

New Public Management Practices in Nepalese Public Organizations: A Systematic Review

Shiva Raj Adhikari, Abdellatif Darwish, Basu Dev Lamichhane, Sunita Dawadi

Article Info.

Shiva Raj Adhikari ,PhD

Director, Kathmandu Metro
City Office

dradhikari3@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0479-8995>

Abdellatif Darwish, PhD

Professor, City Unity
College Greece
l.darwish@cityu.gr

Basu Dev Lamichhane, PhD

Ass. Professor, Saraswoti
Campus, TU, Nepal
basudev.lamichhane@smc.tu.edu.np
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7987-6512>

Sunita Dawadi,PhD

Lecturer, Padma Kanya
College, TU, Nepal
dsuneeta.40@gmail.com

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Abstract

More than three decades after New Public Management (NPM) began affecting public administration in Nepal, this system is implemented inconsistently, selectively, and strongly affected by the political, bureaucratic, budgetary, and institutional conditions prevailing in this country. In this systematic review, the process of evolving NPM practices in Nepalese public sector organizations is analyzed from the perspective of decentralization, privatization, performance management, accountability, service delivery, and local governance in the context of federalism. The analysis uses studies carried out in academia about Nepal in relation to administrative reform, governance reform, local self-governance, fiscal federalism, and service behavior in local government organizations.

Keywords: NPM, public organizations, decentralization, public management reforms

Background

New Public Management is a global reform initiative aimed at improving efficiency, citizen focus, and result orientation in the public sector. The core concepts of New Public Management include managerial independence, performance management, decentralization, competition, privatization, and increased accountability (Atreya, 2002; Paudel, 2013; MoFAGA, n.d.). In Nepal, NPM concepts started impacting reform initiatives after the year 1990 due to the demand for modernization in the country's administration and improvement in service delivery following the process of democratization (Gautam, 2008; Paudel, 2013; Government of Nepal, 2001). Nepal makes for an interesting one due to the fact that the concepts of NPM were introduced in an environment where there was an existing culture of centralization and hierarchy (Atreya, 2002; Gautam, 2008). There were no attempts at reforms before 1990; however, after the year of 1990, management efficiency, local autonomy, and accountability became visible elements of the reform agenda (Government of Nepal, 1999, 2001, 2007). It can be said, though, that these concepts have been applied incompletely, while the bureaucracy still prevails.

Federal restructuring provided an additional dimension to the reform initiative. While the local government system bears additional responsibilities in terms of service delivery, development management, and public participation, its effectiveness is limited by the institutional, financial, and administrative constraints (Gautam, 2023; World Bank, 2023, 2024). The NPM case study of Nepal acquires significance in relation to the interface between administrative reform, local governance, and organizational capacity (Gautam, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Methodology

This literature review utilizes a systematic thematic approach to Nepal-related literature on NPM, public administration reforms, decentralization, governance, performance of local governments, fiscal federalism, and the behavior of services in local administrations (Gautam, 2008; Paudel, 2013; World Bank, 2024). Preference is given to literature that directly addresses Nepal's reform journey, which includes the Nepal Study Center report, NPM literature from Nepal, public management literature, local governance literature, and literature on the behavior of services in local administrations (ADB, 2012; Adhikari, 2022; Gautam, 2023). The review has been categorized under eight themes, which include historical evolution, essential tools of NPM, difficulties faced during its implementation, decentralization and local governance, behavioral aspects of service delivery and service delivery, good governance and accountability, transition to hybrid and e-governance and differences between traditional bureaucracy and NPM (Bhusal et al., 2023; Gautam, 2023; Katuwal, 2022; World Bank, 2024). The goal of the review is to summarize common findings to understand the reasons behind the mixed success of NPM in Nepal, not estimate its impacts statistically (Atreya, 2002; World Bank, 2023).

