the context of identifying the root causes.

In conclusion, marginality is an important crosscutting concept in the field of empirical social science research in examining the rationale behind spatial, economic and social disparities among and between regions/countries and individuals/communities in the light of legitimacy, equity and social justice. The concept is even more pivotal to inter- and transdisciplinary research, where multiple causal links and relationships need to be investigated and understood to extract meaningful insights for scientific research. It is difficult to generate a concise definition incorporating all the dimensions of marginality. However, the conceptual framework provided in Table 1 can help to provide a deeper understanding of the complex social phenomena and explore alternatives that provide relief from marginality and reduce poverty.



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At WWF Nepal, I am responsible for managing the programs and projects, and networking with national and international partners. My past professional experience has been working among rural communities living in and around the Protected Areas of Nepal, beginning from the Annapurna Conservation Area in 1986. I took the leadership role while establishing Manaslu Conservation Area and Kangchenjunga Conservation Area. Professionally my interests lie in reconciling nature conservation priorities with livelihood and development needs/aspirations of people

Whenever I get a bit of time, I enjoy watching national geography, animal planet, news, listening music, watching various documentaries, reading and spending time with family.

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Both spatial and societal marginality persist around the globe, even though the type and scale of occurrence may differ depending on the physical and social setting. Researchers within the NCCR North-South use the concept of marginality in different ways; the present paper explores marginality with the aim of enhancing understanding and common use of the concept in the field of inter- and trans-disciplinary scientific research. It briefly defines and describes the basic concepts of marginality, based on a literature review and inputs from the participants in various workshops of the NCCR North-South, and attempts to provide some key answers to two pertinent questions: What is marginality? What are marginality indicators? At the end, a brief conclusion is drawn from an overall understanding of the concept.

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*dialogue*

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