

**Early Phase of Federalism: Exploring the Experiences of Administrative Leaders of
Local Governments in Nepal**

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Abstract

The first five years since the implementation of federalism has brought a ray of hopes among the service users and service providers at local level. The optimism, was however, coupled with certain challenges for the service providers, especially administrative leaders to manage their local level amidst the resource constraints and dilemma. In this context, this study aimed at exploring those challenges regarding employee engagement and managing networks and relationships with various stakeholders as well as the strategies that they had adopted to overcome these challenges. The study was based on qualitative approach in which in-depth interviews were taken with a total of six participants who were Chief Administrative Officers (CAOs) with the first five years'. They were taken into consideration for study on the grounds of substantial experiences of working as the administrative leaders at local level and still in the government service. The study represented participants from rural / municipalities of three provinces. Using thematic analysis, the study found majority of challenges faced by CAOs were under-staffing and even over-staffing due to employment adjustments by federal governments. They were able to manage the employees through extrinsic motivation, role-modelling, providing training and development opportunities, keeping open environment for discussions and inspiring them for effective public service delivery. However, managing relationships various stakeholders, mostly political leaders was among their biggest challenges to which they strategize using rules and regulations or got transferred.

Keywords: CAOs, federalism, challenges, employee engagement, political relationship

Introduction

The promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal 2015 paved the way for transformation of nation's unitary system of governance into a federal system of governance. This resulted in

one federal unit, seven provinces and 753 local governments. Though, local government set up existed in form of village development committees, municipalities and district development committee earlier, new local government set up was envisioned with unprecedented powers and entirely new structure through this Constitution. The Constitution has assigned significant autonomy and power to subnational governments. Being closest to the general public in terms of understanding the needs, aspirations and delivering services, subnational governments mainly local governments and their roles are crucial in terms of realizing the goal of constitution and federal system of governance. This system aimed at reducing imbalances in regional and local development and ensuring equitable benefit sharing by ending all forms of discrimination created by feudalistic system of governance. Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) in this regard plays a role of protagonist from administration domain. CAO carries major responsibility of connecting the political aspirations of elected political representatives and structural and procedural steps of getting things done complying with legal mandates. Actual institutionalisation of federalism in local level is dependent on how well an administrative leader handles the new challenge and situation. Their role in establishing effective relationship between elected officials and managing their expectations in terms of legal rules and compliances for social, economic and political transformation is both a challenge and opportunity. In this context, experiences regarding the challenges faced by CAOs in terms of employee engagement and political-bureaucratic interface, along with strategies adopted by them during early phase of federalism practice becomes instrumental both for local level and policy level leaders.

Challenges: Employee Engagement

The decisions from the political leadership are implemented through the administrative structures and processes so the workforce also needs to be equipped with the needed skills and motivation. The administrative leaders thus need to ensure the right skills,

team spirit and engagement of employees for better results. Kahn (1990) has pointed out that there are mainly three aspects of employee engagement. First, is the physical engagement that relates to the extent to which employees expend their efforts, both physical and mental. Secondly, cognitive engagement emphasises that employees need to know what their employer's vision and strategies are, and what performance they need to deliver in order to achieve the same. Finally, the emotional engagement focuses the emotional relationship that employees feel with their employer. A positive relationship will require the organisation to learn how to create a sense of belonging and mutual trust at work. Employee engagement is an inclusive concept that can contribute to a better understanding of the management of human capital in many organizations including the public sector (Albrech, 2010). Similarly, various researches point out that employee-driven approaches can act as sustainable sources of employee engagement leading to significant organizational outcomes (Rivera & Flinck, 2011). Engaged employees have high levels of energy, are enthusiastic, and are fully immersed in their daily work. So modern public organizations need their employees to be proactive, show initiative, take responsibility, and be committed to high quality performance standards (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2012).

