



National Governance Symposium 2023

Governance Innovations for Inclusive Development

Cultivating Innovation: Nurturing Youth-Government Collaboration for Evidence-Based Policy Decisions

POLICY BRIEF





Context and Background

Nepal has adopted a federal system of governance since 2015, which aims to enhance people's participation, democracy, and responsiveness in the government. Nepal's current system of governance is a federal republic with a parliamentary system of government. The Constitution of Nepal of 2015, establishes the framework for the governance system, which consists of three tiers: federal, provincial, and local. The federal government has executive, legislative, and judicial branches, while the provincial and local governments have legislative and executive branches. Nepal has a total of 753 municipalities at the local level.

After the adoption of the federal system of governance, Nepal has undergone two cycles of local elections. This is a crucial period for the country to see the proper implementation of the system and reap its benefits. While a constitutional provision has been set to ensure inclusion and political representation, the actual working and fine tuning of policies to implement true representation is crucial. Thus, evidence based policy formulation is especially important in this context.

Youth constitute 40.3% of the total population of Nepal (National Youth Policy, 2015), they have a vital role to play in the new political landscape. Youth are not only the beneficiaries of public policies, but also the agents of change and innovation who can inform and influence policy decisions.

However, youth in Nepal face many challenges and problems that affect their potential. Some of these are unemployment, migration, lack of skills and opportunities, and low investment and entrepreneurship. According to a 2015 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the unemployment rate for Nepali youth is 19.2% compared to 2.7% for the entire population. Youth migration abroad for work, education, and health facilities is also high, with 1.9 million Nepalis aged 15-29 living outside the country in 2011. Moreover, youth lack access to quality education and training and face barriers to starting and growing their own businesses, such as lack of capital, technology, and market linkages. The trust deficit between youth and the government is also very high which, along with other factors, has led young people to leave the country in droves.

To address these issues and broader challenges of economic and social growth, youth need to be involved and engaged in policy-making and governance, both as participants and leaders. It is necessary to involve youth in designing and implementing policies as youths engagement offers insightful information that can be used. Through active engagement, policymakers can develop more inclusive and successful policies by gaining a deeper understanding of the needs and viewpoints of the youth population. Along with that, better program design and implementation of policy made through youth involvement increases a sense of ownership over the policies and programs when they are included in the decision-making process. This process further promotes evidenced-based policy decisions (EBPD). EBPD refers to the use of data, research, and analysis to inform and guide policy choices and actions (Head, 2010). Involvement of youth in the process is also beneficial for the youth themselves as this gives the sense that they are included and their opinions respected. They are able to build positive self-awareness & identity which increases resilience and well-being (United Nations, 2012). It also allows them to build their social capital, which becomes a valuable asset for collective actions and achieving common objectives. This is particularly important as it extends the reach of an individual beyond their own capabilities (OECD, 2014). Hence, youth participation in the process if policy making is crucial. It should go hand in hand with evidenced-based policy decisions EBPD.



Youth and their participation in policy decisions

A critical issue facing the youth of Nepal is the absence of a nonpartisan platform that facilitates their active participation in evidence-based policymaking. The current scenario reveals a significant gap and insufficient collaboration between the youth and the government during the formulation of policies. This disconnect results in policies that may not accurately represent the needs, aspirations, and perspectives of the younger population. The lack of trust in government institutions, stemming from perceived corruption, lack of transparency, and ineffective policies, further exacerbates the problem. This trust deficit can lead to a disengaged and disillusioned youth, manifesting in reduced civic participation, reluctance to support government initiatives, and potential political unrest.

Furthermore, there is a prevalent sense of disinterest and apathy among young people towards political processes and activities. This political apathy contributes to a lack of representation of youth perspectives in decision-making, perpetuating policies that do not align with the interests and needs of the younger generation. While initiatives like the "Use of Evidence (InnoPoLE)" training course and sporadic youth parliament sessions have been undertaken, their effectiveness is hindered by limited frequency and implementation. The existing normative frameworks for youth engagement in political issues are not well-defined, and despite positive initiatives like the National Youth Policy and Youth Vision 2025, there is a potential gap between policy intentions and implementation.

Addressing these challenges requires a shift from assumption-based, top-down policymaking to an evidence-based rationality approach that considers multiple perspectives. The importance of sustained and regular opportunities for youth engagement in policy making cannot be overstated, as current efforts, while positive, lack continuity. Overall, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive, nonpartisan platform that enables youth to actively contribute to evidence-based decision-making, ensuring their voices are not only heard but also integrated into the policymaking process in Nepal.

Thus, to reiterate, the need and role of youth in driving EBPD is undeniable. However, achieving this requires creating and promoting platforms and mechanisms that enable youth input and feedback in evidence-based policy formulation and implementation. Thus, with the objective of creating and promoting platforms for youth government collaboration, a panel discussion with experts from diverse fields was done to identify problems and outline solutions to facilitate platforms that incorporate youth voices to be heard in the process of evidence based policy formulation.