Historical background

The emergence of New Public Management can be best explained as a part of an international trend in public sector reforms that started towards the end of the 1970s and reached its peak during the 1980s and 1990s. According to Hood (1991), NPM was a collection of doctrines focusing on the importance of hands-on professional management, explicit performance criteria, output control, competition, and parsimony as responses to disappointment with the large bureaucratic state. On the other hand, Pollitt (1993) defined managerialism as an organization-wide culture

change in the field of public services, while Osborne & Gaebler (1992) used the concept of “reinventing government.”

It didn’t take long before comparative research began to show that NPM did not belong exclusively to one particular nation or ideology. In particular, Barzelay (2001) highlighted the need for better research and policy debate, demonstrating that NPM ought not just to be seen as a rallying cry for reform but also as a tool for studying public management policies. At the same time, Hood (2000) noted that NPM had gained great popularity, but that its meaning and combination of instruments were quite different from place to place.

With the development of the literature, academics started stressing the fact that NPM is not a panacea for all ills. Grindle (2004) suggested that developing countries require “good enough governance” in contrast to full-blown reform packages, due to the fact that states face real constraints that do not allow them to implement such reform packages successfully in the near future. Furthermore, Dunleavy et al. (2006) claimed that the time of NPM has passed, and now what we are witnessing is the emergence of digital governance based on reintegration, needs-based holism, and increased usage of IT in public administration. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) then proved that there is an age of austerity for public management reform.

OECD's 2010 assessment of the period following NPM demonstrates a similar trend. In other words, there is evidence that the “after NPM” approach has seen many countries adopt mixed models which combined managerialism with coordination and accountability concerns. Overall, these worldwide observations demonstrate that the historic importance of NPM consists in transforming the thinking of governments regarding efficiency, performance, autonomy, and service to citizens.

Within this international context, Nepal's administrative reform experiences can be regarded as a late and selective adoption of the global NPM paradigm. While previous reform processes in Nepal concentrated mostly on the structure of the civil services, administrative controls, and procedures (Atreya, 2002; National Administrative Staff College, 2022), after 1990, reform discourses became more concerned about efficiency, responsiveness, decentralization, and good governance (Government of Nepal, 2001, 2007; Paudel, 2013). According to Gautam (2008), the reform process in Nepal was influenced by the process of policy transfer, political changes, dissatisfaction with bureaucracy, and modernization driven by donors. Paudel (2013) is also of the opinion that Nepal adopted several NPM-related concepts as part of its efforts to establish itself as an efficient, people-centric, and mixed economy state. In both cases, it is evident that the adoption of NPM to Nepal is not an administration model but the adoption of several reform ideas over time (Gautam, 2008; Paudel, 2013). This led to layered reforms. The old bureaucratic organization structure was allowed to function as new managerial jargon was introduced into policy instruments and reform initiatives (Bhusal et al., 2023; MoFAGA, n.d.). That is how it can be explained why Nepalese public organizations tend to be progressive in policy yet traditional in administration (Atreya, 2002; National Administrative Staff College, 2025).

NPM Instruments in Nepal

From the Nepalese literature, several instruments that can be considered NPM are: decentralization, privatization, reorganization of organizations, citizen charters, public-private partnerships, performance budgeting, service standards, and output-oriented reporting (MoFAGA, n.d.; Paudel, 2013; World Bank, 2024). These instruments are meant to increase the efficiency, transparency, and responsiveness of public organizations (Atreya, 2002; National Administrative Staff College, 2022).

Paudel (2013) argues that some of the NPM tools have been implemented in Nepal, including public-private partnership, good governance, accountability/public audit, decentralization, and performance-based financing and reporting. Cost-cutting, downsizing, decentralization of power, and customer responsiveness are among the elements of Nepal's NPM discourse, according to Atreya (2002)

However, these instruments may not always be deeply institutionalized within organizations. Time and again, it can be found from the literature that Nepal has usually resorted to selective adoption of the reform tools that lack the necessary administrative systems to support their maintenance (Gautam, 2008; ADB, 2012; Atreya, 2002). This is the reason why the Nepalese case should better be termed as selective adaptation than NPM conversion.

