

The Politics of Education Policymaking in Nepal

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Frame of Reference

I begin this editorial with an assertion that the contemporary public policymaking landscape in Nepal shows little citizens' participation and thus education policymaking also bears a similar approach. Here, public policies refer to "the decisions and actions of government and the intentions that determine those decisions and actions" (Geurts, 2011, p. 6). Theoretically, governments across the globe in recent decades have committed for larger citizen participation in public policymaking. Therefore, I understand public policymaking as a phenomenon in which wider stakeholders engage in governmental decision-making processes aimed at addressing a public issue.

The voice for the participatory education policymaking has grown steadily over recent decades which is supposed to ensure wider participation of grassroots education stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, school administrators, local education authorities, in the development of education policy so that education policies are grounded in 'local knowledge'. Unfortunately, more often than not what actually happens in these 'participatory processes' differ significantly from the rhetoric deployed to justify them (Delvaux & Schoenaers, 2012). In retrospection, based on my decade long engagement in the education sector, I found little attention paid to create such opportunities for citizen participation in the recent education policymaking scenario in Nepal. Even the policymakers corroborate this argument that Nepal lacks an institutional mechanism for ensuring citizen participation in policymaking process (Sharma, 2016). Given this brief context, two tormenting questions lurk in the back of

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my mind, ‘Who then shapes our public policies?’ and ‘how are our public policies made?’ And, upon pondering on the recent practices, get a broader answer – others, excluding the general citizens whom the policies impact the most.

In the recent federal context, education policymaking is dispersed across national and subnational government levels, and it has gained traction in developing localised, contextual and more relevant policies with wider participation of local stakeholders. However, for lack of timely promulgation of national education policies, subnational governments are confronting double troubles – whether to make local policies first or to wait until the federal policies are made. Lack of strong coordination of the policymaking stakeholders often causes policy conflicts and dilemmas (even if the actors have a common area of interests, sometimes) causing some potential public policies being delayed or deceased. Recent local level policies, though somehow developed, are also ad-hoc, most of which are mere copy-paste of one another local level, which are also conflicting with the existing national policies. Since the subnational education policymaking is yet to be fully operational, the focus of this editorial is federal education policymaking.

Policymaking as Politics

Public policymaking is inseparable from politics in that different groups with differing interests and agendas are involved in policymaking. In this sense, policymaking is essentially a political endeavour (Barberio, 2014). In Mead’s (2013) words, “The separation of policy and politics weakens the public policy field” (p. 391). Likewise, different interest groups have sometimes undue influence on the policy decisions even if they are not at decision-tables. So policymaking is a complex, multidimensional and highly contextual process (Jones, Jones, Shaxson, & Walker, 2012), where both hidden and explicit actors and their agenda go through competitive scrutiny based primarily on political capital.

Policymaking across the world is criticised for adopting a top-down approach. However, the critique of the top-down approach itself is partially true. The critics say that the top-down approach to policymaking is that the top-level make the policies and enforces them downwards (Deeb, n.d., Dye, 2000), which in fact is the policy-implementation approach. And a closer term to define our current policymaking practice is a ‘top-top approach’, following which, policies are made in negotiation and

bargain among the tops – tops in every sector including government, private sectors, donors/development partners, international commitments; thereby it does not include all government mechanisms, private sectors, donors and even international commitments. Therefore, a top-top and centralist approach is the present characteristic of Nepali model of education policymaking. Researchers iteratively point out that lack of consultations with the concerned stakeholders, top-down approach, failure to understand the ground reality and the rhetoric of empowerment against a genuine commitment for participatory processes are some of the reasons education policies have largely failed in Nepal (Budhathoki, 2018; Carney, Bista, & Agergaard, 2006; Pradhan, 2018). Likewise, little effort is being made for scenario scanning for bottom-up policymaking through stakeholder engagement though some concerns of the ‘voiced groups’ – teacher unions are sometimes touched upon. Therefore, unlike the constitutional provision of making local communities, indigenous groups, Adivasi, etc. participate in decision-making processes that concern them (Constitution of Nepal 2015, Part 4, 51(j)), the public policymaking is usually a top-top approach (it is definitely not bottom-up, neither it is top-down – a top-down approach will somehow ensure at least later inputs from the bottom, first draft policies are drawn at the top, and inputs from the bottom are incorporated). Therefore, the top-down approach (with a new definition) still is the most lucrative approach to public policymaking in today’s context against the practice of the top-top approach.