Issues and Key Component

1. Lack of trust in youth

1. The panelists mentioned that young people are often overlooked due to their youthfulness and real or perceived lack of experience and knowledge. The lack of trust stems from two things:

i) Cultural barriers: In South Asian culture, a hierarchy of age exists due to which young people are often dismissed and lack a voice. This is partly influenced by the Confucian values of respect for elders, obedience to authority, and social harmony that have shaped the social and cultural norms of the region. Similarly, the same idea is also reinforced by Hindu philosophy. According to a study by UNICEF (2023), adolescents and youth in South Asia face various barriers to participation and empowerment, such as lack of information, education, and skills, lack of access to services and opportunities, lack of representation and inclusion in decision-making processes, and lack of protection and safety from violence and discrimination. As a result, many youths in South Asia, including Nepali youth are marginalized, excluded, and their potential and aspirations are not realized.

ii) Lack of experience and knowledge: Due to an initial lack of trust, young people are not offered positions and authority to practice their knowledge and experience. This leads to a vicious cycle of young people not having opportunities and reinforcing a system that prioritizes age and experience while denying young people opportunities to have a chance to learn the required skills at the same time.

Disclaimer

The National Governance Symposium 2023, themed 'Governance Innovations for Inclusive Development', hosted a pivotal panel on Cultivating Innovation: Nurturing Youth-Government Collaboration for Evidence-Based Policy Decisions. Moderated by Ms. Prakriti Bashyal, the panel featured diverse voices including Dr. Sohan Sha, Dr. Kiran Rupakhetee, Dr. Prativa Pandey, and Dr. Amina Singh. Mr. Sushant Vaidik, the Economic Advisor at the Office of the Chief Minister and Council of Ministers in Lumbini Province, emphasized youth's vital role in evidence-based policy-making and advocated for collaboration between public and private sectors. Discussions highlighted the potential of youth in driving innovation and the importance of decentralized platforms for youth engagement. Inclusive policies, building trust between youth and the government, and creating an environment to retain young talent were key concerns. Mr. Ek Narayan Aryal, Secretary at the Office of Prime Ministers and Council of Ministers, concluded by underlining the need for actionable policies through increased youth engagement and citizen oversight, stressing accountability in governance.

2. Inadequate youth capacity building

1. The need to invest in youth has been recognized in Nepal and several initiatives through CTEVT and partnerships with national and international organizations to capacitate youth have been forwarded. For example, Youth Vision – 2025 and Ten-year Strategic Plan alone has allocated NRS 1.5 billion for its implementation. Despite such investments, the return is low due to two main reasons: i) high emigration rate of Nepali youth (both as skilled and unskilled workers)- youth that receive various skills training leave the country, they in turn return the investment in the form of remittance but are unable to engage in Nepali political scene directly through voting or apolitically through engagement in the market. This leads to lack of youth voice in the political space; ii) inefficacy of the programs targeted for youth- this stems partly from problems in implementation and lack of proper monitoring and evaluation systems and other structural issues like accessibility and flow of information.
2. The need to develop the capacity of youth is crucial for ensuring their effective and meaningful participation in policy formulation. The government also needs competent and skilled youth advisors who can provide technical and analytical support to the policy-makers and stakeholders at the advisory level. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of such youth advisors in Nepal, due to various factors, such as the lack of adequate and quality education and training infrastructures, the lack of opportunities and incentives for youth engagement and empowerment, and the high rate of youth migration abroad for better prospects. Therefore, it is imperative to address these factors and invest in the capacity development of youth, so that they can contribute to the policy formulation process and the development of the country.

3. The need to recognize and define youth representation

One of the very important questions that was raised during the panel mentioned above was the need to dissect the term youth itself. While youths are categorized on the basis of age, the wider demographic of youth comprises people identifying as different genders, belonging from different caste and class groups and of diverse ethnicity. The underlying socio-economic aspects affect social and class positions of youths, which further creates distinction in education, health, security and other aspects. Thus, the term youth, though pointing to young people, contains multitudes. Referring to youth in the context of evidence-based policy making can be precarious if Intersectionality and socio-economic privileges are not considered.



4. Inadequacy in critical analysis of “research” or “evidence”

Research is often seen as a process that is closely associated with academia or higher education. The process of research follows a rigorous process, one has to be able to not only read and write but also be able to exercise critical thinking and analysis to conduct research. This leaves out the voice of youth who have not had access to higher education due to gender, class, caste and regional disparity, in the process of producing and using knowledge and evidence. Thus, using umbrella terms of youth and EBPD should come with a critical analysis of who is being represented and what issues are these representatives focusing on.

Similarly, research as a term (in the English language) has close ties in Western academia and has been used as a tool in colonialism (Ideland, 2018). Thus, there are several important issues to be considered when using the term “research” for EBPD. Decolonizing research and critically analyzing the process through several lenses and analyzing epistemic and ontological questions through Nepali academic institutions is important. However, simultaneously other ways of knowing, including indigenous knowledge and experiences, and methods of collecting voices outside of academia also need to be considered while researching for evidence for EBPD.





