

The Study of Performance of Provincial Governments: Does Frequent Transfer of Officials Matter?

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Abstract

Nepal is federal country with three levels of governments, viz. federal, province and local. Among these, province government is new structure and its performance is important for the stability of province and the federal system. The performance of province is mainly determined by the frequency of transfer of top level bureaucrats and the availability of the staffs in province ministry. This study establishes the relation between frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats, availability of staffs and the performance of province government further digging out other factors affecting the performance of province government. The purpose of the study is to examine data from secondary sources, focus groups, field observations, interviews with key informants, and other sources that includes both quantitative and qualitative data. The study established the relation between performances of province government with frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats of province ministries of Lumbini Province. There has been effect of such frequent transfer of the top level bureaucrats in the performance of Lumbini Province government to the large extent in planning, implementation, resource management, risk management, liability management, accountable management, effectiveness of office, coordination among other staffs and offices, and policy making. But the impact on daily office operation has been found very low. Federal and province governments are suggested to reduce the frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats and manage the full staffing condition of province ministries.

Keywords: Provincial government, performance, frequent transfer, bureaucracy

Introduction

Nepal is a country of geographical, cultural and lingual diversity. Ever since King Prithvi Narayan Shah unified the country, Nepal has operated under a unitary form of government. In the course of managing and implementing development agenda, federalism has been found an apt practice for

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Nepal. So, the nation has changed from a centuries-old unitary system of governance to a federal structure with the goal of equitable and inclusive development in all geographic regions of the nation and the vision of proper distribution and use of resources by reducing economic, social, and religious prejudice. Federalism is a form of government where a central authority and different tiers of government share power, either equally or unequally. A country under federalism has two levels of government: a federal government at the federal level and additional provincial or municipal governments at the state and local levels. According to Bhattachan (2003), federalism is the practice of the system which guarantees freedom, equality, prosperity and human rights curing the problems like inequality and imbalance. The history also shows that the government of Licchavis, Bajjis, Videhas and Mallas etc. are in the form of confederation during the 4th century BC (CA, 2009). The 240-year monarchy in Nepal was officially ended in 2063 with the adoption of the 5th amendment to the interim constitution (Reliefweb, 2007). It was the first official document to refer to Nepal as a Federal Democratic Republic nation. According to the concept of a federal system, after the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), Nepal has been divided into 7 provinces, 77 districts and 753 local levels. Hence, there are 753 local governments, 7 provincial governments and a central 'federal' government.

The chief minister heads the provincial government. Six ministers accompany the chief minister from ministry of Internal Affairs and Laws, ministry of Economic Affairs and Planning, ministry of Industries, Tourism, Forest and Environment, ministry of Social Development, ministry of Physical Development and ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives. The office of Chief Minister is supported by Principal Secretary and other ministries are supported by secretaries as head of the Administration. These secretaries and principal secretaries are appointed from the pool of senior federal bureaucrats and are accountable towards federal governments. But as the chief of provincial bureaucracy, they have to participate, energize and implement the plans, policies, laws and other development agenda of provincial governments. The availability and stability of such secretaries and principal secretaries is crucial for the development, implementation and monitoring of plans, policies, laws and public service delivery of the provincial government. But, while reading the daily national newspapers and discussion of/with ministers and chief ministers of province, it is found that there has been frequent shuffling and or transfer of such "top level bureaucrats" in the province ministries. Such shuffling may be due to conflict of interest or any other reasons. DRCN (2019) points out that the provincial governments are unable to function as expected because of the frequent transfers of employees and also focus about the stability of the employees. Hence, it is immensely important to study the impact of frequent transfer of secretaries in provincial level.

The main purpose of this study is to explore and compare the impact of frequent transfer of top-level bureaucrats of provincial government in the area of public service delivery, policy decision making and planning and programming. For this, the study only focuses on frequent transfer of top-level bureaucrats (principal secretaries and secretaries) and effects caused on service delivery, policy decision making, planning, and programming of provincial government. Other probable effects will not be analyzed in this study. In addition, this study focuses on Lumbini province only and the political economy of frequent shuffling and transfer of such top-level bureaucrats of provincial government is beyond the scope of this study.

Literature Review and theoretical background

Measurement of Government Performance

It is not simple to assess government performance. Although evaluating government performance is popular, there doesn't seem to be agreement on what constitutes "performance," and there are numerous approaches, techniques, and methodologies available for evaluating a government agency's "performance" (Trivedi, 2017). He also makes the following three frequently used classifications of agency performance management system: a) partial versus comprehensive; b) ex-ante versus ex-post; and c) managerial versus agency performance measurement systems.

