

Policy Actors, Role, and Gap in the Agricultural Policy Process of Nepal

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Abstract

Purpose: This study identifies the roles and limitations of key policy actors in Nepal's agricultural policy process, aiming to understand how to develop more inclusive and effective policies.

Methods: A qualitative research approach was adopted, using a two-dimensional conceptual model that integrates policy actors with four key policy cycle phases: agenda-setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. This framework, grounded in policy network theory and new institutionalism, helped to assess the analytical, operational, institutional, systemic, and political capacities of actors. Data were collected through an extensive review of literature and fieldwork, including 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 18 key informant interviews (KIIIs) conducted across all seven provinces of Nepal with a diverse range of stakeholders.

Results: Findings of this study revealed that the agricultural policy process in Nepal is highly centralized and dominated by state actors, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development. While non-state actors such as farmers' groups, academia, and civil society are present, but their engagement is limited and often symbolic. Donor agencies, however, exert significant influence by providing technical and financial support. Key gaps identified include weak coordination between different tiers of government, institutional fragmentation, and a pervasive lack of capacity among both state and non-state actors. We argue that these deficiencies contribute to policy failures, as evidenced by the underperformance of major national agricultural strategies.

Conclusion: Both state and non-state actors in Nepal have significant capacity gaps that hinder effective policy implementation. Addressing these challenges requires strengthening institutional structures, fostering collaboration, and investing in the policy capacities of all actors to create a more responsive and sustainable policy environment.

Keywords: Effectiveness; Evidence-based; Policy; Policy gaps, Policy makers

1 Introduction

Public policy is a deliberate course of action adopted by governments to address specific public issues through a structured process of planning and implementation (Arfina Osman, 2017). Hill (2014) defines policy as a comprehensive statement of future goals and aspirations, incorporating both theoretical and practical components to guide desired outcomes. Public policy is also considered as purposeful action taken to resolve a public issue, which necessitates government intervention. Policy encompasses a range of legal instruments, including bills, directives, and guidelines formulated either by parliament or executive bodies through delegated legislation. According to Lowi (1972), public policies can be categorized into four major types: regulatory, distributive, redistributive, and constituent.

The policy process refers to the complete sequence of activities involved in the development, enactment, implementation, and evaluation of public policies (Weible et al., 2012). Scholarly literature generally divides the policy process into five primary stages: (1) agenda-setting, (2)

policy formulation, (3) decision-making, (4) implementation, and (5) evaluation (Howlett and Ramesh., 2003; Sabatier, 2007). While these stages are widely accepted, each country adapts them based on its governance structure, institutional capacity, and socio-political context.

In Nepal, the Policy Research Institute (PRI) has formalized this process by issuing the Public Policy Formulation Directives (PRI, 2021), outlining nine stages that include agenda setting, consultation, drafting, approval, implementation, and evaluation as shown in figure 1.

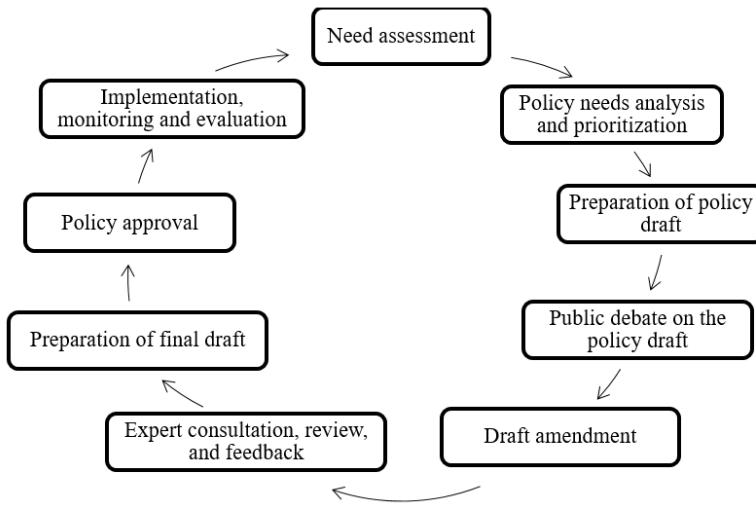


Figure 1: Public Policy Formulation Guidelines produced by PRI, Nepal (Source: PRI, 2021)

These guidelines recognize parliament as the primary body for policy formulation; however, the drafting responsibility typically lies with the concerned ministries. These ministries, leveraging their resources and expertise, consult stakeholders, finalize the draft, and, if required, forward it to the Council of Ministers or register it in parliament. In cases where new policies align with existing laws, they may be enforced by the Council without legislative endorsement. This procedural framework also governs the formulation of agricultural policies.