Gaps in Implementation

The most consistent theme emerging from the literature is the gap between the planning and implementation of reform. In Gautam's (2008) study, restructuring of public organizations, decentralization, public service delivery reform, and performance appraisal reform were not implemented, while rightsizing and privatization had been partially implemented. These results suggest that NPM reforms have been largely rhetorical in Nepal (Gautam, 2008; Paudel, 2013).

According to the ADB (2012) assessment of public management, there are problems with budgeting, reporting, auditing, and implementation processes. This is critical for NPM because the process of effective administration is necessary for achieving outcomes through NPM reforms. When the state is unable to implement its budgeting and performance management, NPM reforms fail to work (ADB, 2012; World Bank, 2023).

This is also supported by the literature on local government and federalism. The World Bank (2024) mentions that while Nepal has undertaken reforms through federalism, it has done so only at a moderate pace and with major institutional difficulties. The World Bank (2023) further emphasizes that sub-national governments require good institutional arrangements in order to discharge their duties effectively. To sum up, implementation challenges are not just technical but capacity and coordination issues as well (ADB, 2012; World Bank, 2023, 2024).

Decentralization and Local Governance

One of the most significant NPM-inspired reforms in Nepal is decentralization, which is the shift of authority closer to the consumers of the services (Paudel, 2013; Government of Nepal, 1999, 2001). Decentralization has been advocated by Nepal for quite some time already as a means of achieving participation, accountability, and responsiveness (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.; Government of Nepal, 1999). With the arrival of federalism, the importance of decentralization increased even further due to greater powers of the local governments (Government of Nepal, 2015; Gautam, 2023).

Nonetheless, literature reveals that decentralization has usually been implemented faster on paper rather than in practice. According to ADB (2012), the World Bank (2023), and the World Bank (2024), the local bodies still lack the required capacity, financial independence, and proper institution-building. It indicates that there might be too much responsibility for the local government without the capacity to carry it out (World Bank, 2023, 2024).

In this regard, Gautam (2023) assumes special importance because the concept of local self-governance in Nepal has been understood in terms of its structure, practices, possibilities, and limitations. This is more accurate than assuming that decentralization automatically ensures efficiency. Indeed, in Nepal, local

governance has emerged as the field where the goals of NPM confront practical limitations of implementation (Gautam, 2023; National Administrative Staff College, 2025).

Local delivery of services and front-line behavior

According to NPM principles, the reform agenda should enhance the delivery of public services through increased client orientation, efficiency, and measurement (Atreya, 2002; Paudel, 2013). The need for reform in order to enhance service delivery has been a driving factor in Nepal in all branches of government (ADB, 2012; World Bank, 2024). Still, there are plenty of findings pointing to delays, lack of responsiveness, and poor service quality.

The paper by Adhikari (2022) titled “Determinants of Service Behavior of Customer Contact Personnel in Local Authority” is pertinent to this context since it moves away from designing reforms to looking at behavioral issues among staff. According to the paper, the quality of public services does not depend on structure and processes only, but also on the behavior of customer contact personnel toward citizens in local authorities (Adhikari, 2022).

This is important for two reasons: First, it confirms the focus on quality of services and customer orientation within the NPM framework; and second, it demonstrates that customer behavior is a critical factor in implementing reforms. More broadly, any attempt to implement NPM-based reforms in Nepal will not work without proper support and motivation for frontline staff members (Adhikari, 2022; ADB, 2012).

Local self-governance

Finally, the literature on local self-governance offers another level of knowledge. Gautam (2023) explains the nature, practice, possibilities, and constraints of local

governance structures in the federal state of Nepal. The local self-governance is crucial for the study of NPM since it is expected to be one of the primary means of how decentralization leads to better responsiveness of the administration (Gautam, 2023).

It becomes clear from the literature that the development of the local governance system in Nepal was influenced by fiscal, legal, and institutional reforms and not only management innovations (Government of Nepal, 1999, 2015; World Bank, 2024). Local bodies do not exist in isolation from each other; they are connected by intergovernmental transfers, legislation, and fiscal federalism arrangements (World Bank, 2023, 2024). It makes local self-governance a crucial case of the application of NPM ideas in a multi-level state (Gautam, 2023; National Administrative Staff College, 2025).