Some news regarding difficulties in bringing/making feel the ownership of employees, team engagement, retention and motivated team

The introduction of the new three tier governance structure requires employees and administrative leaders to equip themselves with necessary skills to deliver the results in the context of the premise of the new constitutional provisions and the expectation of the general public. Hence, it is a challenge for a CAO to strike a balance between the motivation and engagement of employees and delivery of expected results. It is thus necessary to document the experiences of administrative leaders of local governments in order to gather insights on the challenges and the strategies adopted by them to overcome the same.

Challenges: Political-Bureaucratic Relations

The ‘political-bureaucratic interface’ refers to how political and bureaucratic leaders engage with each other, and to the structural or institutional constraints and opportunities that influence their engagement. To define the structural roles, the politicians are supposed to formulate policies and the bureaucrats are tasked with implementing them. The relationships between the public servants and political elites influence performance and affect administration in general (Nyadera & Islam, 2020). The nature of political-bureaucratic interface is crucial in achieving development results and policy reforms in developing countries. Since, politicians and bureaucrats each have their own values, interests, ideas, attitudes and different sources, forms, and degrees of power, there is often conflict of interest between them. Conflicting interests between politicians and bureaucrats is a key factor in the failure of institutional reforms in developing countries (Dasandi, 2014).

In theory, frequently defined roles and responsibilities of political leaders and bureaucrats suggest that there should not be any tension between the two sets of authority as the former is supposed to formulate policies and the latter is tasked with implementing them. However, in reality, substantial tensions exist as a result of conflict of interest and overlapping roles.

Power distribution and power distance between politicians and bureaucrats has over the years been identified as one of the key measures of determining the level of independence and autonomy public servants have from political elites. Similarly, policymaking, and its implementation, is often hazy and blurred.

The question of “who governs whom” has remained salient among many studies, most of which have fallen short of providing a substantial answer. In contemporary democracies, politicians derive their mandate and legitimacy to govern from the citizens either directly or indirectly while bureaucrats are guided by existing laws and legislations governing performance of public servants. Since, both the parties have guided by their own interests, it

has created a fierce rivalry between democratically elected executives and government appointed or nominated officers. Therefore, there is a challenge to shape congenial political-bureaucratic relationships that support the achievement of development results and policy reforms to ensure citizen centric public service delivery. The core group of political and bureaucratic leaders must work closely together and share development centred values and aims, and politicians must take strong leadership stands to promote the policy reforms conducive in designing citizen centric public service delivery

Nepal being the newest country stepping into the journey of federalism has been facing numerous challenges among which lack of rules and regulations, lack of experiences, inadequate capacity, dilemmas (Acharya & Scott, 2022). Mostly, these challenges are faced by the CAOs as they are responsible for the performance of their respective governments. However, even after the transition of five years of federalism, the key challenges that they have faced regarding their employee engagement and relation management with local representatives are still underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to delve into these challenges faced by CAOs of the local governments with respect to employee engagement and political-bureaucratic relations management and the strategies adopted by them to overcome those hurdles and challenges. The findings of these challenges are strategies will be crucial for all the local level administrative leaders in the smooth management of their governments as well as for the policy makers to come with suitable interventional mechanisms to overcome those challenges.

Research Questions

RQ1: What were the challenges faced by the administrative leaders in the initial phase of implementing federalism?

RQ2: What strategies have the administrative leaders adopted to overcome the faced challenges?

Research Methods

Research Design

The study aimed at exploring the challenges faced and strategies adopted by CAOs at local level in the initial phase of implementing federalism. In this respect, descriptive qualitative design was used to explore and describe the ground realities faced by CAOs during different time span of first five years. Cases were drawn and clustered to generate knowledge regarding challenges and strategies that were categorised to produce suitable themes. Hence, in this study, inductive approach was adopted to explore the variables (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Participants and Data Collection

Data were collected from CAOs, as the administrative leaders of local governments, from Rural municipalities and municipalities from Koshi province, Lumbini province and Karnali province. Purposeful selection was done to ensure wider representation of both rural municipalities (RM) and municipalities of the country. A total of six CAOs were approached in which three were RMs and three were municipalities. Further, the inclusion criteria was set as:

1. CAOs with more than 1 year of experience at local level in total.
2. CAOs having the experience of more than six months consecutively at one local level.
3. CAOs who are still in government service.