According to Rahman & Mohtar (2020), the most popular definition of performance measurement is the systematic process of gathering, evaluating, and reporting data to management. It may also be thought of as the process of gauging prior performance.

The five criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of public reporting and government service delivery are made clear in the 2020 Australian Government Productivity Commission Report on Government Services. The report claims that by aiding in the clarification of government goals and duties, encouraging analysis of the connections between agencies and programs, enabling governments to coordinate policy within and across agencies, increasing performance transparency by educating the public, giving governments performance indicators for policies and programs over time, and promoting continuous performance improvements in service delivery and effectiveness by emphasizing innovations and improvements, it creates incentives for better performance.

According to the study carried out on civil servants in India (Marianne Bertrand, Robin Burgess, Arunish Chawla, and Guo Xu, 2020), the civil servants towards the time of their retirement, who are expected to retire without their promotion (stated as "glittering prize" by authors), may have lower motivation preventing to exert enough effort for performance. Jiang, J. (2018) argued, by examining economic performance of local governments in China, that government performance can be improved by using patron–client relations that helps to resolve principal–agent problems that prevails in political hierarchies. Another study by Rivera (2020) shows that party alignment and emergence of career concerns plays an important role for bureaucratic behavior and their performance.

Importance of Government Performance Measurement

While referring to the entrepreneurial government, to carry out the business in government sector also, the individual performance is considered an important factor. Because of the paradigm shift, both public and private sectors are now treated like their business counterparts. According to Rahman & Mohtar (2020), the governments are under a constant pressure to be responsive and accountable to not just the departmental head, ministers and the parliament, but also to all of its clients involved.

No matter how they are owned, all organizations, according to Hoque (2012), must create metrics or indicators to evaluate their performance. These metrics are also supposed to inform business managers' choices regarding employee incentive or reward programs and the organization's ability to express its expectations for employee behavior as well as how it expects it to be observed and assessed.

As to Joseph Wholey (1997), the current focus on performance assessment in government agencies and nonprofits is in reaction to the demands of citizens worldwide for evidence of the effectiveness of programs. In support of their performance monitoring argument, Wholey and Harry (1992) note that systems are beginning to be used for more than just employee motivation and government service and citizen-government communications; they are also being used for budget formulation, resource allocation, external accountability, and performance contracting. According to Wholey and Newcomer (1997), performance evaluations can be carried out more often to enhance management and program efficacy or yearly to increase public accountability and policy decision-making.

According to Harty et al. (1990), the Governmental Accounting and Standards Board recommends that performance measures be used in the following ways: establishing goals and objectives; organizing program activities to achieve these goals; assigning resources to these programs; keeping an eye on and assessing the outcomes to ascertain whether the goals and objectives are being met; and adjusting program plans to improve performance.

According to Ammons (1995), local government performance measurement has made the promise that more complex measurement systems will support management procedures, improve the decision-making process for allocating resources, strengthen legislative oversight, and boost accountability.

Performance measurement, according to Osborne and Peter (2000), gives authorities the power to hold companies accountable and impose performance-related penalties. It gives managers the information they need to enhance performance and assists citizens and consumers in evaluating the value that government generates for them.

According to Behn (2003), managers of public agencies may utilize performance assessment as part of their overall management strategy to assess, regulate, budget, inspire, promote, celebrate, learn, and become better.

Government Performance Evaluation

It appears that one of the most crucial topics in contemporary public administration is the assessment of government agencies' performance. (Suleimenova, Kapoguzov, Kabizhan, & Kadyrova, 2018). Leoveanu (2016) asserts that a crucial component of the New Public Management is the performance evaluation of government entities. Performance assessment is viewed as a method of quantifying the efficacy and performance of activities, and it is a component of the total performance management system (Salem 2003; Hansen 2017). Although there are several other contributing elements, Talbot (2010) claims that the assessment system's adoption aids in improving government agencies' real performance.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Management of government performance is intricate. Decision-makers in government have access to a wide variety of data sources. According to Parmenter (2012), performance management systems have many different measurement indicators, such as Key Performance Indicators (KRIs) that assess key performance outcomes, Result Indicators (RIs) that assess activities, Performance Indicators (PIs) that identify areas for improvement, and KPIs that assess how performance can be significantly improved.

Creating meaningful KPIs may be quite difficult. A performance indicator, also known as a key performance indicator (KPI), is a kind of performance evaluation that is used to increase the effectiveness and accountability of government, according to Carol (1990). Decisions may occasionally be made based on inaccurate or inadequate information, which makes forecasts unreliable and increases the possibility that an unexpected outcome may arise from the choice chosen. Thus, it's essential to use performance indicators correctly to minimize risk and prevent errors of this kind (Dolence, 1990). According to Austin (1996), when workers adhere to the prescribed metrics at the price of the true quality or worth of their job, KPIs can potentially result in perverse incentives and unforeseen repercussions.