Youth Programs and Policies

National Youth Policy 2072(2015) was approved by the Nepal Government and established by the Ministry of Youth and Sports. It aims to promote the development of young people in Nepal and provides a platform for them to voice their concerns, develop their skills, and actively contribute to national development.

Several other youth-related initiatives and policies have been introduced, including the Youth Vision 2025, which aims to mobilize, engage, and empower young people, and the National Development Plan, which emphasizes youth participation and innovation in education and employment. The Youth Self-Employment Program, Grand Youth Sports Competition, and Youth Mobilization Program, all funded through the Ministry of Finance, aim to provide self-employment opportunities, promote sportsmanship, and mobilize youth for national development respectively. Additionally, the UNDP Nepal Youth Strategy 2018-2022 serves as a comprehensive guideline for UNDP Nepal to support youth empowerment, advocacy, policy development, partnerships, research, and impact assessment.

Analyzing Youth Programs and Policies

Youth Participation: The above-mentioned policies emphasize the active involvement of youth in decision-making processes at all levels of society, including governance, community development, and policy formulation. This signifies a recognition of the importance of youth voices in shaping the nation's future.

Skill Development and Employment: Addressing the issue of youth unemployment and underemployment, the above policies focus on enhancing the employability of young people through skill development programs, vocational training, and entrepreneurship support. This aligns with the goal of empowering youth economically and reducing poverty.

Education and Training: The above mentioned policies highlight the importance of quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for youth. It emphasizes the need to improve access to education, enhance the quality of educational institutions, and promote technical and vocational education to equip youth with the necessary skills for the job market.

Health and Well-being: Recognizing the unique health challenges faced by young people, the above mentioned policies and programs aim to promote their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. It includes provisions for healthcare services, reproductive health education, HIV/AIDS prevention, and substance abuse prevention programs targeted at youth.

Youth Empowerment and Leadership: The program and policies also seek to empower youth to become active citizens and leaders in their communities. They encourage youth participation in civic engagement, volunteerism, and community service activities, aiming to nurture responsible and socially conscious citizens.

International Cooperation and Exchange: Recognizing the importance of global perspectives and experiences, various programs and policies encourage international cooperation and exchange programs for youth. This includes opportunities for cultural exchange, international volunteering, and participation in global forums and conferences.

Overall, the National Youth Policy of Nepal of 2015 and the strategies forwarded by development partners demonstrate a comprehensive approach to addressing the multifaceted needs of young people in the country. By prioritizing youth participation, education, employment, health, equality, empowerment, and international cooperation, the policy aims to create an enabling environment for youth development and contribute to the overall socio-economic progress of Nepal. However, its effective implementation requires sustained commitment from the government, civil society, and other stakeholders, along with adequate resources and monitoring mechanisms to ensure accountability and measure impact.



According to some reports like the UNDP Youth Strategy, 2018-2022, the implementation of the policy has been slow and uneven, due to various factors such as lack of resources, coordination, monitoring, and evaluation. Some of the challenges include the loss of preferential market access, the reduction of development assistance, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the need for structural transformation and diversification of the economy. However, some progress has been made in areas such as the formation of the National Youth Council, an autonomous organization responsible for implementing the programs under the policy, and the engagement of youth in various initiatives related to the Sustainable Development Goals, civic engagement, resilience building, and innovation (UNDP Nepal's Guiding Principle on Youth Mainstreaming and Participation 2021).

Recommendations

Promote dialogues: Promote intergenerational dialogue and collaboration, to challenge the cultural and social norms that hinder youth voice and agency, and to recognize and celebrate the achievements and contributions of youth in various fields and sectors.

Curricular reform: The education and training should aim to equip youth with the skills and competencies that are required for the 21st century, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, creativity, and digital literacy. The education and training should also provide opportunities for youth to gain practical and hands-on experience, such as through internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs.

Promote platforms that host youth advisors or youth sounding boards: To address the shortage of platforms for youth participation in an advisory role, the government should establish and strengthen the mechanisms and platforms for youth involvement and representation in policy formulation and implementation. The mechanisms and platforms should include youth councils, youth clubs, and youth networks at the federal, provincial, and local levels, as well as youth advisory boards, youth committees, and youth focal points in various ministries and agencies. The mechanisms and platforms should also ensure the diversity and inclusion of youth from different backgrounds and groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+.

Youth mainstreaming and participation: The approach should involve the integration of youth issues and perspectives in all stages and aspects of policy making and governance, such as agenda setting, policy analysis, policy formulation, policy implementation, policy evaluation, and policy communication. The approach should also involve the consultation and collaboration of youth and youth organizations in the policy making and governance processes, as well as the monitoring and accountability of the policy outcomes and impacts on youth.

Research and data availability: Promote research culture along with critical evaluation of research methods and data validity. Conduct discourse with academia and think tanks. Make data of Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) more accessible for analysis and research to forward programs and initiatives that address the required need based on data and research.

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