
Poverty, Unemployment and Human Development in Nepal: Effectiveness of Economic Reformation Policies of 1990s

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Abstract

Nepal initiated economic reformation measures during late 1980s under the guidance and support of IMF and world Bank when its balance of payment (BoP) turned negative in 1982/83 and remained negative for three consecutive years. The sequential governments after restoration multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990 implemented various measures of economic reformation related to trade liberalisation, investment and foreign exchange regimes, unification of the exchange rate, rationalisation of the tariff structure and tax system, promotion of export and strengthen public expenditure management were introduced. The aim of these reformation policies was to reduce poverty by accelerating economic growth and increasing employment opportunities. This paper attempts to evaluate effectiveness of these economic reformation policies of 1990s in reducing poverty and unemployment and improve human development condition in Nepal. It is descriptive and analytical in nature. Secondary sources of data have been used to carry out this paper. Books, research articles, reports of national and international agencies have been used as secondary sources of data. Descriptive statistical tools have been used to interpret results. This paper finds that reformation policies of 1990s have remained ineffective to reduce poverty and unemployment and improve human development condition at expected level.

Key words: Human development, Economic reformation, Effectiveness, Poverty, Unemployment

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Introduction

Poverty, unemployment and low level of human development have still remained main obstacles in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) for developing and least developed countries by 2030. The pace of global poverty reduction slowed with slow economic growth after 2015 which reveals the fact that the Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating absolute poverty by 2030 remains out of reach. The pace of global poverty reduction was adversely affected by the COVID-19 that resulted in a series of major shocks during 2020-2022. Low-income countries were most affected and have still been struggling to recover. A total of 712 million people globally were living in extreme poverty which was an increase of 23 million people as compared to 2019 (World Bank, 2024). According to ILO, global unemployment rate stood was 4.5 in high income countries and 5.7 percent in low-income countries in 2023 (ILO, 2024). Global unemployment rate was 5.1 percent and Nepal's unemployment rate was 11 percent in 2023 (World Bank, 2024). Nepal's census report 2021 reveals the fact that out of economically active population 70.35 percent people are usually economically active having 6 or more than 6 months' work in a year and 29.65 percent people are not usually economically active having less than 6 months' work in a year (CBS, 2023). The Human Development Report 2023-24 mentions that the trend of losses in human development will be permanent if the global HDI value continues to evolve below the pre-2019 trend, as it has since 2020. Additionally, the trend global HDI value during 1999–2019 was on right track to cross the threshold defining very high human development (a value of 0.800) by 2030—coinciding with the deadline to meet the Sustainable Development Goals but the world is off track now and every region's projected 2023 HDI value falls below its pre-2019 trend (UNDP, 2024). Human Development Index (HDI) and inequality adjusted HDI of the world were 0.739 and 0.576 respectively and the later value declined by 22.1 percent as compared to 2019. HDI and inequality adjusted HDI of Nepal were 0.601 and 0.424 respectively in 2022 and the later value declined by 29.5 percent compared to value of 2019. Nepal ranked in 146th position out of 193 countries in terms of HDI in 2022 (UNDP, 2024).

Nepal initiated economic reformation measures during late 1980s under the guidance and support of IMF and world Bank when its balance of payment (BoP) turned negative in 1982/83 and remained negative for three consecutive years (Acharya, 2000). The sequential governments after restoration multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990 implemented various measures of economic reformation. The international comparisons revealed that these policies remained ineffective in terms of GDP per capita, extent of poverty and human development. 50 percent population below absolute poverty line, 70 percent illiteracy and 50 percent

underemployment level revealed Nepal's unmanageable economic backwardness (Dahal, 1999). The reform programs initiated since 1991 have largely failed to accelerate growth, diversify the economy, stimulate saving and create a basis for sustained growth leading to greater self-reliance and reduction of the poverty of mass (Paudel, 1999). On the contrary, government of Nepal claims that the economic reformation of 1990s helped to transform Nepalese economy from a highly regulated to a more open market-oriented economy creating effective involvement of private sectors in areas of manufacturing, industry exports, education, health, air transport, finance, and power for improving macro-economic fundamentals of the country (NPC, 2003). Although there has been significant increase in health and education facilities in last two decades, Nepal still remains far behind in human development indicators as compared to almost other developing countries (UNDP, 2007). The private sector became unable to increase employment opportunities substantially as it was expected by economic reformation policies because the decade long conflict adversely affected the pace of industrial development in the country (MoF, 2009). Absolute poverty was brought down to 18.1 percent in 14th plan (2016-2019) though its target was to reduce it to 17 percent (Kharel, 2019).

