

Policy Lab: Efforts and Reflections

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Abstract

The contemporary challenges in the current field of public service of developing countries have led the scholars to explore new methods to increase the efficiency of the service mechanisms. South Asia, in specific, requires new and innovative policy making initiatives that promise much more efficient mechanisms than of the current standing to mitigate the contemporary challenges posed by the governments of the nations of the region. In doing so, a very unique academic program and approach stands out which proposes the integration of academicians and scholarly experts in the actual policy making processes and mechanisms of the governments. Consequently, in 2019 Kathmandu University have launched academic program (Master of Public Policy and Management - MPPM) and researchers, primarily academicians, developed more innovative policy labs where new and in-use policies are analyzed, tested and critiqued upon. This mechanism not only promises a more efficient model of policy making mechanism but also gives the relevant government access to a wider advisory group of experts who analyze, synthesize and suggest enhanced and comprehensive approaches towards policy making. Describing the need for mutual collaboration between academia and government in Nepal, this paper explores the prospects of a living public policy lab at the Kathmandu University School of Management (KUSOM) as public policy think tank and center of excellence for the public policy making mechanisms of the government whilst providing a comprehensive analysis of the current and proposed public policies. KUSOM policy lab aims to generate and disseminate ideas, knowledge and critical understanding for the formulation of an improved policy and its effective implementation to contribute in promoting democratic norms and values, rule of law, social justice and good governance through a critical public policy dialogue. The Policy lab will stimulate a human-centered design thinking approach towards policy innovation and facilitate an advanced exchange of ideas, build trust and become a catalyst for change on both regional and national scales. Using the

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methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis, the paper aims to study the efficiencies of the public policies processing them in a controlled environment in Nepal where the effectiveness of the policies will be tested with and without the intervention of the KUSOM public policy lab to determine the significance of the policy lab in the policy making mechanisms of the government of Nepal.

Keywords: *Public Policy Mechanisms, Challenges in Public Service, Policy Making, Academia and government collaboration, State and Societal Transformation*

1. Introduction

The introduction of the Master of Public Policy and Management (MPPM) program in the Kathmandu University School of Management (KUSOM) has created scope for tackling with wide range of public policy and governance issues and enhancing the knowledge/skill management for effective service delivery of public sector. KUSOM, with the aim to contribute for socio-economic, political and cultural transformation of the state, had pioneered this MPPM program by adhering to the notion of 'University for State Transformation' by committing with the goals and provisions of Sustainable Development Goals (2016-2030), Constitution of Nepal (2015) and "Know your Land, Build Your Country" campaign to create an environment where all policy makers and entrepreneurs can come together and participate in public policy issues for developing the nation in line with national mission of 'Happy Nepali and Prosperous Nepal'. Also the Kathmandu University Vision 2030, also known as the KU Silver Jubilee Initiatives, has prioritized the quality, impact, equity, global engagement, identity and innovation as initiatives for promoting University-Community Partnership for its substantial community engagement. This has led the institution to establish policy lab and policy outreach center for institutionalizing the KUSOM policy into Government System of Nepal and serving as the mainstream policy institution and think-tank focusing on the evidence-based policy and decision making processes.

The concept of policy lab is to create credible platform to learn, teach, support and engage the community people in policy formulation and its effective implementation and develop the universities and their campuses/colleges not only as the ivory tower, but also the agencies to learn from the community, teach and support the community, and enjoy with the community and celebrate the community. It attempts to bridge the gap between the academia and public policy mainstream and undertake policy research on people's concerns and their livelihood through joint collaboration of students, professors and scholars. The KUSOM policy lab and policy outreach center has the similar aim of dealing with public policy issues in Nepal acting as the creative space for specialists, university students and experts to work on analyzing the complex policies, evaluate them and recommend the reforming strategies that best serves the interests of general public. It is to act as the Living lab* in the university (e.g. Harvard University) designed to ensure the scholars and policy activists have the opportunity to tackle socially relevant policy issues that are of interests of stakeholders and develop concrete solutions with a method of policy design based on an approach grounded in the field.'