However, policy-making is not merely a technical exercise. It is a dynamic, multi-actor process shaped by diverse socio-political influences (Dzisah & Kpessa-Whyte, 2024). According to Weible et al. (2012), policy actors—defined as individuals, organizations, or institutions involved at any stage of the policy cycle—play a vital role in shaping policy outcomes. These actors include both state and non-state stakeholders whose contributions are essential to enhance the inclusivity, relevance, and feasibility of policy interventions. Turnbull (2008) reinforces this by emphasizing the need for a collaborative and evidence-informed policy environment.

In developing countries like Nepal, the policy process often lacks participatory mechanisms. Policies are frequently drafted in a top-down manner, driven by bureaucratic decision-making and limited stakeholder engagement (Hudson et al., 2019). This approach, described by some scholars as a "fast and easy" method, excludes civil society, local interest groups, and grassroots actors—thereby weakening the overall policy effectiveness and ownership. Moreover, a lack of transparency regarding who is involved in the policy process, and the criteria for their involvement, further erodes public trust and policy legitimacy.

Agricultural policy in Nepal reflects many of these challenges. Despite being the backbone of the national economy and employing the majority of the population, agriculture suffers from chronic underinvestment, limited technological support, and weak research-extension linkages (Upreti, 2012; Upreti et al., 2023). Historical milestones in agricultural policy include the introduction of improved seeds and fertilizers in the 1950s, the First Five-Year Plan (1956), and landmark legislation like the Land Act of the 1960s. Policies such as the Agriculture Perspective Plan (APP, 1995–2015) and the Agriculture Development Strategy (ADS, 2015–2035) were designed to transform the sector, but their implementation has fallen short of targets (Upreti, 2012; Upreti, 2021; PRI, 2020).

Several factors account for these policy failures. Design gaps—where objectives are vague or unrealistic (Bardach, 2012)—and compliance gaps—where stakeholders fail to adhere to policies

due to lack of awareness or conflicting interests (Müller, 2015)—are pervasive. Additionally, weak institutional capacity among policy actors (government, civil society, private sector) hinders their ability to contribute meaningfully to policy processes (Karo & Kattel, 2018; May et al., 2016; Mukherjee, 2019).

Given these issues, strengthening policy capacity—particularly by identifying the roles and limitations of policy actors—is critical. The involvement of non-state actors in contextualizing policies, providing field-level insights, and supporting evidence-based formulation is especially crucial (Popoola, n.d.). As such, this research seeks to identify the key policy actors in Nepal's agricultural policy process, evaluate their roles, and analyze capacity and engagement gaps. Understanding these dynamics will contribute to developing more inclusive, responsive, and effective agricultural policies tailored to Nepal's unique challenges and opportunities.

2 Materials and methods

This study adopts a simple framework to examine the involvement of different actors in each stage of the policy process. Specifically applied a two-dimensional conceptual model that integrates key policy actors with four major phases of the policy cycle such as agenda setting policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003; Sabatier, 2007). This approach helps to identify who (Actor) is involved, when, and how they influence (Role & Gap) in Nepalese agricultural policy process. Similarly explore their gap by: Analytical capacity included knowledge and evidence uses; operational capacity included set of skills; institutional capacity, and systemic capacity, and Political capacity included political acumen, policy leadership ability and ethical standard of policy actors (Wu et al., 2015).

By plotting each state and non-state actor within this matrix, the policy network theory, at first that illuminates how formal and informal relationships govern the flow of information, resources, and influence among actors, and second, the new institutionalism, which shows how formal rules, organizational structures, and shared norms enable their collaboration during the policy process are basis of the study. This framework and theoretical ground provided a structure for comparing actor's capacity across different levels of government.

In deed this study adopted a qualitative research approach to examine the agricultural policy processes and identify policy actors in the context of Nepal. Data collection included an extensive review of academic literature, government documents, and policy reports to develop a robust conceptual framework. Fieldwork involved 10 Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and 18 Key Informant's Interview (KII) by covering at least one city of all the seven provinces -Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan, Biratnagar, Rupandehi, Surkhet and Dhangadi, to evaluate the practical implications of the policy processes. Semi-structured interviews and KII were held with policy-makers, senior bureaucrats from agriculture ministries, agricultural experts, parliamentarians, farmers' groups, agri-entrepreneurs, local leaders, researchers and other stakeholders to gather in-depth insights. Stakeholder consultation workshops were organized to validate findings and incorporate diverse perspectives. The cross-country visits across Uganda, Rwanda, India and Bhutan also provided insights on the policy actors and their policy process. This methodological approach offered a comprehensive understanding of policy process, policy actors their roles and gaps.