These selection criteria were set considering the frequent transfers of CAOs due to which a CAO is less likely to lead one local level for a long period of time. With this, the study ensured that the participants will have sufficient experience to share their experiences among the research team. Participants were pre-informed regarding the arrival of the research team. Interviews were carried out at the convenience of the participants in Nepali as per their comfort.

Analysis

Data was analysed using inductive approach and thematic analysis. Using MAXQDA software, themes, categories and sub-categories were generated. The general principle of data translation, data translating, transcribing and coding were carried in the first stage of data analysis (Rugg & Petre, 2006). In the second stage, thematising and analysing was done. For this, main categories of the challenges and strategies adopted were based on the categories and sub-categories as per the depth of the data collection. Each sub-category was ensure adequate codes to generate data on the basis of textual units (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Stievano et al., 2012). Open codes with similar contents were arranged in sub-categories and then were categorized to formulate highly organized and concise form of results (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Quality Assurance

The quality of the paper was assured by ensuring trustworthiness, precisely credibility and dependability (Saunders et al., 2016). To ensure credibility, prolonged field based engagement will be carried by the entire research team. In-depth meanings were generated through direct interactions by visiting the field and making persistent observations of the ground realities. Besides, methods will be adopted precisely and both verbal and non-verbal data will be strictly recorded and considered for analysis. On the other hand, dependability was assured through the systematic procedure of coding, sub-categorizing and categorising. The transcript was rigorously studied to make sure that important meanings are included in the analysis. The data were collected only after communicating about the research purpose and obtaining informed consent from the CAOs. Moreover, their workload and other important factors were taken into consideration before commencing interviews. All the recorded data were treated with confidentiality and this will be well communicated with CAOs to maintain research ethics.

Findings

Various insights were drawn from the experiences of the CAOs in the course of first five years. This section explains their stories and experiences with regards to how they managed their organization, led their team, challenges they faced and how they dealt with these challenges. The themes and categories are shown below.

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories
Managing Operations	Staff Management	• Challenges in Staff Management
		• Strategies in Staff Management
	Laws and Programs	• Challenges Faced in Formulation and Implementation
		• Ways Forward
Organizational	Capacity Building	
Stewardship		
	Motivating the Staffs	Extrinsic Motivation
		Intrinsic Motivation
Networking and	Networking with	
Relationships	Stakeholders	
	Relationship Management	Challenges in maintaining relationships
		Overcoming challenges

Managing Operations

As the administrative leader, one of the major functions of the CAOs were managing their organizations. CAOs were required to work with the given organogram. In many experiences, CAOs share the adjustment of organogram as per the employee adjustment plan implemented by MOFAGA.

Challenges in Staff Management

Staff management during the early phase of federalism was one of the common challenges. The challenges were even critical at the beginning when most of municipalities were newly formed since that phase was characterized by a great deal of uncertainty regarding the new roles and responsibilities and their required workforce. Most of the municipalities were understaffed and lacked specific competencies. In this regard, one participant of a rural-municipality shared:

Managing HR was definitely a problem. We did not have enough employees as per Organogram and I used to assign Health sector permanent employee to conduct administrative works too. There was no right person in right place due to limited human resource. We even hired experts through directives to conduct some functions of planning (Participant 04, ... Ilam district, Koshi Province).

CAOs experience high level employee scarcity in which more of the workforce crunch was on more on technical areas. Employees of technical subjects were not readily available in local government, especially in remote places since they would easily opportunities in urban areas. To this, another participant of a rural municipality added:

Though there were administrative staffs, I had faced challenges due to vacant posts of technical officials such as sub-engineers... Moreover, the geographical remoteness of that Rural Municipality and its altitude of approximately 2300 kms above the sea level posed a major challenge in managing the operations as necessary

infrastructures such as television, internet, telephone is very limited and there is snowfall in the winter season (Participant 05, Dailekh district, Karnali Province).