* *Living Lab practiced by Harvard University, Plymouth University, and American University of Bulgaria, saw the institutions redefine their academic priorities keeping sustainability at the centre of their mission to catalyze and accelerate changes in economic, civic and community settings (Purcell et al., 2019)*

2. Basic Philosophy and Methodology of the Policy Lab

Based on the human-centered design thinking approach, the policy lab would stimulate and facilitate the exchange of ideas, build trust and become catalyst for change in policy making process. Design Thinking is an iterative process in which we seek to understand the user, challenge assumptions, and redefine problems to identify alternative strategies and solutions that might not be instantly apparent with our initial level of understanding. It provides a solution-based approach to solving problems that create positive impact. In addition, human centered design thinking provides creative abilities and a process for transforming difficult challenges into opportunities for design. It involves DDE (Design, Discover and Evaluate), and scale up.

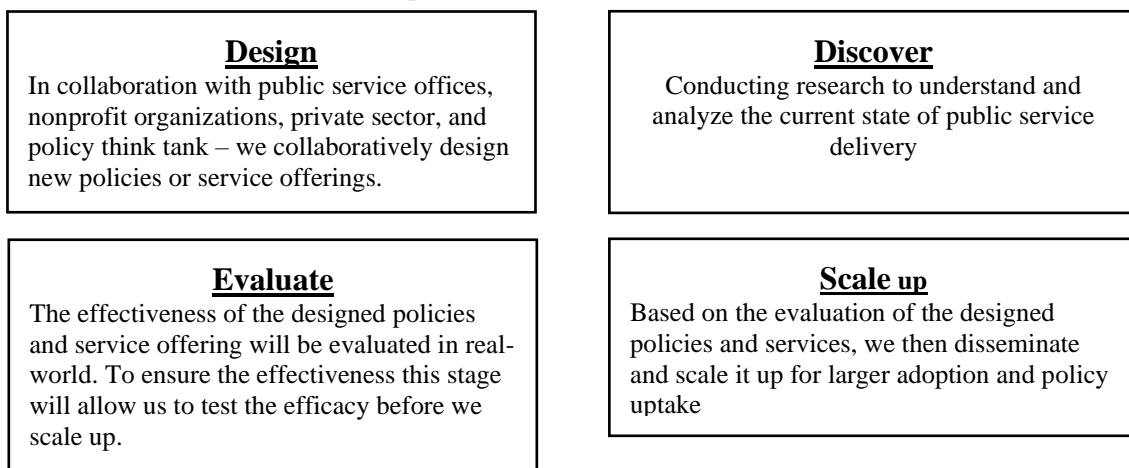
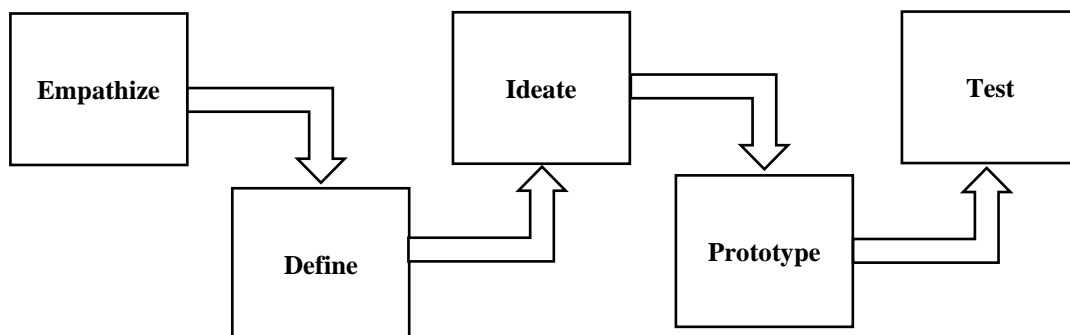
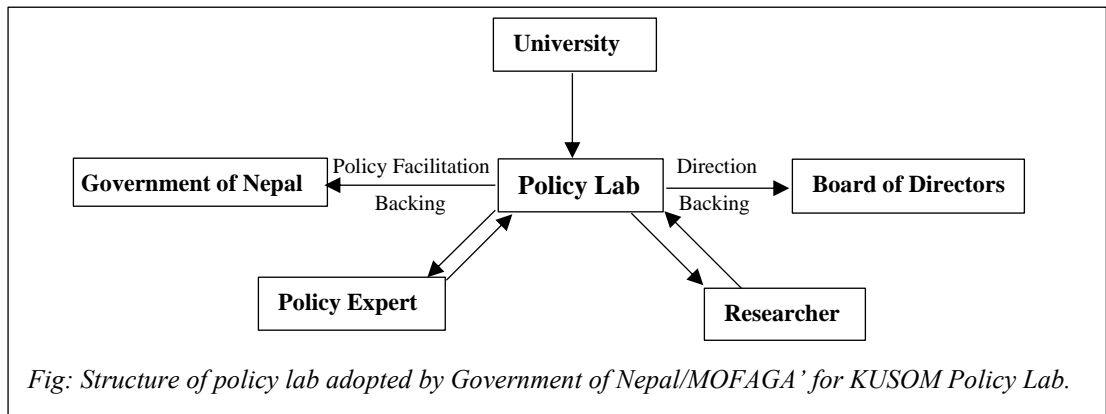