According to the 8th plan, 7.6 percent of the population of 10 years and above was unemployed which was found to be 4.9 percent and underemployment rate was 47 percent in 1997 (NPC, 1997). More than 5 lakh young people are estimated to be added into labour market of Nepal every year. Current statistics on employment status of the country show that 70.5 percent of unemployed reside in urban areas and the unemployment rate is higher among the young population. 38.1 percent of the 15-24 age group and 31.1 percent of the 25 to 34 age group are unemployed (NPC, 2021). The population of productive age (15-59 years) out of total population as per census 2021 is 67 percent and involvement of labour force in formal sector is 36.5 percent (CBS, 2024).

Human development index of Nepal was 0.39 in 1990 prior to implementation of economic reform policies (UNDP, 1990). United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) published the first Nepal Human Development Report in 1998. According to this report, HDI of Nepal was 0.432 ranking in 193 position (Chaudhary, 2000). This change in HDI shows a little bit of improvement. Nepal's HDI was highest in 2019 with 0.611 in last 29 years though there was decline in HDI value in 2020 and 2021 due to adverse effect of Covid-19 (Pyakurel, 2023). Nepal's HDI value changed from 0.395 to 0.601 during the period 1990 to 2022 which shows 52.2 percent change. This reveals the fact that Nepal performed progressively in last 50 years but has trapped under deadlock following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Different empirical studies conducted on poverty, unemployment and human development in Nepal till date have been found to establish linkage between economic growth and poverty and good governance and human development, exploring effectiveness periodic plans in poverty alleviation etc. No study has been found related to study of effectiveness of economic reformation policies in reducing poverty and unemployment and improving human development in Nepal. In this reference, this paper attempts to evaluate in what extend economic reformation policies of 1990s have been effective in reducing poverty and unemployment and improve human development condition in Nepal.

Methods and Procedures

This paper attempted to evaluate effectiveness of economic reformation policies of 1990s in reducing poverty and unemployment and improving human development in Nepal. It is descriptive and analytical in nature. Secondary sources of data have been used to carry out this paper. Books, research articles, reports of national and international agencies available offline and online have been used as secondary sources of data.

Results and Discussions

Economic Reformation Policies of 1990s

Less developed countries began to introduce structural adjustment programmes under the initiatives of the IMF and the World Bank during the 1980s. At the same decade, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was realised that without a decentralised economic structure sustainable development cannot be achieved. Consequence of this realisation was the beginning of the economic liberalisation programmes in less developed countries which acquired momentum in decade of 1990s (Banskota, 1996). A series of macroeconomic reforms started by Nepal in mid-1980s with conditional guidelines under Enhanced Structural Adjustment (ESAP) facilities of the World Bank and IMF. The first elected government after restoration of multiparty system initiated the process of globalisation and economic liberalisation in 1991 onwards (Kharel, 2023). Various economic reforms related to trade liberalisation, investment and foreign exchange regimes, unification of the exchange rate, rationalisation of the tariff structure and tax system, promotion of export and strengthen public expenditure management were introduced. The aim of these reformation policies was to reduce poverty by accelerating economic growth and increasing employment opportunities (NPC, 2003).

Effectiveness of Economic Reformation Policies

Poverty Reduction. Poverty is a condition of human beings not been able to fulfill even their basic needs due to insufficient or low level of income. According to United Nations (1998), “Fundamentally, poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and cloth[e] a family, not having a school or clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one’s food or a job to earn one’s living, not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living on marginal or fragile environments, without access to clean water or sanitation.” 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in September 2015 as development agendas of 2015-2030. The first SDG is no poverty which has target of eradicating extreme poverty from the world by 2030 (UN, 2015).