The Study

Taking into account the goals, research question, and theoretical framework of the study, a research design that includes desk review, key informant interviews, group discussions, and field observation technique has been chosen. The literature review related data, transfer related data from annual reports and documents from the province ministries was collected by desk review. Similarly, information related to the performance and factors affecting the performance of the top level bureaucrats was collected during key informant interview and group discussion. In this study, attempt is made to analyze and interpret the collected data, to answer the principal research questions and fulfill the objectives of the study, within the principles of government performance. The framework of analysis is based mainly on the Constitution of Nepal as the foundation, within and beyond the principles of public service delivery, good governance and federalism. As the study is primarily based on the analysis of the effect of frequent transfer of top level officials of province government, qualitative approaches with analysis of documents is best suited and for the statistical

analysis, quantitative analysis has also been used. Interview and reports are analysed using qualitative approach whereas frequency and tendency of frequent transfer are analyzed using quantitative approaches. Information is gathered using both primary and secondary data gathering techniques. Semi-structured interviews with top-level officials (secretaries, principal secretary, and others) are used to gather primary data. Separate group discussion has been scheduled in each ministry with 5-7 officials considering the GESI lens. The interview is made in Nepali Language for simplicity which is translated in to English latter during data coding. Secondary data is collected from various sources such as annual reports, newspapers/media reporting, project documents etc. Approved number of officials, recruited (appointed) and vacant number has also been collected as secondary source of information. According Creswell (2009), researchers have a responsibility of protecting research participants and the promotion of integrity of the research. So, prior permission with participants to carry out interview was taken and also explained that the information obtained is used only for the research purpose. They received clear information about their voluntary participation in the study and their right to discontinue participation at any time throughout the interviews if they felt uncomfortable. Additionally, they received clear information regarding their voluntary engagement and the non-manipulation of their data. Similarly, their privacy is not disclosed in this report. All the steps and consideration has been made to preserve quality concern on the study report.

Findings and Discussions

Number and Frequency of Transfer of Top Level Officials

As per the requirement of the research objectives, the analysis of the number and frequency of the transfer of top level officials has been carried out. The number of transfer and their average stay in the concerned ministry is provided in Table 1. This statistics cover the data from the date of first appointment of Principal Secretary and Secretaries to the last date of observation 15th Falgun 2077. Furthermore, if the last official in the list is in his/her position for less than 6 months or yet in position during field visit, then it is not included for counting the average tenure.

Table provided below clearly indicates that average tenure of the Principal Secretary/Secretary is found to be less than 1 year (except in Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives) and another interesting fact found is the third (excluding the exception of Second *Nimitta Sachib* of Ministry of Physical Infrastructure Development) the third tenure is more stable and is around 1 year tenure. This is because the government of Nepal has made mandatory provision of minimum 1 year province level experience for joint secretary (Secretary of province) to be eligible for promotion in Secretary. The minimum tenure of province secretary is 5 months and maximum tenure is 18 months. In an average tenure of the principal secretary and secretary, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Law has approximately 8 months, four ministries (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Planning, Ministry of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment, Ministry of Social Development and Ministry of Physical Infrastructure Development) has 9 months, Office of the Prime Minister and

Council of Ministers has 12 months and Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives has 13 months.

Table 1: Number of Principal Secretary and Secretaries and Their Tenure

S.N	Ministry	No. of Principal Secretary/Secretary	Duration (in months)	Average (in months)	Remarks
1	Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers	1	6	11.67 (Approx. 12)	The fourth is excluded from calculation.
		2	13		
		3	16		
		4*	2		
2	Ministry of Internal Affairs and Law	1	6	7.8 (Approx. 8)	
		2	5		
		3	10		
		4	9		
		5*	9		
3	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Planning	1	13	9	
		2	5		
		3	11		
		4*	7		
4	Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives	1	15	13	
		2	6		
		3*	18		
5	Ministry of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment	1	6	9.25 (Approx. 9)	
		2	13		
		3	12		
		4*	6		
6	Ministry of Social Development	1	9	9.25 (Approx. 9)	
		2	10		
		3	12		
		4*	6		
7	Ministry of Physical Infrastructure Development	1	8	9	Second is not included in calculation.
		2	1		
		3	10		
		4	12		
		5*	6		

* Indicates that the Principal Secretary/Secretary was on tenure during field visit.