Figure 1: Diagrammatic Framework of KUSOM Policy Lab based on Design Thinking and Human Centric Innovations (Authors own adapted graphic from New York based Public Policy Lab <http://publicpolicylab.org/our-methods/>)

This innovative policy design approach would involve five stages, where we would understand the policy problems in real life situations, define and analyze the issues, generate the solutions, prepare policy draft and test whether it would actually address the identified problem or not.



The structure of the policy lab will be as shown in figure below.



All these components work together for critical and qualitative analysis of the outcomes and the required direction, coordination and facilitation of the lab regarding newly formulated and implemented policies. Ultimately, it would contribute to evidence based and informed policy making and decision making for the larger benefit of people.

3. Global Practices of Policy Labs and their Relevancy to KUSOM Policy Lab

The global practices and instances of the policy labs could be analyzed and lessons could be adapted from them and embedded with KUSOM policy Lab. Some of such instances could be MIT Policy Lab, Harvard EPoD, MIT JPAL Lab and Harrish Policy Lab. All these labs work to collaborate with multiple stakeholders (academia, policy workers, students, governmental agencies etc.) regarding the policy research and contribute to best serve the nation and world in 21st century.

The MIT Policy Lab at the Center for International Studies aims to establish connections between the MIT research and public policy domain and work with the faculty to identify the policy implications of their work and their effectiveness at general public domain. It creates platform to engage the policy makers and other stakeholders in dialogue sessions to create and implement outreach strategies for making the public policy more effective and allows MIT researchers to effectively develop relationships with minimal expenditure of faculty time.

The Harvard EPoD aims in fostering the economic development by bringing together the decision makers and implementing agencies of the policy and engage them along with the academia and policy scholars in deep and rigorous ground embedded researches to design/ re-design and evaluate policy so that it would better serve the disadvantaged and socially backward groups who are at high risk of economic and social vulnerability. This is done through large-scale field experiments and cutting-edge analytical methods and joint identification of policy priorities and solutions with engagement of the policy scholars, practitioners, students and policy-makers who are skilled in evidence based policy design and research and its implementation in the insights of economic development and generation of the new leaders.

The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) works to reduce poverty based on informed and evidence based policy research by conducting randomized impact evaluations and answering the critical questions in the fight against poverty. It investigates world's greatest challenges and effectiveness of social programs regarding poverty reduction and translates research into action, promoting a culture of evidence-informed policymaking around the world. The policy analysis and outreach helps governments, NGOs, donors, and the private sector apply evidence from randomized evaluations to their work, and contributes to public discourse around some of the most pressing questions in social policy and international development. With a focus on learning and innovation, J-PAL works to build the capacity of researchers who produce evidence, policymakers and donors who use it, and advocates of evidence-informed policy.

