

Proceedings of the Inaugural NPI Global Youth Policy Dialogue Series 29 December 2021

(Hosted by Nepal Policy Institute)¹

A. Introduction

1. On 29 December 2021, Nepal Policy Institute (NPI) hosted its inaugural NPI Global Youth Policy Dialogue Series session on the topic of “Youths and Contemporary Public Policy Issues in Nepal”. The intent of the dialogue series is threefold: (i) to create a global community of youth students; (ii) to take an inter-generational and inter-disciplinary approach to policymaking; and (iii) to serve as a platform for the youths of Nepal to come together both for their studies and their careers.

2. The dialogue series is meant to be a conversation, and will be organic in nature, ie, there will be no formal presentations, and the focus will be on hearing the views of the youths on a range of topics.

3. For the inaugural session, eight youths from across the world were selected to take part in the conversation.² Prior to the session, the panelists were given three questions to mull over; these included:

- a) What is the most pressing public policy issue in Nepal, and how would you address it?
- b) What should Nepal expect of you, and is that a fair expectation?
- c) How can NPI better engage the youths of Nepal?

B. Context

4. The Chair of the Board of Directors of NPI, Mr. Khagendra Dhakal, touched upon relevant issues by way of a brief background to the event. He spoke of a demographic dividend for Nepal that meant its youths will continue to have a central role to play in the affairs of the country. These youths, viewed from the perspective of the diaspora, can be said to include of three groups: (i) Nepal-based youths, (ii) youths in foreign labor markets (ie, the so-called migrant workers), and (iii) Nepali youths studying outside the country. The second group contains a substantial number of youths (in the vicinity of 7-8 million people) while it is estimated that more than 500,000 Nepali students are studying abroad.³

5. The primary objectives of the NPI Global Youth Policy Dialogue Series are threefold: (i) to create a global community of youth students; (ii) to enable an inter-generational and inter-disciplinary approach in policymaking; and (iii) to ensure that NPI serves as a suitable platform for youths inasmuch as their studies and careers are concerned.

C. On perceptions of main public policy issues in Nepal

6. To the first question on what the panelists perceived as the main public policy issues in Nepal, the following observations stood out:

¹ The dialogue session was moderated by Dr. Gambhir Bhatta, Executive Director of NPI.

² The selection criteria were not necessarily random nor very scientific; the intent was to get a cross-section of youths from within and outside Nepal, across range of age-bands, and covering students as well as professionals. **Appendix 1** provides brief details on the 8 panelists.

³ There are no confirmed official figures but these numbers are said to approximate the current situation on the ground.

- a) While there may be various issues dominating the policy landscape, agenda-setting (ie, determination of what constitutes a concern for the government to look into) is not necessarily a primary consideration.
- b) One of the primary stakeholders in the public policy discussions in Nepal is the bureaucracy. Inclined towards the status quo, it is perceived that bureaucrats have not necessarily adapted their world view to the rapid changes that have taken place in Nepal (eg, a fundamental transition in the form of governance), and neither have they demonstrated ownership of public policies.
- c) Picking up on the theme of the bureaucracy, it was also felt that it is only meant to be an enabler, and that the primary focus should be on the private sector.
- d) There appears to be a substantial gap between policy formulation and its implementation. It appears policies are made without consideration of operational realities on the ground. It was also felt that there was no ownership of development works by local level officials.
- e) On the issue of the ownership, an illuminating discussion took place on ownership versus accountability. One of the conclusions to this discussion was that the former necessarily impacted the latter.
- f) One of the main public policy issues in Nepal is that of the lack of support for women entrepreneurs (in the form of, for example, ease of financing, access to markets, etc.).
- g) The diversity that is exhibited across the country is not necessarily reflected in political participation; and political life still tends to be dominated by selected elites.
- h) The average citizen is not necessarily aware of his/her rights and entitlements (the example put forward was one on online harassment and what recourse a victim may have access to).
- i) What appears to be lacking in Nepal at present is effective inter-agency collaboration and lack of effective engagement of stakeholders in the policy making process.