CAOs from remote areas faced further difficulties since employees were reluctant to go or work in such remote areas due to lack of facilities. Lack of resources create much difficulties to work on a daily basis and staying far from home would pressure the CAOs for more leave approvals and early transfers. The limitations of number of employees in far remote places were always a big headache for the CAOs and they had to manage one employee in different areas. We saw employee of IT looking after the functions of education in the main municipality office, or one Auxiliary Nurse and Mid-wife (ANM) working in a ward taking the responsibilities of a ward secretary. Such headache employees would be even intense when they would go on a long leave. One participant shared his sorrow:

The employee of health was on a week-long leave. Later he extended his leave and I do not if he is resuming this week or not. With this, it has become more difficult to provide health related service. Everyone wants to go to the headquarter for various objectives and refreshments, and I cannot deny their requests. I have to keep them motivated. (Participant 9, Taplejung district, Koshi Province).

While in most of the cases, the local governments were under-staffs, in a few others, there were also the cases of over staffing due to adjustments. During due to MOFAGA's adjustments, there more employees than the positions risking lesser productivity and conflict of interest. The same allocation resulted in under-staffing in some municipalities with higher flow of service seekers whereas it created difficulties some others due excess employee structure than the capacity and need of the municipalities. As per one participant,

During that time, I had faced challenges in infrastructure and staff management. The federal government used to allocate the staff positions on lump sum basis. So, there were more employees in the rural municipality than the approved position. To recall

my past experience, for one approved position on Assistant Women Inspector post, six employees of same position were sent to this Rural Municipality when the federal employees were merged to local level units. (Participant 06, Banke district, Lumbini Province)

One of the root causes of this issue was that the allocation of staff was done at federal level without thorough study of the need and scope of the municipalities. CAOs shared that Organization and Management (O&M) survey was not done back then which would take time and resources. However, they voiced out that Federal government should make one round of two-way communication to at least analyse the number and type of workforce that they would need. In some cases, CAOs who were willing to conduct O&M surveys were transferred before they could make a move which halted the optimal employee estimation process.

Strategies in Staff Management

As the administrative leaders, CAOs had to run the entire local government amidst the greater aspirations of the local public. In this regard, they managed the operations by assigning one employee in different areas. Thus, numerous municipalities saw temporary management of staffs in which the staffs of one subject area covered up for another area. Besides, many CAOs hired employees on contract basis to fulfil their immediate needs.

...To overcome such challenges, I managed the vacant posts through job rotations and by providing higher level job assignments to the junior staffs (job enrichment). (Participant 05, Dailekh district, Karnali Province).

In case of over-staffing, the CAOs managed by assigned them with various tasks to meet the organizational objectives. However, over-staffing had created difficulty in paying them salaries. In some municipalities with limited revenue sources, they were unable to timely pay these staffs in which even the core member of staffs suffered the arrears in

payment. Hence, CAOs were continuously attempting to optimizing the staff number for which they were planning to get O&M survey as soon as possible.

Laws and Programs

One of the biggest challenges as well as the achievements shared by the CAOs were formulation of laws during the initial phase of federalism. Model laws were provided by MOFAGA for them which became the major foundation for law formulation. Besides, they also employed legal advisors to formulate the laws. One participant recalls his past days:

We took decisions in law formulation and implementation on the basis of the provided law and we also used legal advisors in our activities due to which we could perform well. During the course of law formulation, employees were involved. We have to involve our employees as it is the part of the process. (Participant 08, Dailekh, Karnali Province)

CAOs acknowledged the roles of employees in the law-formulation processes. Besides, there were experiences of proper formal law formulation process. Another participant added:

Laws, Rules, Acts and Guidelines were enacted based on the template of the model law provided by the federal government and it were sanctioned by the judicial committee of the rural municipality. The laws were formulated by the legislative committee and the draft laws were discussed on the executive committee and presented for sanction at village assembly. Finally, the laws are published in the local gazette for implementation. (Participant 05, Dailekh district, Karnali Province)

Similarly, through team engagements, various programs were formulated and implemented. CAOs shared that programs were formed by the local level wards and they were sanctioned by the village assembly by the following due process. The programs and projects were run by the rural municipality according to the needs and priority of the area.

