

Policy Research Bootcamp 2024

With the government becoming more receptive to evidence-based policies and seeking out new policy solutions in rapidly changing political environments, the role of emerging researchers in policy research is expected to increase. The policy process is challenging to navigate which needs skill which goes beyond the theoretical teaching. There is widespread acceptance and growing need of evidence from the wider stakeholders but, the manpower skilled enough to generate the on-demand evidence and ability to navigate this complicated process is very limited. Recognizing this gap, the key institutions working in the policy research have decided to come together and fill this gap.

Governance Lab, in collaboration with partners: Inclusion Economics Nepal (IEN), Kathmandu University School of Arts (KUSOA), Nepali Academics in America (NACA), Policy Entrepreneurs Inc (PEI) and Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) initiated and organized a three-day Policy Research Bootcamp to capacitate the emerging researchers/scholars with essential policy analysis tools including essential research skills to generate necessary evidence for influencing key policy decisions. The partnering institutions expect the skills of human resources in policy research landscape is enhanced and that this event opens doors for future collaborations that leave a positive impact.

Additionally, the Bootcamp had an objective to establish a supportive network and provide valuable career guidance, ensuring continued personal growth of the participant ultimately leading to positive impact in the fields of research and policy making

This bootcamp was highly aimed at building the capacity of emerging researchers/scholars with policy process, policy analysis, policy evaluation, and skills to navigate the policy making journey. While theoretical knowledge is foundational, practical application is equally important in cultivating well-rounded researchers. By offering participants first hand practical knowledge of the entire policy process, the program aimed to bridge this gap and empower them with the skills and experience essential for success in research for policy making. Furthermore, by providing a collaborative platform among organizations, it planned to create an ecosystem where aspiring researchers can engage with real-world challenges and make meaningful contributions to academic and professional communities.

Vision:

“Building a community of researchers who have intense enthusiasm and curiosity towards the national policy ecosystem and are keen on contributing to evidence based policy making in Nepal.”

Objective:

- Strengthen the capacity of emerging policy researchers by providing them with both foundational and practical research skills and knowledge to add on to their existing foundational knowledge
- Equip participants with necessary skills to effectively navigate Nepal's governance system, fostering adaptive leadership
- A firm understanding of relevant tools and research methodologies for conducting evidence-based policy making in Nepal
- Strengthening communication and advocacy skills.
- Foster collaboration and networking among participants.

PARTNERS

- Inclusion Economics Nepal (IEN)
- KU School of Arts (KUSOA)
- Nepali Academics in America (NACA)
- Policy Entrepreneurs Inc (PEI)
- Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC)

Duration and Schedule

- Total Duration: 3 days
- Daily Schedule: Flexible (Mix of both in-person & virtual sessions)
- Date held: August 4-6, 2024

Sessions and Discussions:

The three- day program was divided into in-person sessions led by experts from partner institutions, virtual sessions, interactive lectures, group discussions, hands-on activities, and case studies.

Day 1: Nuts and Bolts of Policy Making

The day started with the goal to introduce the fundamental, practical aspects of creating and implementing public policies. It involved the detailed, hands-on work required to develop a policy, from identifying issues and setting goals to drafting legislation, conducting analysis, engaging stakeholders, and ensuring effective execution. In essence, the ideas were about understanding how policies are actually crafted, the steps involved, the challenges

encountered, and the techniques used to ensure that policies are effective and achieve their intended outcomes.

In the opening session, Dr. Nisha Onta, founder and Executive Director of Governance Lab gave an overview of the Bootcamp. She emphasized on the synergy of effects created by collaboration among think tanks and academic institutions to foster policy research landscape in Nepal. She shared how this initiation is a beginning of a collaborative journey to support young researchers in the policy research process, which in the long run will contribute towards a more organized and systematic approach to informed policy making.

Module I (a) : Understanding the Public policy process (Theory and Practice of Policy Process)

The session of the Bootcamp was led by Mr. Trilochan Pokharel, Senior Director of Studies at NASC. He began by showing two videos that presented conflicting perspectives on the dynamics of public policy formulation, highlighting a gap between existing policies and the actions of policymakers. Mr. Pokharel explained that the policymaking process should begin with recognition, diagnosis, prognosis, followed by formulation, consultation, decision-making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and review and adjustment. He emphasized that this process should include contributions from academicians, think tanks, research organizations, and experts—elements that are unfortunately lacking in Nepal's current policy making practices. Mr. Pokharel further noted that federalism serves as the bridge that connects local problems with national solutions. In conclusion, he described the core of policymaking as encompassing problem identification, problem formulation, decision-making, policy evaluation, and policy implementation.

Module I (b): Introduction to PDIA Approach in policy process

Sharing his insights from the experience in Public Policy Dr. Pukar Malla, Founder and Chairperson of the Daayitwa, introduced the Problem-Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) approach, developed by researchers at Harvard University's Center for International Development, as a method designed to address the challenges of complex policy-making. Traditional policy processes often rely on standardized solutions or best practices from other contexts, which can lead to significant gaps in implementation.