D. On expectations made of the panelists and their fairness

7. To the second question on what the panelists perceived as expectations the country may have of them, and whether this was fair, the interesting observations made included:

- a) A few felt they really did not know what the country expects of them, other than that they are expected to return to Nepal and work there.
- b) It is right that the country should have expectations of the youths, but that the patriarchal system in the country is not amenable for the youths (particularly females) to excel and they are not comfortable with it.
- c) A persistent theme that emerged from the discussion on this topic was that no one needs to return to Nepal in order to be able to contribute to the country's progress. Indeed, a few felt the opportunities and scope to do so were much more in evidence while out of the country (see point b above).
- d) By way of context to the question, a sentiment was raised that the expectation of the country of the youths needs to be viewed from a perspective of the role of the State in the marginalization of various groups of citizens and the inevitable apprehension thus raised about the exact role of the youths in giving back to the State.
- e) The country also expects a reversal of the 'brain drain', although it was felt that in this day and age physically returning to the country did not necessarily form a key component of this drain.

- f) Most of the panelists took a more personal approach to answering this question and focused on what they themselves would like to do upon returning to the country.
- g) Two other points raised generated a fair bit of discussion: (i) the country has expectations of the youths, but it does not necessarily offer suitable opportunities to the youths to realize such expectations: and (ii) even if there were opportunities, the scale of the competition in the country is now such that a critical question to ask is: do the youths who return have the requisite skills to contribute to the country's progress?

8. An interesting observation was made from the floor about expectations and contributing to the country – that the youths' personal ambitions are also important and relevant and they need not be burdened by having to consider how they are to meet any expectations of them.

E. On what NPI can do to support the youths

9. The final question posed to the panelists centered on what role NPI could play in supporting the youths as they progress in their studies and careers. Observations made on this topic covered a gamut of areas, including:

- a) Help identify relevant areas of various policy problems that the youths could be involved in.
- b) Assist youth students to be published. Included in this were suggestions of providing access to data, and to research sources of developments in the country. The data is of both the quantitative and qualitative variety.
- c) Serve as a genuine knowledge hub for the youths to use as and when possible.
- d) Help bridge the gap between research and practice and across sectors (terms inter-sectionality) so that the youths can see the bigger picture in public policy.
- e) Support youth students and others to get, and stay, connected to relevant professional associations in Nepal.
- f) Serve as a forum to bring people together to discuss relevant public policy recommendations (eg, inviting government officials to participate in discussions on specific topics).
- g) Facilitate linkages with entities such as the UNDP (which has a Youth Strategy), Nepal Youth Council, etc. so that youths will be able to know more of public policies and their various dimensions.
- h) NPI experts from various countries could share the experiences of different countries in the implementation of relevant public policies, with a view to ascertaining how, and if, they could be applicable to Nepal.
- i) NPI should provide incentives to youths to participate in public policy issues (mention was made of the recent initiative award up to six NPI Young Researcher Award).
- j) Liaise, and link up, with universities in Nepal as well as entrepreneurs and business houses in the country.
- k) Facilitate the development of a research culture in the country.
- l) NPI could have in place various thematic groups for the youths to join so as to be able to benefit directly, and on an ongoing basis, from the work of such communities of practice.

F. Conclusions

10. Concluding remarks from the Chair of the Board of Directors of NPI, as well as the moderator of the session, centered on the following points: (i) it was inspiring to hear the views of the panelists that NPI should serve as a platform for youths to utilize so that they could contribute to the country; (ii) contributions can be made to the country by being based anywhere in the world; there should thus be no angst if someone does not return (in this regard, it was pointed out that the concept of a 'brain drain' was indeed passé); often, there are better enabling conditions abroad which facilitate making a contribution easier; (iii) NPI is keen to offer assistance to the youths, as is possible, and indeed to serve as a knowledge platform and a forum to collaborate.