Similarly, Harrish Policy Lab allows policy students to apply their rigorous core education to real-time public policy challenges thus guiding them to be better-prepared policy professionals with a competitive advantage in the job market. These labs strengthen students' professional experience and skills and provide students with hands-on experience on analyzing, developing, advocating for, and implementing policy in "real-world" contexts focusing on different policy area or set of policy tools. Thus, the future policy practitioners would understand the policy institutions from inside and have close network with policy makers and policy influencers, making them key drivers of policy change in future.

All these instances pave a pathway for KUSOM to engage in different topics and set of tools of policy making and implementing. There are burning issues like caste-based discrimination (casteism), historical inequality and injustice, structural poverty etc. at present context which are hindrances to social development. Taking lessons from these global policy labs, KUSOM Policy Lab could act as the common platform to bring together all the stakeholders and engage them in rigorous policy research, design and implementation so as to address the causes for these issues and create a society free from the impacts of these hindrances. KUSOM Policy lab could act as the liaison between government and social institutions and engage the government agencies and policy makers together with the community and academia to create a space for broad and evidence based policy design on these issues and implement these policy with effectiveness to build a better society with social justice and equality.

4. Institutional Collaboration with Government System

Along with the establishment of the Policy Lab, KUSOM has also signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA) on November 2, 2020 with aim to provide the scholarship for the development of graduates and human resource working for public policy under MPPM program. This was done to promote the research activities and enhance the capacities of the civil service employees at the federal, provincials and local levels and contribute to socio-economic transformation of nation. Also, it is believed to foster the cooperation between ministry and university for expansion, development and utilization of knowledge, skill and technology in public management. This step would also increase managerial capacity of public administration and maintain balance between demand and supply of public policy human resources.

Also, this collaboration will share roles and responsibilities with KU offering skill, knowledge and resources to MoFAGA for production of human resource in public policy and management and the

MoFAGA tailoring the MPPM program to make it responsive to national policy needs and make it more employment oriented.

In addition, different initiatives and collaborations are also being promoted with provincials and local governments for provincial and local development. KUSOM and Kathmandu Metropolitan City-City Planning Commission (KMC-CPC) have agreed upon a memorandum to establish a public - academic partnership framework for contributing to the development and utilization of professional management resources and practices through the use of each other's institutional strengths, experiences and resources that will eventually strengthen management capacity in the country for its social and economic transformation. A detailed plan has been prepared to intervene in the joint areas like public and social policy lab, fellowship for policy engagement, joint researches and studies on policy issues, capacity building of policy makers to sensitize them towards inclusive policy making, focus of long and short term needs of country along with pertinent issues and fostering seminars and advocacy programs regarding public policy management so that the needs of KMC could be addressed through policy research and studies in one hand while the MPPM program of KUSOM would be strengthened and institutionalized on the other. Similar memorandum has also been signed with Lalitpur Metropolitan City by KUSOM keeping the policy research, policy internship/practicum, formulation of local procurement policy and other policy issues of the city.

These instances help the MPPM program and make it responsive to national development by reorienting the policy graduates towards the issues of the very society they would act upon in near future. These collaborations and governmental networks are exemplary for other academic institutions to extend the boundary of academics beyond classical pedagogy to evidence-based analysis and reality experiencing.

The KU, in its effort to institutionalize the public policy and improve the government system of Nepal, has focused in the following outcomes of MPPM program in shorter period of time:

- Reorient the curriculum and the academics as per the immediate and long-term needs going beyond the classical and traditional pedagogy to research, community engagement and extension.
- Strengthen the University- Community relationship through the outreach centers to serve the local community and promote students to be informed members of society through critical analysis, interdisciplinary perspective, team-working and real-world problem solving skills so that they are responsible towards the very community they live and act upon.
- Promote research by collaborating with federal, provincials and local levels through different collaborative actions and establish itself as nation's Research University through innovative approaches like establishment of policy labs, production of policy journals and publications, practicing human centered design thinking and informed decision making.

