

# Evaluation in Nepal: Primary Policy, Uneven Practice and Limited Capacity

Narayan Shrestha <sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kathmandu BernHardt College, Kathmandu, Nepal

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Management, Tribhuvan University

Email: narayanshrestha@gmail.com

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## Abstract

*The role of evaluation is highly emphasized for evidence-based policy making and effective development governance. However, there is inadequacy of research that assesses the evaluation policy and practice in Nepal. Ritually, one can find the evaluation term being used in conjunction with monitoring in Nepal. Drawing data from literature reviews and self-professional experience of its author, this article argues that the evaluation policy is yet in a primary stage, the practice is uneven and evaluation capacity both at demand and supply side is lagging far behind its professionalism to create an enabling institutional environment of evaluation. Hence, this article tries to explore the evaluation in Nepal with shedding light on the challenges and opportunities facing Nepal's evaluation ecosystem, examining its progress and the road ahead.*

**Keywords:** *Evaluation policy, Evaluation practice, Evaluation capacity, Institutionalization*

## 1. Introduction

Evaluation has been increasingly gaining concern among the development stakeholders. The concept of evaluation has emerged with the initiation of development in the 1950s across the world but became more profound during the 1970s and 1980s (Cracknell, 2000). Initially, evaluation was considered primarily as a tool to ensure the use of fund and measure the achievements but not in view of learning and accountability. However, there have been shifts in evaluation thinking with the changes in development thinking from a technocratic modern development to participatory people-centered development. As a consequence, evaluations are taken as a means “to save lives and improve people’s welfare” (Gaarder & Briceño, 2010). Thus, the main thrust of evaluation at present has been supporting the evidence-based policy making (Segone, 2008).

In such a context of development and evaluation, evaluation in Nepal can be seen as the reflections of evaluation in the field of development. Initially, it was limited with the practice of external development agencies to assess their development aids. It was only in the Fifth Plan (1975-1980) that had incorporated the role of monitoring and evaluation (Asian Development Bank, 2014) in the document. After then, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has been a part of national plans which continues up to the current 15<sup>th</sup> plan (2019/20- 2023/24). The M&E component was treated in isolation from the development

process and practiced in an ad-hoc manner (Sharma & Dhakal, 2008). In such a context, drawing from the literature and self-professional experience, this paper aims at exploring the evaluation in Nepal and argues that the evaluation policy and practice in Nepal is primary and uneven with low level of professional capacity. With this brief introduction, this paper further discusses evaluation policy, practice and capacity in Nepal and finally draws the conclusion.

## **2. Methodology**

### **Evaluation Policy, Practice and Capacity:**

Evaluation policy shapes the capacity and practice of evaluation. While practice informs the policy making providing learning, capacity is considered instrumental for both the demand and supply side of evaluation (Segone, 2010) for its professional development. Indeed, it is essential to explore the intricacy of policy, practice, and capacity of evaluation in Nepal for understanding of its working.

### **Primary Policy Frameworks:**

Nepal's evaluation landscape has long been hindered by the absence of a robust policy framework dedicated to evaluation. As of 2022, the country still lacked a comprehensive and cohesive evaluation policy, which hindered the development of a structured evaluation system. This lacuna meant that evaluation activities were often ad-hoc and lacked standardization. The absence of a well-defined policy framework also resulted in limited guidance and accountability, making it difficult to measure the impact of various developmental programs and policies.

### **Uneven Practices:**

The fragmentation of evaluation practices in Nepal was another pressing issue in 2022. Various government ministries, departments, and organizations were conducting evaluations independently, often with little coordination or collaboration. This uneven approach led to duplication of efforts, inefficient resource allocation, and inconsistency in evaluation methodologies. Additionally, the lack of information sharing, and a unified database made it challenging to draw comprehensive conclusions from evaluation findings.