3 Results

3.1 Policy Actors in Nepal's Agricultural Policy Process

The study identified a diverse array of actors involved in Nepal's agricultural policy process, ranging from government agencies to international donors and civil society organizations. However, their roles and influence vary significantly depending on the stage of the policy cycle—formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Government actors dominate the process, particularly the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development (MoALD), the National Planning Commission (NPC), and the Ministry of Finance (MoF). These institutions are central to agenda-setting and policy formulation. While provincial and local governments are constitu-

tionally empowered to frame and implement agricultural policies within their jurisdictions, their actual involvement in national-level policy development remains limited.

Table 1: Roles and levels of engagement of different actors in Nepal's agricultural policy process.

Actor Group	Key Institutions	Role in Policy Process	Engagement Level
Government (central)	MoALD, NPC, MoF	Agenda setting, policy drafting, budget allocation	Very high
Government (local/provincial)	Provincial Ministries, Local Governments	Implementation, limited input in policy design	Low
Donor agencies	FAO, IFAD, ADB, DFID	Technical support, policy influence, financing	High
Political parties	All major national parties	Policy direction, political endorsement	Moderate
Farmers' groups and cooperatives	National Farmer Groups, All Nepal Peasants Federation	Consultation, advocacy	Low
Private sector	Agro-enterprises, FNCCI Agribusiness Division	Market facilitation, lobbying	Low
Academia/research institutions	NARC, Universities	Knowledge generation, occasional consultation	Very low
NGOs/CSOs	LI-BIRD, CEAPRED, etc.	Program delivery, field insights	Moderate
Media	National and local outlets	Information dissemination, awareness	Very low

3.2 Centralized and Politicized Policy Formulation

The policy formulation process in Nepal remains highly centralized. MoALD prepares draft policies with minimal consultation from provincial or local stakeholders. Respondents reported that political appointments and leadership changes often trigger policy revisions, reflecting political motivations rather than data-driven needs. Political parties influence policy direction, but their involvement tends to be ad hoc and driven by short-term political considerations. Stakeholder consultations are conducted primarily as procedural requirements rather than meaningful engagements. One respondent remarked, "Policies change with ministers, not with field realities." Despite federal restructuring, institutional inertia continues to limit the influence of provincial and local actors in shaping national agricultural priorities.

3.3 Donor Influence in Policy Agendas

Donor agencies remain influential, especially in setting reform agendas and providing technical and financial resources. This is most visible in projects funded by FAO, IFAD, and ADB, where donor-funded consultants often draft policy frameworks or strategies. While donor engagement has improved evidence use and facilitated innovation, several respondents noted concerns about overdependence, lack of ownership, and the sustainability of donor-driven policies.

3.4 Exclusion of Non-State Actors and Evidence

Despite the presence of farmer organizations, cooperatives, academic institutions, and civil society groups, their engagement in the policy cycle is limited and often symbolic. Farmers and their networks are rarely involved in agenda-setting or review processes. Respondents expressed that participation mechanisms, such as stakeholder workshops, are conducted perfunctorily and without follow-up. Academics and researchers, though essential for evidence-based policy development, are underutilized. One academic stakeholder said, “Policymakers don’t ask for data; they ask for endorsements.” There is little integration of research findings into policy design, and field-based data are often overlooked in favor of political or donor preferences.

3.5 Weak Coordination and Institutional Fragmentation

Coordination among actors is one of the most critical gaps in Nepal’s agricultural policy process. Ministries operate in isolation, and there is minimal horizontal collaboration between MoALD, the Ministry of Environment, or the Ministry of Land Management. Similarly, vertical coordination—between federal, provincial, and local levels—is weak.

The study found that there are no established mechanisms for systematic multi-actor engagement across government tiers or between sectors. As a result, policies often lack alignment, leading to fragmented implementation. Duplication of efforts, inconsistent messaging, and inefficient use of resources were recurring themes in stakeholder interviews.

3.6 Capacity Constraints at Sub-National Levels

Provincial and local governments, though constitutionally mandated to design and implement agricultural policies, face significant capacity challenges. Respondents from these levels reported a lack of technical expertise, human resources, and financial autonomy.