Poverty reduction has remained the main challenge of the Nepalese government since it started planned development which has always remained at top priority in all plans. Poverty reduction was one of the aims of economic reformation policies of the 1990s. Lack of efficient government mechanism and good governance, political instability and the beginning of a decade long Maoist insurgency since 1996 could not support transforming the national economy for achieving targeted results of poverty reduction. The problem of poverty in Nepal is acute due to low production and productivity, low level of income, lack of skill, employment generation and development of socio-economic infrastructure. Poverty is the cause of poverty in Nepal because poverty starts with low income and causes higher risk of illness, low mobility, limited access to education, information and training, poor health services and ultimately low income again. Reformation policies initiated 1991 onwards failed to accelerate growth needed for reducing mass poverty at targeted level (Paudel, 1999). Government of Nepal claims that absolute poverty continuously decreasing although it has not been reduced at targeted level of periodic plans due to Covid-19 pandemic, domestic natural disasters, global rise in prices basic food grains etc. (MoF, 2024). The following table shows targets and achievements in poverty reduction in different periodic plans.

Table 1***Targets and Achievement of Poverty Reduction in Nepal (1991-2024)***

Periodic Plan	Poverty Level (%)	Target (%)	Achievement (%)
8 th Plan (1992/93-1997/98)	49	42	42
9 th Plan (1997-2002)	42	32	38
10 th Plan (2002-2007)	38	30	31
11 th Plan (2007-2010)	31	24	25.4
12 th Plan (2010-2013)	25.4	21	23.8
13 th Plan (2013-2016)	23.8	18	21.6
14 th Plan (2016-2019)	21.6	17	18.7
15 th Plan (2019-2024)	18.7	9.5	20.3*
16 th Plan (2024-2029)	20.3*	12	--

*Nepal Life Standard Survey (NLSS) 2022-23

Source: National Planning Commission, Nepal (8th to 16th Plan Documents)

Table 1 reveals the fact that different plans after 1991 except the 8th plan have failed to achieve absolute poverty reduction target. Absolute poverty is high in the beginning of 16th plan although the 15th plan targeted it to reduce to 9.5 percent, but it could not be achieved due to Covid-19 pandemic and disruption in global supply chain (NPC, 2024). The following table 2 shows that poverty in rural areas is greater than urban area though there is decrease in rural poverty percentage and increase in urban poverty percentage in recent years. This may be due to migration of people from Mountains and Hills to Terai Madesh and from rural areas to urban areas within Mountain, Hill and Terai regions.

Table 2***Poverty Rate in Nepal (1995-96 to 2022-23)***

Particulars	Year			
	2052-53	2060-61	2066-67	2079-80
Nepal (%)	41.76	30.85	25.16	20.27
Urban Area (%)	21.55	9.55	15.46	18.34
Rural Area (%)	43.27	34.62	27.43	24.66

Source: MoF, Economic Survey 2023-24

Economic reformation policies have been found to be ineffective in reducing income inequality rather there is a rise in income inequality as it is revealed by the following table 3.

Table 3***Gini Coefficient of Nepal (1995-96 to 2022-23)***

Particulars	Value of Gini Coefficient (%)		
	Nepal	Rural	Urban
Nepal Living Standard Survey 1995-96	0.32	0.43	0.31
Nepal Living Standard Survey 2003-04	0.41	0.44	0.35
Nepal Living Standard Survey 2010-11	0.33	0.35	0.31
Nepal Living Standard Survey 2022-23	0.30	0.30	0.29

Source: MoF, Economic Survey 2023-24

Table 3 reveals the fact that income inequality in rural areas is higher than urban areas in the last three decades.

Unemployment Reduction. Unemployment refers to a situation of people willing to work but not having work. It may be full-time unemployment or underemployment. According to ILO (1982), “An unemployed person is a person aged 15 or over who simultaneously meets three conditions: being unemployed for a given week; being available to take a job within two weeks; having actively sought a job in the last four weeks or having found one starting in less than three months”. Unemployment rate refers to the percentage of labour force of a country having no work but available for and seeking work which differs from country to country (World Bank, 2024). Sustainable Development Goals are concerned with promoting the smooth integration of workers into the labour market to ensure their socio-economic development around the globe. SDGs 4 and 8 explicitly refer to youth and their employment (United Nations, 2015).