5. Key Lesson Learnt

The KUSOM, in line with the contemporary needs of the nation and the efforts to institutionalize public policy and management education into government system of Nepal, focuses of the key notion 'University for State Transformation' and attempts to enhance its collaborative actions with the governmental bodies considering the following points:

- National Centre of Excellence in public policy, governance, and management exemplified by the signing of Memorandum of Understanding with Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, Government of Nepal-MOFAGA/GoN for provisioning the Government Scholarship towards KUSOM MPPM.
- Institutionalization of the Public Policy Lab to connect the state representatives and academia planned with support of University Grant Commission and MOFAGA/GoN focusing on generating unorthodox solutions to the existing policy problems through active engagement of different stakeholders and governmental bodies.
- Engagement with international coalitions and collaboration with reputed Universities and policy think tank like Harvard University, MIT JPAL, etc.
- Promoting the concept of being ‘Globally Connected and Locally Rooted’, with the expanded international and governmental networks and sustain the MPPM program at all levels for impactful contributions to public policy and management.
- Vibrant collaboration and partnership with Local Government (Kathmandu Metropolitan City, City Planning Commission and Lalitpur Metropolitan City) for Business Incubation Centre and Policy Outreach Centre for informed decision making
- Establishing the provincial center of excellence in public policy and governance in collaboration with Lumbini Centre for Sustainability and Sustainable Development Lab and existing universities in the province e.g. Lumbini Buddhist University, Nepal Sanksrit University.
- Promotion of the Transdisciplinary Social Policy and Justice Lab to connect social movement actors and academia for discourses on social policy and social justice issues so that they can interact and generate pragmatic solutions for the cause of social justice.
- In changing institutional landscape (emerging role of CSOs-civil society, media, and community based organization), it is an important shift that University is collaborating with the government and community to bring knowledge and wisdom. But at the same time, there will be pros and cons (benefit and threats)
- Becoming the regional center of excellence in South-Asia for Public Policy, Governance and Management as we have had positive indication of this prospect of vibrant collaboration with North-South University, Indian Institute of Management (IIM), MIT J-PAL South Asia, Harvard EPoD South-Asia, University of Bergen, Norway, Harrish School of Public Policy at University of Chicago etc.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The KUSOM MPPM program is an innovative program of KUSOM to internalize the idea of ‘University for State Transformation’ considering various agendas of public policy and public affairs for effective formulation of public policies, their implementation and skill enhancement of the public sectors regarding policy making.

As the MPPM outreach, efforts have been taken to extend collaborative actions with government bodies (MoFAGA, KMC, LMC etc.) to re-orient and institutionalize the MPPM program in the governmental system and contribute to policy making. These efforts such as university policy lab as public policy think and centre of excellence, establishment of endowment fund, student led policy initiatives, business incubation and innovation fund, international coalition and collaboration, community engagement and collaboration with policy think tanks and all three tires of government

institutions can help the academia and the policy graduates to inform, design, improve and test policy and ultimately make government policies better.

The engagement of the policy makers with academia should be fostered and this could be done through unique approaches such as Transdisciplinary nature of academic program (professional program), MPPM outreach dealing outside the academia, Policy Outreach Centre-serving the provincial and local government, community engagement- social transformations (University-Community Partnership), and Serving the mainstream public policy institutions and think tank for informed and evidence-based policy making and decision-making processes.

Based on notion of ‘Globally Connected and Locally Rooted’, the public and policy institutions should be rooted at state and societal level (or grassroots level). Accordingly, the policy lab and policy outreach center based on design thinking and human centric innovation can contribute to serving the mainstream public policy institutions and think tank for informed and evidence-based policy making and decision-making processes. Moreover, the exemplary initiative of community engagement by KU also provides the impetus for societal transformation based on notion of University for Social Responsibility (USR) and University for Societal Transformation (UST). Therefore, an attempt is also being made to establish the Transdisciplinary Social Policy and Justice Lab for addressing the issues of social justice and social policy.

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