In the past decade, Nepal has witnessed an enormous national movement to upgrade its public schools, referred to as ‘community schools’. However, the educational outcomes of the "reform movement" are much debated (Colclough, King, & McGrath, 2010). Although the politics of educational policymaking is contested, who is/are shaping our educational policies has become strikingly clear. It has become common knowledge in most developing countries that the national policymaking structures are government bodies (state agencies) and the processes mostly include the interaction between the politicians, bureaucrats, and a few experts and/or interest groups. As such, rather than being based on research evidence, the processes are often driven by (political, bureaucratic) interests (Jones, 2010, Gelal, 2015, Pokharel, 2015). In a policy context like ours which is more politicized, public policy is bound to be influenced by the ideology of the party in power and their promises made in the manifesto and during the election campaigns (Naurin, Soroka, & Markwat, 2019). In addition, ‘policy

position' of the executive head(s) determines the course of action, where more than 'agenda', 'personality' drives policy changes. In fact, a salient feature of Nepali policymaking is its personality-driven decision-making process – a small number of individuals make some policy decisions behind closed doors (Basnett et al., 2014) and often these 'rarified' policy interaction venues are inaccessible to ordinary citizens (Shipps, 2018). Moreover, the policymaking domain in Nepal has expanded to include non-state actors such as development partners (donors, bi- and multilateral agencies) and pressure groups (Gelal, 2015; Acharya, 2013; Menashy, 2017) besides adopting the international policy commitments and mandates.

Scholars argue that the roles and influence of development partners have been very significant across the educational policy spectrum in developing countries (Aminuzzaman, 2013; Bhatta, 2011). Some even observed that, in the name of development aid, development partners have disenfranchised the domestic policymakers by making them "subservient to external policy prescriptions" (Lewis, 2011, p. 39). Some scholars question how well international education policy mandates such as *Education For All (EFA)* and *Millennium Development Goals (MDG)* serve the needs of developing countries, which actually are policy priorities of wealthy countries (Brown, 2015). The answer seems to stem on the architecture of the Western policy agenda and the government revenue needs (Brown, 2015; King, 2004). As such, policy changes are often aligned with donor interests. Despite these, education is falling down the list of donor priorities in recent years (Pota, 2017). In such a context, with critical scrutiny of donor interest, education aid received and educational outcome, it is the right time to rethink how education policies are shaped and for what effect.

Who Shapes Education Policies, Anyway?

The general practice of public policymaking shows that policy processes can be classified into two categories: (a) procedural due process and (b) informal processes (Ayyar, 2009). The procedural due process covers the formal mechanism of reaching a policy decision – which also includes inviting experts, donors for consultative meetings. On the other hand, informal processes are ad hoc, unstructured, elitist or "superclass" (Rothkopf, 2008) dominated, and differ across themes and contexts. However, often the role of the informal processes is significant. Here, the challenge for bureaucrats and politicians (major formal policymakers) is to ensure that the

policymaking is sensitive to the different interest groups ('superclass' private sectors, donor agencies, development partners) that shape the Nepali public sector.

In conversation with some politicians and bureaucrats, I have found them admitting that education policies are not grounded in local realities – indicating that development partners have major leverage. This reflection holds true when we see the recent education policy changes in Nepal. In fact, aligning with donor interests, Nepal government made some seemingly reformative interventions – CAS, grading system, SSRP, SSDP without adequate preparation. This indicates that though there is some donor support financially, the politics of policymaking is largely shaped by donor interests (Bhatta, 2011; Bourne, 2014). Despite the changing interventions with not so promising outcomes, Nepali education policymakers are not yet ready to chart a new course of action.

What does this imply, then? Is it that education policies in Nepal fail due to donor interests? That is seemingly true. However, my position is that it is the policymaking process itself which is exclusionary that fails the education policies. When the policymaking process itself is not participatory, the implementing bodies and agents are not bound to own the policy and thus comply with them – leading to a kind of latent resistance.

What Should We Not Sidestep Any Longer?

There are two specific concerns that this editorial attempts to bring out – which the policymaking process has 'deliberatively' eluded till today. The first one is 'evidence-informed policymaking'; and the next is 'participatory policymaking'. On the one hand, researchers and policymakers face the "two communities" problem (Court & Young, 2006; Harris, 2015; Stone, 2009) – that they live in separate worlds (Stone, 2009) and have weak connections (Rakhmani, 2016). I know politicians, bureaucrats, some influential education policy drivers (private and development sectors) and also academics. I have seen policymakers having committees and subcommittees and thinking about what to say in decision tables and some of them have their 'general interests' over 'what needs to be for larger good' – clearly demonstrating their poor 'evidence literacy'. Whereas on the other corner, I have daily *chiya-guff* with academics and scholars who have sound grounded research evidence of most of the sectors (here my focus is on education) who are worried that the policymakers do not

base their policies on research evidence. While at another corner, media critics are ready to pounce when the policy footage leaks – some are policy critics on their own while some take refuge to some educationists to supplement their critiques. This at least suggests that the critical capacity of the media has risen. However, their influence on education policymaking is limited. All these show that there are poor or accidental connections between research and policy.