Fiscal federalism and capacity

Fiscal federalism is crucial to comprehending Nepal's public management reform process. According to the World Bank (2024), Nepal's institutional and legal reforms within the framework of fiscal federalism are still underway, but at a relatively slow pace, and its sub-national governments face challenges regarding their finances and institutions. Moreover, according to the World Bank (2024), fiscal transfer mechanisms between the government levels are to be improved, among other things.

These results have implications for NPM because managerial autonomy has no meaning unless there is fiscal and administrative capability. Local governments will be unable to provide services efficiently if they do not have resources, budget credibility, and institutions for implementation (Asian Development Bank, 2010; World Bank, 2023, 2024). In other words, the literature on fiscal federalism demonstrates that the effectiveness of NPM-type decentralization is contingent

upon the public finance framework (Asian Development Bank, 2010; Subedi, 2013).

Also relevant for our topic is the dissertation of Subedi (2013), which addresses fiscal decentralization and municipal taxation in Nepal. All told, the fiscal literature indicates that in order to achieve any gains in terms of performance, Nepal needs to take into account both the revenue and fiscal aspects of decentralization (Asian Development Bank, 2010; Subedi, 2013; World Bank, 2024).

Accountability and Governance

The concepts of NPM and good governance share several common features. They both focus on accountability, transparency, and responsiveness (Paudel, 2013; Government of Nepal, 2007). Based on the reform literature in Nepal, accountability devices like public auditing, frameworks of good governance, and reporting have been established within the process of administrative modernization (MoFAGA, n.d.; Paudel, 2013).

Nonetheless, formal accountability does not mean effective governance. According to the ADB (2012) report, implementation challenges, lack of coordination, and weak enforcement still hinder public management structures. Furthermore, the local governance literature highlights that the concept of accountability in federal Nepal is strongly dependent on institutional capacity and local administrative effectiveness (Katuwal, 2022; Gautam, 2023). Katuwal (2022) contributes to this discussion through his research on the quality of good governance practiced within local government in Nepal. These findings combined highlight the necessity for reform initiatives regarding accountability to be underpinned by substantive capacity in the administration (ADB, 2012; Katuwal, 2022; Gautam, 2023).

School governance and participation

Governing by sectors further reflects the functioning of NPM theories in Nepal. The National Administrative Staff College (2022) applies the NPM theories to analyze the issue of school governance and citizen participation. The article highlights the fact that school governance has been influenced by the process of decentralization and transformation in the structure of local powers, namely due to the process of federal restructuring (National Administrative Staff College, 2022). This is important because it proves that NPM principles in Nepal are not limited by reforms in central ministries and the civil service only, but influence governance in the sphere of education as well as participation and relationship between local institutions and citizens (National Administrative Staff College, 2022). Hybrid governance. However, recent literature implies that hybridization may become a future for Nepal's administration rather than NPM per se (Bhusal et al., 2023; Adhikari et al., 2026b). Specifically, Bhusal et al. (2023) claim that the nation is moving from NPM towards New Public Governance and e-governance. It is crucial to note that such an idea acknowledges the necessity to incorporate not only efficiency into the nation's public administration but also collaboration, e-governance, and networked governance (Bhusal et al., 2023).

Similarly, the 2026 overview article emphasizes that the nation has selectively adopted NPM, and hence a hybrid approach is more appropriate compared to the market-oriented one (Adhikari et al., 2026b). In turn, it can be linked to the findings obtained in the local government and service-behavior literature. It claims that performance is determined by the organizational capacity and staff behavior within the institutions (Adhikari, 2022; Adhikari et al., 2026a). Therefore, the task of Nepalese reforms is not to decide whether to adopt bureaucratic or NPM practices but to create an effective combination thereof (Bhusal et al., 2023; World Bank, 2024).