While taking consideration of the performance of the province, it is very difficult to relate the frequency of transfer of top officials with performance of the province government, ministries and other government agencies. But indirectly, during Key informant's interview and focus group discussion, all officials participating came on common consensus that such frequent transfer of top officials has adverse effects on efficiency and effectiveness on designing, planning and implementation of policies, rules, projects and other regular service delivery.

Status of Availability of Officials in Province Government

The study also revealed that beside the frequent transfer of top officials (bureaucrats) of province government, the availability of the other officials is also crucial determining the performance of the province government. Table 2 presents the status of availability of officials in province government. Here, Ministry of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment contains total number including ministry itself and its department and other offices whereas other ministries contain the status of officials within ministry only.

Table 2: Status of Availability of Officials in Province Government

Ministry	Approved	Available		Vacant		Availability Ratio
		No.	%	No.	%	
Ministry of Internal Affairs and Law	57	38	67	19	33	2/3
Ministry of Economic Affairs and Planning	48	26	54	22	46	½ (Approx.)
Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture and Cooperatives	74	44	60	30	40	3/5
Ministry of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment	1333	986	74	347	26	¾ (Approx.)
Ministry of Social Development	54	38	70	16	30	7/10
Ministry of Physical Infrastructure Development	56	34	60	22	40	3/5

While considering the approved and available number of staffs in each ministry, no any ministry is fully equipped with the approved number of *darabandi*. Comparatively, Ministry of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment has highest percentage (74%) of available officials whereas Ministry of Economic Affairs and Planning has lowest percentage (54%) of available officials. According to the officials, such condition of the ministry has created the environment where officials have to work under pressure due to which they can not complete the assigned work either as in expected quality or in designated time. Delay in completion of work is being regular, according to them. To avoid such situation and increase the performance of the province ministry have hired the temporary and contract staffs. According to their record, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Law has 33%, Ministry of Land Management has 12%, Agriculture and Cooperatives and Ministry of Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment has 9% of staffs either temporary or in contract out of

total approved *darbandi*. The study further revealed that, even though ministry has managed staffs as mentioned above, all seats need to be full yet. Hence, despite of such, these ministries, based on the perception of officials included in Key informant's Interview and Focused Group Discussion, are still in under performance. So, understaffing might be another reason affecting the performance of the province government.

Perception of Officials towards Government Performance

Based on the studied literatures, authors have prepared 10 indicators to determine the Province Government Performance. These indicators are: Planning, Implementation, Resource management, Risk Management, Liability Management, Accountability Management, Effectiveness, Coordination among others, Policy making and Daily office operation.

Seven group discussions and 17 key informant's interview also included a perception survey containing these 10 indicators and 5 options in scale of 0 – 4. The survey was carried out in individual basis and latter verified with group discussion. There was slight deviation in the response in group from the individual response. But for the purpose of this study, the individual response provided by 52 respondents on the effect of frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats has been tabulated in table 3.

Table 3: Perception of Officials towards Government Performance

Factors	Very Large Extent (4)	Large Extent (3)	Moderate (2)	Very Less (1)	No effect (0)	Total
Planning	37	13	2	0	0	52
Implementation	32	15	3	2	0	52
Resource management	35	10	7	0	0	52
Risk Management	42	7	2	1	0	52
Liability Management	40	4	6	2	0	52
Accountability Management	33	10	8	1	0	52
Effectiveness	30	13	7	2	0	52
Coordination among others	42	9	1	0	0	52
Policy making	34	10	6	2	0	52
Daily office operation	1	3	7	9	32	52

The above perception table clearly revealed that among 10 factors causing the effect on the performance of province government, nine factors are highly important whereas daily office operation has less effect due to the frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats. Out of 52 respondents, 32 said there has been no effect on daily office operation due to frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats. Whereas in remaining nine factors, no one agreed that there will be no effect due to frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats. Majority of them agreed that there will be effect on very large extent due to frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats on these nine factors. Among these nine factors having effect on very large extent, risk management and coordination among others have higher value (40) and effectiveness has lower value (30). This supports that the effect on the government performance and frequent transfer of top level of bureaucrats is deeply related.

Other Factors Affecting on Performance of Province Government

Beside of individual perception survey, the studied carried semi structured interview and group discussion to identify other factors affecting the performance of the province government. Even though the effect caused by these factors cannot be quantified and claimed as they have high effect on performance, these factors also cannot be excluded from the study, hence, discussed hereunder.