Local officials are often tasked with implementing policies they had little or no role in formulating, which leads to poor ownership and ineffective delivery. Limited digital infrastructure and weak data systems further compound these challenges, making evidence-based planning and monitoring difficult.

3.7 Stages of the Policy Cycle: Gaps in Participation

The involvement of various actors differs across policy stages. Table 2 summarizes the observed trends.

Table 2: Actor participation across stages of the agricultural policy cycle.

Actor Group	Agenda-Setting	Policy Formulation	Implementation	Monitoring & Evaluation
Central Government	High	High	Moderate	Moderate
Local Governments	Low	Low	High	Low
Donors	Moderate	High	High	Moderate
Political Parties	High	Moderate	Low	Low
Farmers/Cooperatives	Low	Low	Moderate	Low
Academia	Low	Low	Low	Low
NGOs/CSOs	Low	Low	High	Moderate
Media	Low	Low	Low	Low

Figure 2 visually represents the perceived influence of various actors based on their access to decision-making and ability to shape outcomes. Government ministries, particularly MoALD and NPC, occupy the most influential space, followed by donor agencies. Non-state actors, including farmer groups, cooperatives, and academia, lie at the periphery, with limited access and influence.

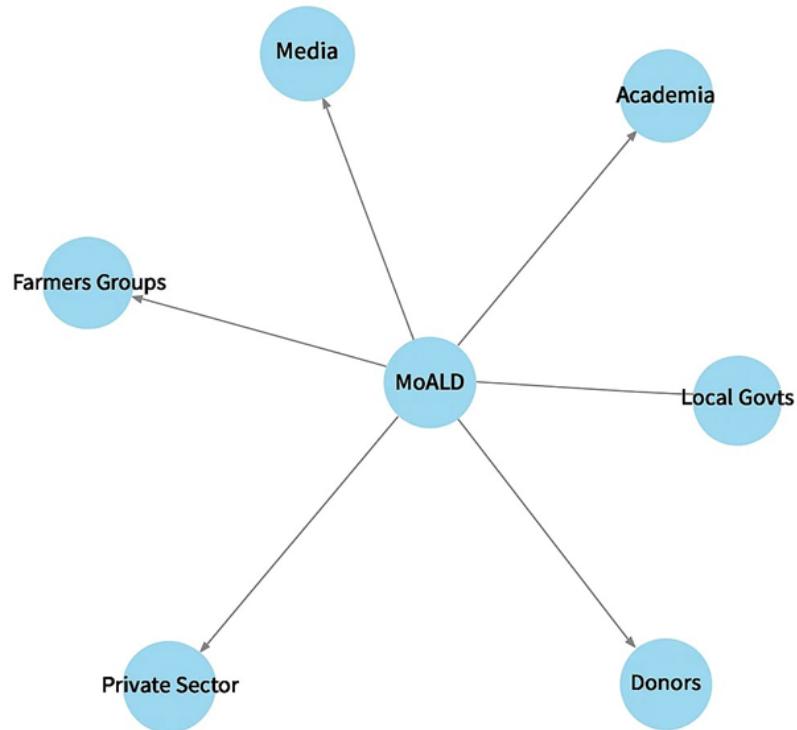


Figure 2: Actor Network in Nepal's Agriculture policy process.

4 Discussion

Public policy is broadly understood as a deliberate course of action adopted by governments to address public issues through structured planning and implementation (Osman, 2017). Hill (2014) highlights policy as a comprehensive statement of future goals. Policies are thus enacted through multiple legal instruments—laws, directives, guidelines—by either legislative or executive authority, and can be classified as regulatory, distributive, redistributive, or constituent (Lowi, 1972). Equally important is the policy process, which comprises agenda-setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation (Howlett et al., 2009; Sabatier, 2007; Hill, 2014). In Nepal, this sequence has been further formalized by the Public Policy Formulation Directives of the Policy Research Institute (PRI, 2021), which articulate nine stages from agenda setting to evaluation.

Despite such frameworks, this study reveals that Nepal's agricultural policy process remains highly centralized and state-dominated. As in democratic systems broadly, the separation of powers assigns the legislature lawmaking functions, the executive implementation authority, and the judiciary oversight roles (Wu et al., 2015; Heywood, 1997; O'Connor & Sabato, 2025). However, in practice, Nepal's executive—particularly the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development (MoALD), National Planning Commission (NPC), and Ministry of Finance (MoF)—monopolizes policy design and drafting. Bureaucrats use technical expertise to prepare drafts, while political leaders provide legitimacy and consensus. Yet, stakeholder consultations are often superficial, and policies rarely undergo broad-based discussion, confirming earlier critiques of top-down processes in developing countries (Hudson et al., 2019).