Traditional bureaucracy vs. NPM

Both the traditional bureaucracy and NPM constitute different logics of public administration. According to Atreya (2002), the traditional bureaucracy in Nepal is hierarchical and procedural in nature, while NPM focuses on performance, flexibility, decentralization, and service orientation (National Administrative Staff College, 2022; Pfiffner, n.d.). In the case of traditional bureaucracy, the success of administrative activities depends upon rule following and the smooth flow of files, while NPM measures success based on results and customer satisfaction (Pfiffner, n.d.; Paudel, 2013).

A significant distinction is in terms of management style. Bureaucracy relies on top-down management and standard operating procedures, whereas NPM grants managers and local government organizations more discretion in achieving desired results (Atreya, 2002; VU Research Repository, n.d.). Moreover, another aspect of the difference between these two paradigms is the way of accountability. In bureaucracy, accountability is essentially hierarchical and procedural, while NPM requires the achievement of performance- and outcomes-based accountability through reporting, targets, and public auditing (Paudel, 2013; MoFAGA, n.d.).

Another difference relates to the treatment of citizens by these approaches. Citizens in bureaucracies are treated mainly as recipients of standard regulations, while in NPM they are regarded as customers for whose requirements services should be delivered (Adhikari, 2022; National Administrative Staff College, 2022). For this reason, NPM promotes citizen charters, service standards, and frontline responsiveness, especially at the level of local governments (Adhikari, 2022; ADB, 2012).

For Nepal, the literature suggests that both the above logics exist without completely displacing each other. The country has adopted various tools of NPM,

including decentralization, PPP, and performance reporting, but its administrative practices have remained very bureaucratic in nature (Gautam, 2008; Paudel, 2013; Bhusal et al., 2023). Therefore, the public organizations in Nepal have adopted an approach where bureaucracy is dominant, while the language of NPM is used for making reforms (Atreya, 2002; National Administrative Staff College, 2025).

Discussion

In literature from Nepal, the following trend can be observed: NPM has shaped the discourse around reform and its directions; however, NPM has not replaced the traditional administration model in Nepal (Gautam, 2008; Paudel, 2013; Atreya, 2002). Instead, Nepal has introduced a layered and hybrid public management system, which incorporates old bureaucracy, innovations in governance, and managerial practices (Bhusal et al., 2023; National Administrative Staff College, 2025).

The discussion is further supported by the findings about public service and behavior since this paper argues that the quality of the service offered depends on the behavior of officials and administrators during the interaction with citizens (Adhikari, 2022). Therefore, regardless of how sophisticated the tools of reforms may be, their impact depends on frontline behavior (Adhikari, 2022; ADB, 2012).

The general lesson is that Nepal requires a context-driven reform approach. Instead of transplanting NPM, the country should adopt a blend of NPM techniques along with governance reforms, fiscal federalism reform, and e-administration (Bhusal et al., 2023; World Bank, 2024). It is the only practical way to enhance public organizations under the federal structure (Gautam, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

Conclusion

From this systematic review, it can be noted that the adoption of New Public Management practices by the public organizations of Nepal has been selective, inconsistent, and highly constrained by context (Gautam, 2008; Paudel, 2013; ADB, 2012). The NPM tools used in Nepal consist of decentralization, privatization, public-private partnerships, citizen charters, performance-based management, accountability mechanisms, and service standards (MoFAGA, n.d.; Paudel, 2013; National Administrative Staff College, 2022). The implementation of NPM in Nepal has been partial due to low institutional capacity, political instability, bureaucratic resistance, and lack of incentive for frontline services (Gautam, 2008; World Bank, 2024).

The key lesson learned from the literature review is that the performance of local governments, fiscal federalism, and the behavior of frontline service are crucial aspects in the context of reform in Nepal (Adhikari, 2022; Gautam, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Therefore, any effort in public management reform in Nepal must give priority to institutions and behaviors required for achieving performance, rather than slogan importations (Bhusal et al., 2023; Gautam, 2023). In this regard, the Nepali experience can be best described as unfinished reform and needs further institutional changes.

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