Newly Established Structure and Working on Odd Situation

It has been the fact that the province governments were formed after the election only some 3 years ago. After the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal, province governments were structured according to the constitutional provision of federal system governance. This is very new structure being functional from 3 years ago, so, many functional areas are yet to be clear. Similarly, these governments are functional in very odd situation where all political, social and functional structures are in transition state. The focus group discussion and key informant's interview also argued about this factor associated with the poor performance of the province government.

Interest of Bureaucrats and Political Leadership

The study revealed that another factor affecting the performance of province government is interest of both political and bureaucratic leadership. Top level bureaucrats are selected and designated for province government by the federal government. Hence, their accountability not only remains towards province government but also remains towards federal government. Another important fact is that the career growth of such bureaucrats is solely dependent on the federal government. Interestingly, many such officials, according to most of the respondents, have very less interest to remain in province government for longer duration and they are always intended to transfer from province government as early as possible. Hence, they do not have more interest for improving their own and province government performance, when they are at province. Similarly, political leadership, according the study, also neither have powerful control over bureaucrats nor play the influential role to engage and motivate the bureaucrats to perform as per requirement making the performance of the province government better. Similarly, there is lack of consistency of policy and

programmes with political wills which further supporting the temporary mindset of designated bureaucrats. The political leadership of the province level failed to institutionalize the province governance system (function) which failed to make bureaucrats accountable towards province government.

Systematic Error

The constitution of Nepal has provisioned the power and authority of each level of governments scheduled in schedules 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 consisting both concurrent and shared powers. But there has been lack of role clarity between federal and province level. Lack of coordination between federal and province governments for functional assignment has been causing the low performance of the province government, according to the focus group discussion. Similarly, centralized mentality and lack of proper transition management plan, failing to implement right man in right place are also fueling this systematic error. Another example of systematic error is we have still those people who worry for post carrier and do not function the present carrier, however, they surrender to political leadership for their carrier growth, the study revealed. Another interesting example, as mentioned in key informant's interview, is that we take the feudal system as role model, grown up in subsistence agriculture system and entered in the capitalist wage economy based bureaucracy.

Lack of Experience and Ownership

The study further revealed that due to the frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats, there is lack of experience and ownership. When an official joins the province government, it takes some time to understand the province government and political leadership of the province government as well as the policies, programmes and priorities of the province. As of new comers, according to most of the respondents, there will be no ownership and stake on the plans, policies and programmes designed before. Some of the respondents, in contrary to this, argued that this could not be a problematic factor for affecting the performance of province government as long as institutional memory has been maintained. But there has been problem on institutional memory too because of such frequent transfer. An official makes an annual programme along with implementation plan back up in his/her mind. But when s/he is transferred and the newcomer will know about the programme only but does not know about the implementation plan due to lack of institutional memory. This ultimately reduces the ownership towards such programme. Similarly, study also revealed that political leadership also do not have experience of province level. They also just willing to pass their tenure as most of them were, before, in central level and have interest to jump back to federal politics. This ultimately reduced the ownership of political leadership too.

Conclusion

Province government is the part of federal system provisioned by the constitution of Nepal. Failure of province government to produce its performance ultimately affects the newly established federalism in Nepal. The performance of the province government has been dependent on many

factors. Among such factors, frequent transfer of top level bureaucrats is important factor. Province government is newly established structure comparison to the pre-existing federal (as central) and local governments (as local bodies). Hence, functionally and structurally province government is experiencing the low performance. There has been transfer of top level bureaucrats in Lumbini province in an average of 8 months to 13 months. This seems to be quite stable if compared with other provinces. But this frequent transfer has affected the performance of province government to large extent except to its daily office operation. Beside of this, all ministries are not provided with 100% staffs. Their availability has been ranged from 54% to 74% of the approved number. This also has been affecting the performance of the province government. Similarly, there have been some other factors affecting the performance of Lumbini province. These factors include the newly established province structure working on odd transition situation, lack of will and interest of both bureaucrats and political leadership, existence of the systematic error and lack of experience and ownership of both political and bureaucratic leadership. Regardless of these facts, the influence of transfer of officials on government performance should be weighed against completion time of projects, income generation, physical and financial performance, number of laws drafted, and so on. However, the study was conducted a few years after the founding of the province government, therefore there was a shortage of such essential data and information. As a result, another research should be conducted once the election cycle has completed two or three terms of the province government.

Acknowledgement

Our sincere thank goes to Nepal Administrative Staff College for providing financial and related technical support required for the study (between December 2020 and June 2021). Also, we sincerely thank to Principal Secretary and Secretaries and senior officials of different ministries of Lumbini Province, Nepal for their active participation and continuous support.

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