Challenges Faced in Formulation and Implementation

The initial years at local level were full of confusions and uncertainty. Though model laws were available, there were quite a few context specific issues. In this regard, one participant shared:

While formulating the laws, acts and regulations, I have faced challenges due to the non-availability of legal advisors, yet the laws were formulated by learning by doing approach. I overcame the challenges faced during the daily operations through job rotations and job enrichment. (Participant 05, Dailekh district, Karnali Province).

Firstly, it was a new experience to them since barely anyone had prior experiences of law formulation at local level. Besides, there were scarcities of legal advisors at local level. Moreover, in the presence of legal advisors, they were not experienced in law formulation. As per one participant,

We had legal advisors but their experiences were not regarding making of laws, but were experienced to file and defend cases in the court. (Participant 08, Dang district, Lumbini Province)

Some CAOs faced difficulties during the implementation phase due to conflict of interests. Besides, they still were struggling to formulate many laws. In this case, some shared that they were awaiting law formulation at higher government level and since federal or provincial level governments had not formulated some laws, it hindered their functions too.

Ways Forward

CAOs adopted their own ways to deal with the situations. Many of them followed the model laws to work out for the time being and that adoption of the model laws became the actually implemented laws later on. In other cases, some CAOs also learned from the laws formulated by other municipalities. They took the references of those formulated laws while making their

own. Besides following the reference/model laws, CAOs could not do much on their own due to lack of expertise and the sensitivity of the subject matter.

Organizational Stewardship

To maintain the organizational stewardships, CAOs carried out different approaches discussed below.

Staff Motivation

As the administrative leader of the entire local government, it was crucial that their employees were motivated at their work. To motivate their staffs, majority of CAOs applied extrinsic motivational factors. In rural municipalities from remote areas, allowances were given to the staffs. The technical staffs such as overseers and sub-engineers were mostly given incentives for their field visits while other staffs used to receive travel allowances and daily allowances (TADA) for field based works. As per one participant,

I tried to provide monetary and non-monetary incentives to the employees. I provisioned them allowances like TADA on a regular basis. Similarly, I provided staff quarters with basic facilities for employees coming from different places. I faced criticism in executive committee but I took a stand on the provisions. (Participant 02)

CAOs often faced challenges when it came to motivating their staffs but since motivation was key to employee performance, CAOs found ways to keep them motivated. However, this study found more of the motivational efforts through role-model based leadership seen through practices.

I manifested the public service values and beliefs to my staffs through regular staff meetings and reinforcing them to provide best public service delivery. To share my anecdote, I can still recall telling my staffs that my chief aim in the rural municipality is to provide quality public service delivery to the public at large unlike the Chief

District Officers whose role is to impose law to maintain peace and security.

(Participant 06, Banke district, Lumbini Province)

CAOs focused on clear line of communication, regular feedback and open environment for discussions, clear job responsibilities and such to keep employees focused on their job roles and keep them intrinsically motivated. Another participant added:

I motivated the employees by giving them clear cut job description. Since the municipality had little internal revenue sources, it was difficult to provide financial incentives to the staffs but I motivated them by reinforcing that we as public officials our main aim of life is public service delivery. (Participant 06, Dailekh, Karnali Province)

In some cases, CAOs used word-power to keep the employees motivated and they shared that it really worked. However, they also stressed that the administrative leaders much be a role model and work harder than others so that the staffs also follow their roadmap. Besides, they also shared that talking alone is not sufficient and their words should align with their actions. As per one participant,

I often talk to my employees. I try to motivate saying we are the ones to build the nation... Employees used to ask for remuneration of working overtime but I always told them that we have to work for compensation of the losses caused by our bureaucracy and politics. I also keep encouraging them by being a role model and working hard and extra time. Besides, during the course of my first tenure, we used to celebrate birthdays, enjoy picnics almost every month, hiking. With different celebrations, I used to enforce that we have to work in holistic approach. (P8 Gehendra Bahadur Dangi Lamahi Mun Transcript, Pos. 21-22)

CAOs of different municipalities applied different approaches that matched their context such as geography, revenue generation sources, political interferences and such.