Unemployment reduction has remained a priority for the Nepalese government in all periodic plans. Economic reformation policies incorporated by sequential governments since 1991 also aimed to reduce unemployment in the country. The objectives of the 8th plan were attaining sustainable economic growth, alleviating poverty and reducing regional disparity. These objectives were underlined as 10 priorities of resource allocation out of which employment generation and human resource development was 4th priority of the plan (NPC, 1992). The 9th plan of Nepal also aimed at increasing income generation and employment

through development of agriculture sector along with cottage, small industries and tourism sector (NPC, 1997). Achievement of rapid, sustainable and employment oriented economic growth was the topmost long-term national strategy of the 15th plan (NPC, 2020). Although employment generation has remained the most important priority of all periodic plans, Economic Survey 2023-24 accepts that the number of youths going abroad for foreign employment is in increasing trend. There are insufficient beneficial employment opportunities in the country due to lack of development of productive industries, construction and tourism sectors etc. at expected level (MoF, 2024).

Table 4***Employment Status of Nepal (Population 10 years and above)***

Description (in percentage)	Nepal Living Standards Survey*			Census
	1995/96	2003/04	2010/11	2021#
Employed population	67.2	74.3	78.3	62.5
Unemployed population	3.4	2.9	1.8	3.4
Not active population	29.4	22.8	19.9	34.3
Labour force Participation	70.6	77.2	80.1	65.5
Labour force worked more than 40 hrs./week	52.9	52.2	46.8	--
Labour force worked less than 40 hrs./week	47.1	47.8	53.8	--
Labour force worked 6 months and more@	--	--	--	93.05
Labour force worked less than 6 months@				6.95

*For past 7 days of the survey

#For 12 months preceding the census

@ Percentage of economically active or employed population

Source: NLSS 1995/96, 2003/04 & 2010/11 and Census 2021

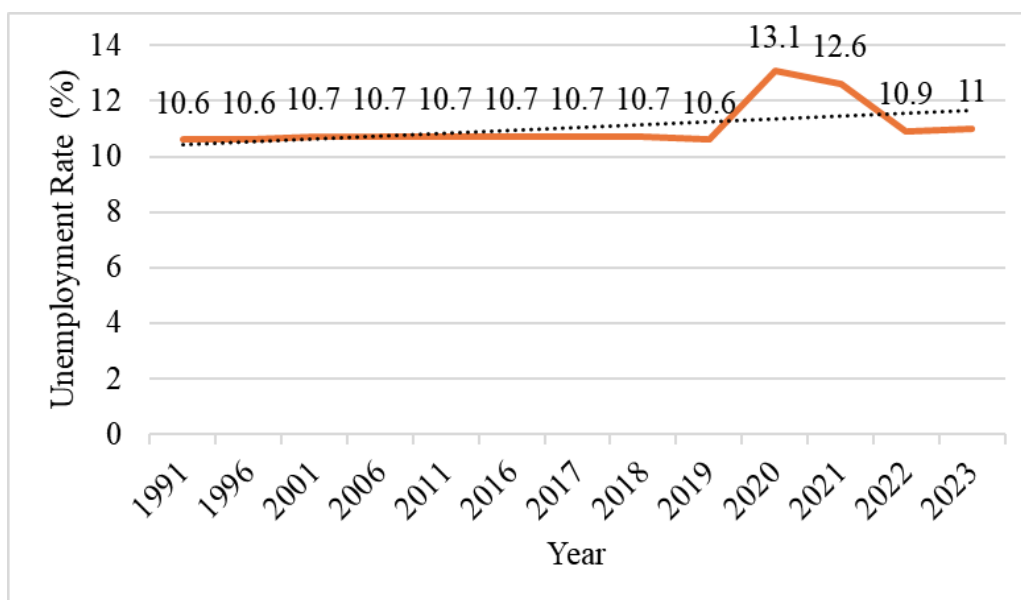
The table 4 reveals data regarding employment status of Nepal since 1995/96. Three Nepal Living Standards surveys since 1995/96 show that labour participation and employed population were increasing whereas unemployed population was decreasing although these surveys show that percentage of labour force worked more than 40 hours is decreasing. These surveys were based on the information from the past seven days preceding the surveys.

