

5th South Asian Conference on Public Policy and Governance

Conference Theme: Subnational governments as the defender of democratic governance and service delivery

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Venue: Nepal Administrative Staff College

The recent wave of multi-level governance has stressed the role of sub-national governments in promoting democratic governance and service delivery. In an effort to decentralize the centrally held powers to the sub-national units, countries have adopted different political and governance structures. The fundamental reasons for decentralization are to address political demands for greater recognition of regional and local identities within larger states and to the perceived failings of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to governing.¹ South Asia has diversity in terms of political and administrative arrangements, with the common goal of providing better governance and delivery to the citizens. Having an asymmetrical delegation of political structure and powers, the sub-national governments are playing important roles in meeting citizens' demand for better governance and quality delivery. In the aftermath of the recent COVID pandemic and subsequent crisis, it has been realized that sub-national governments should have enhanced role and capacity to provide uninterrupted services to the citizens and include them in the democratic processes.

In South Asia, India, for example, has a long practice of decentralization through federalist constitution, while Nepal has adopted a recent federalist constitution that has delegated a number of authorities to sub-national governments. In addition to the federalist constitution, Pakistan has adopted a decentralization plan for devolving powers to the lower orders. Bangladesh, on the other hand, being a unitary and centralized government, working towards decentralizing the authorities and providing sub-national units certain level of autonomy. Likewise, Sri Lanka has recognized the role of decentralization as part of the peace strategy in addressing the issues of ethnicity and local autonomy.²

Despite recognizing that the sub-national governments as the defender of democratic governance and service delivery, evidence supports that sub-national governments suffer a number of challenges such as imbalances in functions and funds, autonomy, administrative arrangements, political maneuvering, and poor intergovernmental coordination, among others. Building on the previous series, the fifth series of the South Asian Conference on Public Policy and Governance, organized jointly by the prominent

¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0020852321996429>

² http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01061/WEB/0__CO-26.HTM

institutions in South Asia, aims to provide a forum where scholars from South Asia will join together to share their knowledge on the functioning of the sub-national governments, the good practices, the challenges, and prospective solutions. Together, we will learn from cross country practices and build an informed understanding. Papers are invited from the scholars and practitioners working in South Asia on the following sub-themes.

Sub-themes

Sub-theme 1: Innovation in governance and delivery at the subnational governments

Subnational governments serve as street-level governments to the citizens and play a key role in public service delivery. Sub-national governments are also considered innovation labs that will unleash opportunities for solving problems in an efficient way. With the growing public demands surmounted by challenges and opportunities, the subnational governments have the leverage to apply innovative approaches to deliver public demands. This sub-theme brings ground-level experiences on innovative approaches the subnational governments adopted in governance and service delivery from the South Asian region.

Sub-theme 2: The structural and functional empowerment of the subnational governments

The global debate of multi-level governments is to balance the structural and functional capacity of the subnational governments. Devolution of functions requires the development of congruent structure and functional capacity of subnational units. Clear assignment of functions, compatible structural arrangements, and performing capacity are the impetus for making subnational governments the backbone of strengthening state-people relationships. This sub-theme discusses on the issues, challenges, and practices of strengthening subnational governments in the South Asia region.

Sub-theme 3: Intergovernmental relationship – Practices, dilemma and opportunities

A basic challenge in multilevel governance is to ensure principled relationships among the levels of government. It also requires to balance between self-rule and shared rule. Studies show that intergovernmental relations have both structural and functional perspectives. The structures are the formal arrangements that bring different levels of government on the same platform for dialogues and negotiations, while the functional relationships are open and dynamic. The latter is context-specific and evolving, examples are seen while managing the COVID pandemic. Studies have advocated that strengthened intergovernmental relationships would have positive impacts on overall service delivery. Meanwhile, challenges such as unclear jurisdictions, ineffective coordination mechanisms, role overlaps, and controlled autonomy are on the surface.

This sub-theme will highlight the existing practices, challenges, and opportunities of intergovernmental relations and also present the learning cases.

Sub-theme 4: Fiscal decentralization: Opportunity for expanding the economic base

Fiscal decentralization is one of the emerging issues in multilevel governments. In principles, 'funds follow functions'. The second-generation theory of fiscal decentralization advocates that fiscal decentralization is not only a technical issue, but it is also political. A study by the OECD in 2016 shows subnational governments account for a quarter of total government spending and this may increase further³. Devolution of resources is considered an opportunity for expanding the broad-based economy. Countries have adopted different forms and scales of fiscal decentralization. Studies have shown that there could be a gross fiscal gap in response to the expenditure requirements among subnational governments. The vertical gap could be minimized by a robust transfer mechanism while the horizontal differences emerge as another critical issue. This sub-theme will inform with the practices of fiscal decentralization in South Asia, the challenges faced by the countries, and the associated opportunities.