A deluge of scholarly work indicates that policymakers largely demonstrate poor research reading culture (Dhimal, Pandey, Aryal, Subedi, & Karki, 2016; Koon, Nambiar, & Rao, 2012; Sutcliffe & Court, 2005; Uzochukwu et al., 2016), and many researchers do not consider their role in policy engagement (Datta, 2012). Therefore, the pledge for evidence-based policymaking turns out to be elusive, rather our ‘policy brokers’ adopt a contingent policymaking approach based on power, network and negotiation dynamics among the policy influencers. In fact, bureaucrats are the key policy brokers who intermediate between politicians and interest groups (Cooper & Starkey, 2010), but in Nepali public policymaking context, both politicians (who largely negotiate with elite private sectors) and bureaucrats (who largely deal with international interest group) serve as policy brokers.

Whatever might be the reasons for the gap between research and policy, there has been mounting global interest in making use of research evidence while making public policies (Boswell & Smith, 2017; Glied, Wittenberg, & Israeli, 2018; Newman, Cherney, & Head, 2015). In September 2018, Nepal government formed a think tank, under the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), to suggest it on various policy issues concerning economic, political, social and administrative reforms. However, it is yet to be seen whether it will be able to function as an independent institution. Moreover, the experiences of those working in academia and with government inform that research is only one [small one, not capital ONE] of many things that influence public policymaking in Nepal (Dhakal, 2017). In my observation, policymakers are little interested in recommendations of the commissioned or academic research inputs, nor are the government agencies convinced of the credibility and usefulness of such evidence. Although several studies are commissioned or ‘sponsored’ annually by the government agencies, the reports are almost non-used because they are neither transparently made available to the public, nor are they systematically stored. This observation gave birth to another question, ‘where do our policy implications (by

academics) or recommendations (by authorised, government-sponsored commissions) go? In a recent education conference in Delhi, I had an interesting dialogue with an Indian Professor on this issue and his response was much revealing: ‘They do not go, they just pass away!’

In 2013, Britland, a comprehensive schoolteacher in the UK, wrote, in his country context, that buffet table policymaking (bringing in the most popular policy lines of the world together for us to enjoy under one roof) does not work, and we are still doing the same. It is apparent that this is not going to work here as well. Then, evidence-informed policymaking grounded in the local context seems to be the best antidote. Evidence for policymakers is crucial which can inform them “(a) if a policy is delivering better outcomes at an affordable cost and (b) whether the policy is better than viable alternatives” (Hares, 2018, p. 1). However, a crucial question is where does evidence come from? Obviously, evidence comes from all directions, and most importantly from right down under us. Therefore, it is time to listen to the “voices of local actors and scholars” (Brown, 2015, p. 2) more than the Western scholars in regards to education in the developing world.

On the other hand, though largely eulogized as being realistically grounded in citizen preferences (Bobbio, 2019; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Michels, 2012), participatory policymaking has been overly de-emphasised – citing that it is costly, time-consuming, cumbersome, diverging and conflictual (Cornwall, 2008; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). This disbelief in participatory policymaking process has resulted in an unrelenting influence of a superclass shaping the education policy. If interactions from the ground up are not possible, the least that could be done must involve inviting increasing numbers of stakeholders to comment on each policy points that would impact them. In fact, the idea of participatory policymaking is “to hear opinions or to involve people in policymaking before taking decisions” (Michels, 2012, p. 286). By doing this, inputs from the ground up eases decision-making, and also uncover concerns or policy needs that might have been overlooked. However, experts and think tanks often mourn that the state does not heed their consultation in Nepali education policymaking. It implies that local citizens including parents, students, teachers, school administrators and local education authorities seem completely left out of the ring.

Looking Forward

The education policies in Nepal have been subjected to one experiment after another, mostly following the donor interest, in the name of reform initiative over the past decades. Now, it is time to rethink, re-vision and transform our education policymaking mechanism in a changing context. For this, we need more debate on evidence-informed policymaking processes, local adaptation of borrowed policies, creative collaborations and deliberative dialogues with diverse stakeholders, knowledge mediation platforms, and locally grounded policymaking tools to charter a new path to education policymaking in Nepal – which are likely to work across developing countries.

I believe, with little focus and timely start, addressing both the concerns raised in this editorial is possible. Regular and deliberate policy-research interactions can be designed. Researchers should go a step further in communicating the research evidence to concerned policymakers. They should take alternative approaches (Dhakal, 2017) to make their research synthesis visible and digestible to the policy community – in fact they need to feed research evidence in an editable capsule format to the policymakers. Likewise, the policy community including the government needs to communicate clearly about their evidence needs to the research community and accept academia and thematic think-tanks' presence as desirable in the policymaking process. Likewise, respecting the constitutional ethos of participatory decision-making process, a 'top-down', if not bottom-up, approach – respecting the citizens' concerns and inputs on education policies, can be adopted. Ensuring that these two concerns are adopted in Nepali education policymaking, policymakers will have access to the best available evidence to help them tackle the major policy issues and citizens own the policies – conjointly contributing to better informed and inclusive education policymaking in the country.

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