On the contrary, census 2021 reveals the fact that the percentage of employed population

has decreased in 2021. Information of this census is based on status of employment 12 months preceding the census. It shows that 62.5 percent of the population aged 10 years and above performed any one economic work any length of time 12 months preceding the census. 34.4 percent neither performed nor searched for any economic work in the same time span. It reveals the fact nearly 35 percent of the population aged 10 years and above were not active. It further reveals the fact that unemployment increased in 2021. The unemployment population percentage also includes people who did not respond to their employment status. The census 2021 further reveals the fact that 93.05 percent of total employed population performed economic work 6 months or more whereas 6.95 percent performed economic work less than 6 months.

Figure 1

Unemployment Rate in Nepal (Population 15 to 59 Years)



Source: World Bank Data 2024

Figure 1 shows that the unemployment rate of population aged 15 to 59 years is almost same till 2019. The unemployment rate is highest in 2020 and begins to fall till 2022. The unemployment rate has increased again in 2023.

Improving Human Development Status. Currently, the level of human development is measured by the Human Development Index (HDI). It was introduced by UNDP at first in its Human Development Report 1990. According to UNDP (2024), “The Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living. The HDI is the geometric mean of normalized indices for each of the three dimensions”.

Life expectancy at birth is used to measure the health dimension, while the mean number of years spent in school for persons over 25 and the anticipated number of years spent in school for children who are ready to start school are used to measure the education dimension. Gross national income per capita is used to measure the standard of living. By posing the question of how two nations with the same level of GNI per capita may have different outcomes in terms of human development, the HDI can be used to challenge national policy decisions. These differences might spark discussion regarding the priorities of public policy. The HDI oversimplifies and only partially represents the scope of human growth. It doesn't address issues like poverty, human security, empowerment, or inequality etc. (UNDP, 2024). There are four classifications of human development index ranking. 0.8 to 1 has been ranked as very high, below 0.80 to 0.70 as high, below 0.70 to 0.55 as medium and below 0.55 as low human development (UNDP, 2024).

Economic reformation policies also 1990s also aimed at improving the status of human development in Nepal. Nepal had HDI 0.278 in 1990 which stood at 17th rank of bottom 44 countries (UNDP, 1990). Nepal ranked in 151 out of 174 countries with HDI value 0.351 in 1995 (UNDP, 1998). Nepal ranked 146 out of 193 countries with HDI value 0.601 in 2022 (UNDP, 2023/24).

Table 5

Status of Human Development Indicators of Nepal

Census Year	HDI	HDI Ranking	Indicators		
			Literacy (%)	Life Expectancy at Birth (years)	GNI Per-capita (2021 Price PPP\$)
1991	0.408	121	32.98	56	890.0*
2001	0.469	126	48.66	63	2421.6
2011	0.471	145	59.63	67	3214.5
2021	0.553	146	76.20	70.5	4660.3

*Current Price of 1991

Source: UNDP, Human Development Report 2023-24 & CBS Nepal, Census 2021

Table 5 shows the changes in HDI and its components during census years since 1991. It reveals the fact that Nepal still stands under medium human development countries although

it was under low level of human development countries till 2011. The HDI ranking of the country has improved by only one rank as its ranking was 145 in 2011 which reached 146 in 2021. The literacy rate of the country has increased by 43.22 percent as it was 32.98 in 1991 which reached 76.20 in 2021. Life expectancy reached 70.5 years in 2021 from 56 years in 1991 in 30 years. Gross National Income (GNI) per-capita at constant international price of 2021 (PPP\$) reached 4660.3 in 2021 from 2421.6 in 2001.