Sub-theme 5: Role of subnational governments in meeting 2030 target of SDGs

The SDGs are a global framework for social and economic development. Though challenging to meet many of the targets by 2030, the SDGs provide a roadmap for the countries toward prosperity. The SDGs are broadly organized around economic, social, environmental, and governance dimensions. The goals underscore the roles of subnational governments in two ways- a) delivering the commitments and b) creating a database for monitoring the progress. Countries have made their national localization plan to ensure that SDGs are aligned with the national development plan and priorities. These national plans recognize the role of subnational governments in achieving the SDGs. As of now, there have been mixed responses on the status of SDGs. For some goals, countries are progressing well ahead, while for many others, it is still a long way. This sub-theme will collate and fortify the roles of subnational governments for achieving SDGs.

Sub-theme 6: Inclusive governance and service delivery at subnational level

Inclusive governance and service delivery are framed in the principle of a 'citizen' centric' decision and delivery process. Responsive, accountable, and committed to social justice sub-national governments can play instrumental roles in improving governance and

³ <https://www.oecd.org/regional/regional-policy/Subnational-Governments-Around-the-World-%20Part-I.pdf>

service delivery. As the subnational governments make direct and regular interactions with the citizens, they are required to be open and inclusive. The governments should address the social, economic, and other types of diversity in an efficient and just approach. The subnational governments can play roles in creating intrinsic value of democratic governance and service delivery by addressing the social, economic, and cultural constraints of citizens to receive quality services. This sub-theme will highlight the efforts and challenges of inclusive governance in the South Asia.

Sub-theme 7: Subnational governments at the time of pandemic and disasters

The outbreak of a pandemic and the situation of disaster tests governments' capacity. The initial concern about the pandemic and disaster will naturally center on the immediate response of the subnational governments. It is also important to realize that a pandemic and disaster can also affect other key services. In such situations, the capacity and response of the subnational governments have important roles in providing immediate response and building a resilient society. The recent COVID pandemic has been a litmus test of health governance for several countries. South Asia is prone to several types of disasters as the data show regular occurrences of disasters of different scales. This sub-theme will share the efforts to subnational governments in dealing with the crisis.

Sub-theme 8: Role of subnational governments in upholding fundamental rights

The protection of human rights is one of the core values of government. An effective subnational governance system needs to be in order to safeguard the fundamental rights of citizens. The subnational governments are responsible for the delivery of basic services of health, education, drinking water, sanitation, clean environment, housing, livelihood, and other developmental activities, that form basic components of fundamental rights. The fundamental rights also provide a framework for a rights-based approach to development. Better functioning of the subnational governments plays important role in ensuring the citizen's entitlements. This sub-theme will explore the role, efforts, and challenges of the subnational governments in upholding fundamental rights.

Sub-theme 9: Accountability framework of the subnational governments- social justice, finance and performance

Accountable subnational governments are essential in realizing the virtues of democratic governance. They should ensure social justice, allow citizen participation by recognizing their voice, deliver public goods and services, and enhances trust through performance. Importantly, an accountability framework equips people with tools and resources to hold their government and its functionaries accountable for their decisions and actions. In the spirit of 'downward accountability', the subnational governments should hold themselves accountable towards social justice, finance and performance. This sub-theme will provide a platform to discuss the issues of accountability, and the efforts and innovative

approaches adopted by the subnational governments to promote accountability in South Asia.

Sub-theme 10: Subnational governments as a lab for leadership development

The scarcity of better leadership is a challenge for the countries. In a democratic system, leadership has to be evolved through enduring practices. The subnational governments are, therefore, a lab for leadership development. The continuous engagement with society and people, the exercise of authority, and the application of innovative approaches to solving public problems would eventually lead to leadership development. In multilevel democratic governance, the subnational governments should function as a leadership lab that will produce better leadership through performance. In several countries, national leadership has evolved through performance at the sub-national level. This sub-theme will provide a space for sharing experiences, practices and discourses on the role of subnational governments in leadership development.

Key Dates

Submission of abstract (extended): 09 February, 2024

Notification on selection of abstract: 23 February, 2024

Conference programme initial update: 01 March, 2024