(The discussion during the entire dialogue session was recorded, and can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amS4JYgAvwY>)

Appendix 1. Brief Introduction of the Panelists to the Inaugural NPI Global Youth Policy Dialogue Series

1. **Mr. Ashis Adhikary** is a graduate in International Relations and Diplomacy, and pursuing doctoral studies in theoretical economics at Peking University. He is also a faculty of International Relations at Kathmandu School of Law, and executive editor of the upcoming Asian Journal of International Affairs.
2. **Ms. Aakriti Ghimire** is a journalist at The Kathmandu Post covering social affairs – focusing on women's rights, climate change, and LGBTQIA+ issues. She graduated cum laude from New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) in May 2021 with a degree in Legal Studies. She was the Managing Editor of the Journal of Social Sciences at NYUAD, and has worked on research projects focusing on gender equality in South Asia. Her final year thesis was on The Rule of Law and Nepal's Democratic Constitution. Aakriti enjoys writing, both academic and personal evocative pieces. She plans on working in Nepal for two years before pursuing her further education in law and policy.
3. **Mr. Avinash Jha** is currently Engagement Manager at NPI, and an Education Director of the non-profit entity United World Schools. He has recently graduated at the top of his MPPM class at Kathmandu University School of Management. He is also a member of the Global Shapers Community, an initiative of the World Economic Forum.
4. **Ms. Srijana Lama** is currently a PhD researcher at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She completed her BSc in Environmental Science from Kathmandu University in 2014, and worked there as a Research Assistant after her graduation (her work was focused on the impact of air pollution on brick kiln workers). For seven months in 2016, she worked as an environmental consultant at Gautam Buddha International Airport, Bhairahawa. In August 2016, she received a Netherlands Fellowship (NFP) scholarship to pursue a Master's degree in Earth and Environment with specialization in Meteorology and Air pollution from Wageningen University and Research. During her Master's degree, she worked as an Intern at the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute for 6 months, looking into air pollution scenarios in Europe.
5. **Ms. Nirupama Magar** is a rising sophomore at Harvard, exploring Environmental Science and Public Policy, Mathematics, and Economics. She comes from Thabang, an ancient village in the foothills of midwestern Nepal. Her hobbies include hiking, swimming, newspaper reading, and crafting.
6. **Ms. Isha Mandal** is an intersectional feminist and an avid human rights defender. With an academic background in Political Science, European Policy, and International Business, her area of specialty lies in transitional justice, conflict resolution, and gender studies. With over five years of research experience, Isha has been part of multiple research projects and published papers with UNIDO, UN GCNI, and UN Youth-led Solutions. She is currently pursuing her second Master's degree on Human Rights and Democratization at the Global Campus of Human Rights in Venice.
7. **Ms. Rojina Shrestha** is an MBA graduate of 2021 with a major in Brand Management and Service Marketing. Her research topic in MBA was "Advancing Towards Digitalization: Assessing the Relationship between Individual-Level and Firm-Level Factors and Advanced ICT Adoption among Women Entrepreneurs of Nepal". Rojina is a winner of the Robert C. Bodden Prize for most outstanding academic performance among female graduates at the School of Management, Asian Institute of Technology. She is a national pageant winner of Miss Nepal Earth 2017 where she represented Nepal on the global stage of Miss Earth which was held in the Philippines in 2017. She is currently working as Chief Customer Experience Analyst at Thamel Remit Pvt. Ltd.
8. **Mr. Sushant Subedi** is a policy analyst by training, and practices at Invest Infra, with international experiences in sectors spanning social impact, research, and communications. He is a founding member of Sansar-earth, a student initiative which works to reduce plastic pollution and poverty in vulnerable areas of Nepal by exchanging waste for free rice. He also previously worked as a junior researcher for an award winning project called Riding Sunbeams in the UK, which aimed to power the UK railways by solar. He holds a Bachelor's degree in International Social and Public Policy from the London School of Economics.