### **Limited Evaluation Capacity:**

Despite the potential for a vibrant evaluation ecosystem, Nepal faced a significant challenge regarding limited evaluation capacity. The country struggled to cultivate a pool of trained evaluators, both within the government and in the non-governmental sector. This lack of capacity hindered the production of high-quality evaluations, limiting the nation's ability to make informed policy decisions. Furthermore, inadequate funding and investment in evaluation education and training contributed to this issue.

## **Evaluation Policy: Far Behind of Institutionalization**

One of the important roles of evaluation is to support develop various policies. But for this, evaluation itself needs its own policy for effective working. Evaluation policy in a particular country refers to the set of an institutional arrangement for the evaluation of the public sector (Segone, 2015). Without a strong evaluation policy, it cannot support evidence-based policy formulation and check the tendency of policy-makers who take decisions in the absence of evidence that affect people at large scale and incur scarce resources (Gaarder & Briceño, 2010). To promote evidence-based policy making it is argued that a national level authority becomes essential to bear the responsibility of evaluation of public sector (Gaarder & Briceño, 2010). This indicates the need for an institutionalized evaluation system in any country.

In the context of Nepal, the increasing demand for evidence-based policy making has compelled policy makers to consider the role of evaluation in the development planning and management. Reflection of this can be found in various efforts made in the past though it remained in a primary stage in the absence of institutionalization. As mentioned above, since the Fifth Plan evaluation has been just incorporated in each plan just lumping with monitoring function. For example, the 10th Plan discusses only monitoring leaving evaluation as nothing (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2003). Meanwhile, a Monitoring and Evaluation Guideline, 2018 is in practice (NPC, 2018); however, it is observed insufficient to govern the evaluation in view of three levels of government in the newly introduced federal structure. However, the new Constitution of Nepal has provided mandate for the institutional development of M&E as the Article 54 directs to “monitor and evaluate whether the directive principles, policies and obligations of the state have been progressively implemented or not” (Law Books Management Board, 2016). At local level, the Local Government Operation Act 2017 provides rights for evaluation to local municipalities (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2017).

With this when coming to the 15<sup>th</sup> plan, it recognized the role of evaluation more than in the past. In such a background, realizing the need for a separate monitoring and evaluation act, an M&E Bill has been registered in the National Assembly of Nepal (National Assembly, Nepal, 2021) in 2020. All this supports the statement that Nepal’s evaluation policy is in an evolving phase yet to be formalized (Parliamentarians Forum on Development Evaluation in South Asia/EvalPartners, 2015). While developing evaluation policy, it is essential to consider the fast-growing nature of development evaluation (Cracknell, 2000) and to contextualize the evaluation policy for a professional development of evaluation.

## **Evaluation Practice: Weak Integration and Cross-learning**

An evaluation policy which provides a normative framework and a national evaluation system that implements the policy (Segone, 2015) largely influence the evaluation practice. Though the evaluation policy is fundamental to shape the evaluation as a whole,

the practice of evaluation helps improve the policy providing learning from the real world. The practice of evaluation takes place in three domains – NPC for the government projects, Social Welfare Council (SWC) and International Non-government Organization (INGOs) for non-government projects and international development agencies like United Nations (UN) and international banks for the projects of their funding. In case of evaluations by the government, the practice is very limited and not effective according to a study carried out for NPC (Pokharel et al., 2020). As the study reports, the practice of evaluation is limited to donor-financed projects, and there is a kind of perception among the government officials that evaluations are “unnecessary liability on the government”. Furthermore, the study points out that evaluation is rarely used for learning and decision making (ibid).

While observing the evaluation practice of SWC, it appears only as a ritual process to meet the legal formalities conducted with very limited budget and time and involving non-professional evaluators. In addition to the SWC, INGOs conduct various evaluations on their own. However, both the SWC and INGOs conduct evaluations in an isolated manner and rarely make them public allowing opportunity for cross-learning. The international development banks and UN agencies though conduct evaluations in a more professional manner and also public them are not integrated due to the lack of established national evaluation system. Thus, one can observe the evaluation practice highly uneven in the absence of a formal institutional system to integrate and utilize the full potentiality of evaluation (Gaarder & Briceño, 2010) providing an enabling environment.