Dr. Malla highlighted these often-overlooked gaps in well-crafted policies, questioning whether low and stagnant capabilities represent a gap or a trap. While these challenges are frequently perceived as gaps, Dr. Malla argued that when the same approaches are repeated without yielding results, it signifies a trap. This trap arises from isomorphic mimicry, adopting ideas from others to establish legitimacy rather than addressing core issues. He explained that this imitation of modern institutional forms tends to overlook the importance of

sustainability. Additionally, it leads to premature load-bearing, where external solutions are imposed that surpass the capacities of the implementers. Consequently, despite their initial appeal, such policies fail to achieve the desired outcomes due to these underlying traps.

In response to these challenges, Dr. Malla introduced the PDIA approach as a dynamic and flexible method of policy-making. PDIA prioritizes problem-solving in context-specific, iterative, and adaptive ways, making it particularly effective for addressing complex and evolving policy challenges.

Module 2: Leveraging tools to effectively identify and define the policy problem/issue

This module was facilitated virtually by Dr. Udaya Raj Wagle from NACA. This module included discussion on different tools available to better understand and define the policy issue/problem - one of the key aspects before initiating any policy research. Dr. Wagle started his session with the introduction and definition of public policy to bring consensus among all the participants. The session then identified all the stakeholders involved in the policy making process and then moved to introduce the rational model of policy analysis which is one of the popular problem solving models used in policy process. The rational models included quantitative analysis and summation, cost-benefit analysis, cost effectiveness analysis, risk and actuarial analysis etc. Dr. Wagle further introduced non-rationality in policy analysis. The session also included a “technical exercise: do values matter?”. One essential learning for the participants from this session was the introduction of a generic (stage-heuristic) policy analysis process which included discussion on stages of the ongoing policy cycle.

The day ended with group work instigating participants to reflect on the sessions and work with their group on the final outcome: framework on policy brief.

Day 2: Essential Research Skills in Policy Making

In the field of policy-making, research plays a critical role in shaping effective, evidence-based policies that address real-world challenges. The ability to conduct thorough and methodical research is essential for policymakers to understand the complexities of issues, assess potential solutions, and make informed decisions. Essential research skills in policy-making encompass a wide range of competencies, from data collection and analysis to stakeholder engagement and ethical considerations. These skills enable policymakers to develop well-informed, effective policies that are responsive to the needs of society.

Module 3: Harnessing the Transformative Potential of Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research for Policy Practice

Day 2 started with an online session by Dr. Arati Maleku, an Associate Professor from Ohio State University at NACA. She discussed various aspects of policy practice with an

integration of qualitative and mixed research methods offering transformative potential, enabling a deeper understanding of complex social dynamics and ensuring that policies are both inclusive and effective. She spoke highly about the importance of research positionality where she emphasized the identities and positionality of researchers that play a crucial role in shaping the data collection and analysis process. Acknowledging one's own position allows for more reflexive and context-sensitive research, which is essential for producing valid and ethically sound insights. Second, she highlighted data transformation that leverages advanced techniques like Social Network Analysis and Community-Based Participatory Research that can significantly enhance the power of data. These methods allow for the exploration of relationships, power structures, and community dynamics, offering a nuanced perspective that is vital for informed policy-making.

Following that, Dr. Malekhu accentuated Grounded Theory in Policy Making as a systematic methodology in qualitative research and especially valuable in policy-making. It allows for the development of theories that are directly grounded in the data, providing policymakers with robust, evidence-based frameworks that are deeply rooted in the realities of the communities they serve. To conclude, she underlined the humanistic values in qualitative research particularly in contexts like Nepal, where caste, ethnicity, and social identity profoundly influence lived experiences. She urged the participants that understanding these aspects through qualitative inquiry ensures that policies are culturally sensitive and socially equitable. By harnessing these approaches, policymakers can create more responsive, equitable, and effective policies that truly address the needs and challenges of diverse populations.

Module 3: Quantitative Research Methods in Policy Research

The facilitator, Dr. Santosh Adhikari, an Assistant Professor from Kathmandu University School of Arts (KUSOA) started with the introduction of quantitative research methods as an essential tool in policy research, providing the empirical foundation necessary for evidence-based decision-making. The discussion focused on the various quantitative research tools that are particularly relevant to policy research, as well as the practical experiences of applying these tools in real-world policy contexts.

Dr. Adhikari highlighted the technical aspects of quantitative research methods that involve the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data to identify patterns, test hypotheses, and make informed predictions. According to him, in policy-making, these methods are crucial for assessing the scope of issues, evaluating the potential impacts of policy options, and measuring outcomes. He discussed the quantitative research tools such as surveys, statistical analysis, econometrics, and modeling which are commonly used to gather and interpret data on a large scale. He shared examples of the use of quantitative research methods during the implementation of a social welfare program where policymakers might use statistical analysis to track changes in poverty levels and income distribution, providing

concrete evidence of the program's success or highlighting areas for improvement. Similarly, econometric analysis could be employed to study the effects of trade policies on domestic industries, guiding adjustments to promote economic growth.