The study further demonstrates that while Nepal's federal system constitutionally grants powers to provincial and local governments (Smith, 2023), their role in agricultural policy remains constrained. Local governments mostly execute centrally designed policies with limited ownership, exacerbated by resource and capacity deficits. Weak vertical coordination undermines consistency across governance tiers, while horizontal coordination across ministries is minimal. These gaps reflect systemic fragmentation and duplication, limiting policy coherence.

Non-state actors—including farmers' groups, cooperatives, NGOs, civil society, academia, and

media—remain peripheral despite their potential to enhance evidence-based policymaking (Turnbull, 2008). Farmers are rarely involved in agenda-setting, while universities and research institutions contribute little to policy design, partly due to weak funding and limited integration of research into decision-making (Dhakal, 2022). Similarly, despite extensive resources, institutions such as NARC and NAST provide insufficient empirical inputs into policymaking. As a result, policy cycles fail to reflect grassroots needs or scientific evidence.

Donor agencies such as FAO, IFAD, and ADB, by contrast, wield disproportionate influence, shaping agendas through financing, technical expertise, and often drafting key strategies. While such involvement has promoted innovations, it also risks dependency and undermines local ownership. Several respondents highlighted that policies often reflect donor priorities rather than contextual realities—echoing critiques of externally driven policymaking (Dzisah & Kpessa-Whyte, 2024).

Agricultural policies illustrate the consequences of these dynamics. The Agriculture Perspective Plan (APP, 1995–2015) aimed to boost agricultural growth by two percentage points but failed due to design flaws, overdependence on rainfall, and weak implementation (Upreti, 2012; Agriculture Development Strategy, 2015). Its successor, the Agriculture Development Strategy (2015–2035), also underperformed, with growth falling short of targets (Palikhe & Adhikari, 2023). These outcomes reflect what Bardach (2012) terms “design gaps” and Müller (2015) identifies as “compliance gaps”.

Overall, this study highlights a policy system characterized by centralization, weak coordination, donor dependency, and exclusion of non-state actors. Addressing these limitations requires strengthening the analytical, operational, institutional, and political capacities of policy actors (Wu et al., 2015), while institutionalizing mechanisms for inclusive participation. Doing so can foster more responsive, evidence-informed, and sustainable agricultural policies tailored to Nepal’s socio-political realities.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of Nepal’s agricultural policy process revealed persistent challenges rooted in the limited policy capacity of both state and non-state actors. Development has historically depended on governments’ ability to design and implement effective public policies. However, for agricultural policies in Nepal, weaknesses in institutional frameworks, lack of coherence and consistency, and insufficient use of evidence-based approaches have constrained progress. State policy actors, despite being central to the process, face notable gaps in technical expertise, analytical skills, operational efficiency, and political negotiation. These deficiencies have weakened their ability to ensure effective policy implementation and sustain long-term outcomes in the agricultural sector.

Equally important are the roles of non-state actors—farmers, civil society, academia, media, and trade unions—whose contributions to agricultural policymaking remain underutilized. The study highlights that these actors also face significant capacity gaps, particularly in knowledge, organizational strength, and strategic engagement. Their limited participation has resulted in a policy environment that is often top-down, lacking inclusivity and grassroots perspectives. When non-state actors are active, coordinated, and empowered, they not only amplify public interests but also complement state efforts by promoting transparency, inclusivity, and evidence-based decision-making.

Addressing these gaps requires a multi-pronged approach: strengthening institutional structures, fostering trust among actors, promoting collaboration, and investing in targeted capacity development. By enhancing the performance, roles, and responsibilities of both state and non-state actors across operational, technical, and political domains, Nepal can lay the foundation for more coherent, participatory, and sustainable agricultural policies that effectively support rural livelihoods and national food security.

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Author's contribution

Y. Humagain was involved in conceptualization, methodology design, data collection, analysis and draft preparation. B. Upreti was involved in supervision, methodology validation, and draft review. D. Devkota was involved in supervision, day to day guidance, revision of final draft. Y. Mgaya was involved in supervision and draft reviews. R. Mishra was involved in supervision, methodology validation, and draft review.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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