### **Evaluation Capacity: Lagging the Professionalization**

Of the three pertinent issues of evaluation in Nepal, the evaluation capacity is highly important for the professionalization of evaluation. The issue of capacity applies to the demand, “policymakers/policy advisors to use evidence” and the supply side, “evaluation professionals to provide sound evidence” (Segone, 2010) for the sustainable evaluation system. However, the demand side plays an initiative role as demand is considered detrimental in shaping the capacity as it seeks quality evaluation (Wiesner, year). Without evaluation capacity of professional standard, it is not possible to generate and use quality evaluations which are essential for the purpose of development efficiency and good governance (Hay, 2014). Indeed, evaluation capacity is taken as continual efforts of any organization to establish the practice and use of quality evaluation ; Preskill & Boyle, 2008).

In such a need for capacity development and for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, building national evaluation capacity has been a global concern. In the context of Nepal, evaluation capacity with both the demand and supply sides is not meeting the requirement not only in the context of SDG but also for the overall development works. The 15<sup>th</sup> Plan has recognized this gap well as it identifies “inadequate capacity to evaluate” due to the “inability to build the capacity of human resources involved in monitoring and

evaluation” (NPC, 2020). Indeed the 15<sup>th</sup> Plan has considered “develop and retain skilled human resources in the field of monitoring and Evaluation” as a major challenge for its M&E capacity. The low level of awareness and motivation with the policy makers for evidence-based policy making reflects weak demand-side capacity of evaluation in Nepal, which in turn discourages the supply-side capacity of evaluation. However, there have been efforts to develop evaluators by universities and some professional organizations working for the promotion of M&E. For example, Kathmandu University has been running a course on M&E at its post-graduate level (Kathmandu University School of Education, 2020). In addition, INGOs and some volunteer organizations for professional evaluations (VoPEs) have been providing training on M&E. However, in the absence of a strong evaluation policy to strengthen the national evaluation capacity, the efforts are not consolidated for promoting professional evaluation.

## **Opportunities for Improvement in Evaluation**

### **Policy Development**

Nepal had the opportunity to focus on the development of a comprehensive evaluation policy that would serve as a guiding framework for all evaluation activities. This policy could define the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders and promote a culture of evaluation across the government and non-government sectors.

### **Capacity building**

Nepal could invest in capacity-building initiatives to train a new generation of skilled evaluators. Establishing evaluation training programs and fostering partnerships with universities and research institutions would help address the issue of limited evaluation capacity.

### **Standardization of Collaboration**

Encouraging collaboration among government bodies, NGOs, and development partners could lead to the standardization of evaluation practices. The creation of a central repository for evaluation data and findings would facilitate information sharing and improve the overall quality of evaluations.

### **Transparency and Accountability**

Enhancing transparency and accountability in the evaluation process is crucial. Implementing mechanisms for public access to evaluation reports and fostering a culture of learning from evaluation findings could improve the effectiveness of policies and programs.

## **3. Conclusions**

Nepal stood at a critical juncture in its evaluation journey. While facing challenges related to primary policy frameworks, uneven practices, and limited capacity, the nation also possessed significant opportunities for growth and improvement. With a concerted effort

from stakeholders within Nepal and support from international partners, the country could transition toward a more robust and effective evaluation ecosystem, ultimately contributing to better-informed policy decisions and improved development outcomes.

Though Nepal has been pursuing development over the decades, its evaluation policy is not institutionalized yet because of the low level of understanding of policy makers on evidence-based policy making. There have been some efforts for the practice of M&E, but it is lagging behind for the professionalization of evaluation in Nepal. Particularly in the absence of clear national evaluation policy, both the demand and supply side evaluation capacity are very poor. Therefore, evaluation in Nepal is not able to achieve the basic purpose of evaluation of accountability, learning and evidence-based policy making. All this suggests a multi-pronged strategy of evaluation in Nepal to enhance the evaluation through institutionalization and professionalization.

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