Capacity Building

CAOs, in order to sustain organizational strength, often send their employees to capacity building programs. In this context, CAOs shared that they regular send their staffs to training and development programs. Some participants shared:

I delegated many thematic functions to the centres. It was not possible to perform all function all on our own. The ultimate accountability would definitely be mine.

Granting leave, making plans of centres were delegated to respective centres. We prepared interim plans, vision paper but to be honest, it was mostly copy paste from sample plan documents that federal used to provide. (Participant 04, Ilam district, Koshi Province)

To promote future oriented skills and capabilities of the employees, I used to provide regular training to staffs and expanded the physical infrastructures to accommodate the working space for the employees. To establish trust based distributed leadership among employees I used to always work for providing quality of work life for employees. (Participant 07, Dailekh district, Karnali Province)

In some cases, CAOs also shared their inabilities to adopt strategies to capacitate their staffs.

As per one participant,

The long term vision mainly comes from Political Leadership. No formal strategies were prepared in the first phase. The workload was also very high so the strategies were mainly reactive than proactive. (Participant 01)

Some pointed towards political leaders and some admitted workload due to which they were unable to drive towards organizational stewardships.

Networking and Relationships

CAOs as the administrative leaderships have to manage professional networks with various organizations, governments at different level and people of important profile. In this regard,

CAOs shared that they had to work with political parties, local NGOs, INGOs, private firms and such. They also admit that with these parties, it is difficult to solely work at the local level. CAOs often share that they worked with I/NGOs to promote various domains of the society such as education, water resources, women empowerment and such. As per one participant,

I tried to collaborate with other local levels and some NGOs for benefit of the organization and citizens. Eg. Panchakanya Samuhik Krishi Karyakram is a mega scale project jointly run by two local levels. (Participant 03)

Similarly, another participant also shared:

Some collaborations were done with local NGOs in different sectors. Especially in districts outside valley, the influence of organizations was very high and in some cases, the laws were also overlooked for gain. Example: Giving land for use by NGOs where they build their office and start operating. This was done without any formal contract involving revenue. (Participant 01)

Challenges and Strategies in Relationship Management

Among various networks and relationships, CAOs mainly faced challenges of political interests from political leaders. The challenges were mostly in the form of political conflict of interests. This was one of the common, unavoidable challenges that they had faced. As per one participant,

I used to face political interferences and pressures from the political representatives in terms of appointing contractual staffs, staff transfer, consumer committee and tender contract. To overcome such challenges, I used to convince the political representatives that such activities are not in according to law referring to the acts, laws, rules, regulations and guidelines. (Participant 07, Dailekh district, Karnali Province)

The study also observed that many CAOs got early transfer as the result of political conflict. In many such cases, CAOs got transferred because they did not agree to political pressure and decided to stick to compliance. However, on a few cases, political and administrative relationships were smooth. As per one CAO,

In that municipality, the political leader was cooperative. He used to get my consent and we used to mutually agree on decision, plans and policies. As the result, our work did not face conflict of interest. (Participant 09, Taplegunj district, Koshi province)

The study found that though political pressures were common, those CAOs who were proud of their tenure, did have something in common that they followed the given laws, rules and regulations.

Conclusion

CAOs undertook the roles of operations managers, mentors, motivation sources as well as the relationship managers. This study explored the vital role of administrative leaders within local government and examined the challenges they face along with the strategies they adopt to overcome these obstacles. During the early phase of federalism, they faced significant challenges in these domains. In some areas, they were successful while in others, they struggled and even got transferred. The findings of this paper highlight the instrumental roles of CAOs in shaping and guiding the operations and policies of local governments even during the inception phase to institutionalize governments. This study explored CAOs' roles as the administrative leaders managing resources, coordinating departments, implementing policies, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. However, the challenges they faced were, to some extent, beyond their grip. It is thus essential to foster their performance by addressing these challenges and supporting their roles mostly through political partnerships and support from higher level governments.

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