In conclusion, Dr. Adhikari re-emphasized that quantitative research methods not only offer robust insights into policy issues but also enhance the credibility and transparency of the policy-making process. By grounding decisions in empirical data, policymakers can ensure that their actions are informed, effective, and accountable. Their application in real-world policy contexts demonstrates their value in shaping effective, evidence-based policies that address societal needs.

Module 4: Incorporating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in policy research

With an expertise in Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in policy research, Dr. Nisha Onta emphasized that making policy research GESI-responsive is crucial as to integrate GESI frameworks from the outset. This involves systematically considering how different groups—especially marginalized or vulnerable populations such as women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities are affected by policy issues. First, GESI Analysis, as a tool, involves disaggregating data by gender, age, ethnicity, disability status, and other relevant social categories to identify disparities and inequalities. It allows policymakers to understand how different groups experience problems differently, ensuring that policies do not inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities. Second, Intersectional Analysis considers the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. By applying an intersectional lens, policymakers can explore how various social identities intersect to impact individuals' experiences, leading to more nuanced and inclusive policy solutions.

To conclude, Dr.Ms. Onta incorporated that GESI in policy research is not just about addressing gender or social disparities, it is about ensuring that all members of society are considered in the policy-making process. By employing the right tools, methods, and strategies, policymakers can create policies that are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs of the population, ultimately leading to more effective and just outcomes.

Day 3: Insights to Actions in Policy Making

Public Policy Applications/Cases:

The day started with a brief exchange by the current policy research practitioners on different policy research topics they have worked on in the past or are currently working on.

Topic: Scenario-Building: A Tool for Planning and Policy Making in an Era of Uncertainty

Topic: RCT's used by Inclusion Economics Nepal

“To understand what is required to ensure women’s representation, we must first understand why women’s representation is so low”, Mr. Chandra Bhandari, a Senior Research Manager at Inclusion Economics Nepal at Governance Lab started the session with the importance of scenario-building as a method that allows policymakers to anticipate potential futures, explore the implications of various scenarios, and make informed decisions that are resilient to change.

Mr. Bhandari explained a broad research agenda that asks what constrains female political representation? Globally, there are two major explanations for the low levels of female political representation: i) supply constraints; i.e. there are fewer women seeking political office, possibly because women lack political aspirations and ii) demand constraints; i.e. women are less preferred as political representatives either because political parties prefer to nominate men or voters prefer to elect men. According to Mr. Bhandari, their existing research suggests that, in Nepal, demand constraints may be more important in explaining the challenges to women’s representation at the local level. They conducted a nationwide survey in December 2021 where they saw a large share of female incumbents report an aspiration to run for higher office. 63% of female deputy mayors expressed an intention to run for mayor in 2022 elections. However, only 6% of mayoral candidates were women. Therefore, there is a mismatch between women’s stated desire for higher office and parties’ fielding of women in those positions.

Module 5: Transforming Research into policy decision with effective communication and advocacy

This module, facilitated by Dr. Sucheta Pyakuryal, introduced the participants on tools and techniques of using evidence generated from research to policy making. In the background, she highlighted the dis-link between evidence generation and use of the same during the policy-making process which means we are not making the most of vast and increasing investment in knowledge production. She even introduced the construct of “two communities” which is widely used to describe the sharp disconnect between the world of academia and policy. In this context, the primary question that remains in front of us is: How can policy makers maximize the underutilized potentials in scientific research? And, what tools of communication are appropriate to make research accessible to various stakeholders?

Dr. Pyakuryal’s session took the participants through a journey of four waves of evidence revolution where first wave included efforts to develop indicators to measure performance, second wave defined the rise of use of randomized control trials (RCTs), third wave included the rise of systematic reviews and finally fourth wave included emergence of researchers whose incentive is to produce systematic reviews relevant for policy and practice. Her session also introduced the participants with Gordan Adam’s Iron Triangle

which undermines rational, evidence-based policy making process. She further highlighted the use of numbers and symbols in policy communication.

Informal Session: Hearing from the policy makers

After the end of formal modules, an informal session was scheduled titled - “Hearing from the policy makers”. In this session we had Dr. Rajan Khanal - Former Secretary of the Government of Nepal, currently serving as Executive Director of Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC). Dr. Khanal with his rich experience as policy maker shared his experiences on policy-making and policy analysis in Nepal. He also talked about the transformation of the industry within Nepali context and how the data & evidence has increasingly played an essential role in this process. He even shared his experience on how people within the government generate required data and evidence while making crucial decisions.

Bootcamp Output

At the end of the third day, each group presented their topic, draft outlines or framework and timeline for developing a policy brief which received enthusiastic applause from the facilitators.

While the research bootcamp was aimed at enhancing research skills of participants, it was also an opportunity for them to work on developing a policy brief on the area of their interest. Thematic areas identified by the participants included Gender and Inclusion, Governance, Public Economy, International Trade and Development Economics.

Though the three-day event concluded with cheerful faces and great networking sessions, the team members continue to work on their respective policy briefs. The output, once finalized, will be shared with all the readers through an effective medium.