Table 6***Status of Human Development of Switzerland, USA, China and SAARC Countries 2022***

Countries	HDI Value	HDI Rank	Indicators			
			Life Expectancy at Birth	Expected years of Schooling	Mean Years of Schooling	GNI Per-capita 2017 PPP\$
Switzerland	0.967	1	84.3 years	16.6 years	13.9 years	69433
USA	0.927	20	78.2 years	16.4 years	13.6 years	65565
China	0.788	75	78.6 years	15.2 years	8.1 years	18025
Afghanistan	0.462	182	62.9 years	10.7 years	2.5 years	1335
Bangladesh	0.670	129	73.7 years	11.9 years	7.4 years	6511
Bhutan	0.681	125	72.2 years	13.1 years	5.8 years	10625
India	0.644	134	67.7 years	12.6 years	6.6 years	6951
Myanmar	0.608	144	67.3 years	12.1 years	6.5 years	4038
Nepal	0.601	146	70.5 years	12.5 years	4.5 years	4026
Pakistan	0.540	164	66.4 years	7.9 years	4.4 years	5374
Sri-Lanka	0.780	78	76.6 years	13.6 years	11.2 years	11899
World	0.739		72.0 years	13.0 years	8.7 Years	17254

Source: UNDP, Human Development Report 2023-24

Table 6 shows Switzerland stands in 1st in HDI ranking, life expectancy at birth, expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling and GNI per-capita. USA stands in 20th ranks and China stands in 75th rank. Sri-Lanka's standing 78th rank has best human development status among the among the SAARC nations. HDI of Pakistan and Afghanistan belong to low human development level which are below Nepal in ranking. Nepal has medium level of human development status although its status in terms of education and income level are poor.

Table 7***Pace of HDI Growth of Switzerland, USA, China and SAARC Countries 2022***

Country	HDI Value								Average Annual
	1990	2000	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	2022	Growth % (1990-2022)
Switzerland	0.850	0.885	0.940	0.952	0.960	0.957	0.965	0.967	0.40
USA	0.875	0.894	0.916	0.924	0.933	0.923	0.921	0.927	0.18
China	0.482	0.586	0.698	0.741	0.775	0.781	0.785	0.788	1.55
Afghanistan	0.284	0.340	0.449	0.479	0.492	0.488	0.473	0.462	1.53
Bangladesh	0.399	0.491	0.538	0.604	0.646	0.657	0.662	0.670	1.63
Bhutan	-	-	0.582	0.625	0.668	0.675	0.677	0.681	1.32
India	0.434	0.490	0.572	0.619	0.638	0.638	0.633	0.644	1.24
Myanmar	0.333	0.407	0.506	0.557	0.608	0.615	0.599	0.608	1.90
Nepal	0.395	0.461	0.543	0.568	0.598	0.593	0.591	0.601	1.32
Pakistan	0.394	0.434	0.496	0.525	0.537	0.536	0.537	0.540	0.99
Sri-Lanka	0.641	0.689	0.735	0.760	0.775	0.777	0.783	0.780	0.62
World	0.601	0.645	0.698	0.724	0.736	0.735	0.735	0.739	0.65

Source: UNDP, Human Development Report 2023-24

Table 7 shows of human development index and its components of Switzerland, USA, China and SAARC nations. It reveals the fact that China's pace improvement in terms of human development is better than countries mentioned in the above table 7. Pace of improvement of Nepal is not at expected level as there has been 1.32 percent annual growth of HDI in last 32 years. Nepal still has not been able to cross the world HDI value which falls under the high human development category in 2022.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to evaluate the extend of effectiveness economic reformation policies of 1990s in reducing poverty and unemployment and improve human development condition in Nepal. This study has found that these policies have been ineffective in reducing poverty and unemployment and improve human development condition at expected level as human and natural resource potential of the country allows. Poverty level has only been reduced by half in last two decades, unemployment rate under 15-59 age group population is almost same

in the same period and there is slow improvement in human development condition because the country's HDI in 2022 represents it as a medium human development country which is far below the world average HDI which is 0.739 representing high human development countries. Decade long Maoist insurgency that began from 1996 although it has been credited for beginning inclusiveness and bringing voiceless in main stream of development, commission fed development projects, slow completion of strategically important development projects, slow growth of private sector, slow growth of foreign direct investment, decreasing share of capital budget, poor performance of all three levels of governments in spending capital expenditure, the adverse effects COVID-19 that has resulted in a series of major shocks in the country since 2020 and political instability even after promulgation of new constitution of Federal Republic Nepal are some of the causes of ineffectiveness of economic reformation policies at expected level.

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