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Nepal, Factor 17: Good Governance

### **Governance in Nepal**

Nepal is a landlocked country located in South-Central Asia, home to nearly 28 million people (The World Bank). This nation is inhabited by some of the most impoverished people in the world; Nepal ranking 28th poorest with a GDP per capita of only USD 2,480 annually. With an impressive range of topography for its diminutive size, Nepal's 58,000 square mile land area is commonly distinguished by three broad physiographic areas: the Mountain Region, the Hill Region, and the Tarai Region (U.S. Library of Congress). The Nepali government has in recent history used these distinct regional barriers to determine sectors and further regional development. Of these, the Tarai Region in Southern Nepal is the most apposite for agricultural expansion when considering the climate and topographical limitations of the others. Politically torn since the Nepali Civil War and devastated by a recent earthquake in 2015, Nepal's people have lacked stability for nearly 60 years. In recent times, Nepal instituted its ninth government in the past eight years in the summer of 2016. The political turmoil has hampered many areas of economic and social development during this time due to its inefficiency. This instability has threatened the balance of agriculture and urbanization, leading to an abundance of economic concerns. Approximately 84% of Nepalis inhabit rural areas that are neither ideal for the production of the crops currently produced nor for the distribution of agricultural products and resources (NGO Federation of Nepal). Although the government has attempted reform, these policies have yet to be implemented in the most marginal and impoverished communities. It is imperative to solve these issues as soon as possible, as the population is growing at a time when the current agricultural pace and practices are unsustainable. Furthermore, the population is growing even as the majority of people live below the poverty line. Thus far, Nepal's government has been unable to provide adequate structure and financial support to creating policies that support the agriculture sector has led to a lack of agricultural development sustainable enough to support its people. Poor infrastructure (i.e. poor road maintenance) and lack of reliable information about prices and quality has prevented the market from functioning sufficiently on its own through supply and demand.

Today, the average Nepali family comprises four people. Nearly 60 percent of the current population is under the age of 18 or above 50, which has drastically reduced the average age of labor force entry to order to support the family. Children in marginal communities are especially vulnerable to impoverishment as people under the age of 15 comprise 37 percent of the population. Although there are child labor regulation laws for children under the age of 14 in Nepal, the government cannot afford to enforce them effectively. This leads to a startling statistic: the average age of entering the workforce is estimated to be around six or seven. Combined with the fact that more than 84 percent of Nepali people are rurally located, this means that more than 8.7 million children are employed for an average of 12 plus hours per day rather than attending school (2011 Demographic and Health Survey). It is also important to acknowledge that this statistic is likely to be low, as unregistered corporations do not submit data on child workers.

Adult female workers account for 54 percent of the agricultural labor force. Today, it is not uncommon for rural families to send men and sons to urban locations for employment, leaving women to manage the majority of the household income in the farming sector. However, although women provide the majority of the national economy, they are underrepresented in politics and in the caste system. Due to societal stigma, women face greater barriers to education and are therefore unlikely to be employed in higher paying occupations. This lack of education also transcends to access to and knowledge of healthcare, particularly in gynecological and prenatal care. Around 48 percent of women disclosed in an independent survey in 2012 that they experience abuse on a regular basis, although domestic violence is unlawful (The Asia Foundation). Despite the efforts of Nepal to promote equality for women, laws are slow to take effect in rural communities, therefore leaving the predominately female rural agricultural sector disadvantaged.

The culture of Nepal is very heavily entwined with agriculture. Both land and livestock have retained their historical social importance as major status symbols, resulting in more than 87 percent of households owning some form of livestock (IRIN News). The preponderance of livestock does not guarantee sufficient economic benefits to compensate for the challenges they provide. While livestock are useful in transporting goods (particularly important due to poor road maintenance) their ultimate benefit to the economy is limited by their lack of overall health. Marginally located people tend to gravitate towards maintaining both weak and unnecessary livestock to preserve their social standing, despite the cost and risk. Popular animals such as goats, various poultry, and cattle are genetically inferior to breeds located elsewhere, which has prompted the government to increase the number of livestock imports in the last several years to diversify the genetic pool. Although this promotes the health of livestock throughout more populated regions, people in rural areas have limited access to new breeds and do not have resources such as veterinarians and adequate nutrition to sustain the health of their livestock (IRIN News).

Consistent with the region, Nepal experiences a monsoon climate, with harsh periods of both flooding and drought throughout the year. Areas with monsoon climates often have difficulty cultivating many crops, as they must be able to either withstand both seasons and temperature fluctuations or have a short growing period. Despite the growing demand for traditionally grown cereals (i.e. potatoes, millet, barley), farmers continue to farm cash crops due to a lack of government regulation on planting, as crops that can be sold for higher prices appear to yield higher profits on the surface. In reality, these cash crops are not especially compatible with the environment and provide a physically smaller yield, which forces the government to import food. These cash crops, predominantly coffee and sugarcane, are not only unsuitable for the climate, but also provide far less in yield per capita, averaging only 160 kilograms per capita at most to the yields of cereals at 180 kilograms (Sustaining Our Food Security).

At a surface level, Nepal has made tremendous strides in healthcare in the past several decades, most notably in infant and maternal mortality rates, which have decreased significantly. As healthcare becomes more accessible, it has become increasingly apparent that there are still groups largely ignored, especially in maternal health across wealth statuses, social groups, and geographic location. The World Health Organization estimated in 2011 that 358,000 Nepali women die annually from preventable causes in pregnancy and childbirth. Additionally, 22 percent of the population still lacks basic healthcare. This system, which typically targets Muslims and Dalits (Terai region) people, increases the spread of infectious disease and puts rural families and their occupations at risk (ReliefWeb).

In general, marginal farms are less productive than large scale farms because they tend to farm in areas of uneven topography, lack efficient irrigation systems, and must farm soil not particularly arable or nutritious. Distribution of modern irrigation techniques and technologies has been stunted in these areas that need them most due to the difficulty of transporting materials on rural roads. At this time, a lack of efficient resources has limited the yield of these communities, with statistics averaging cereal crop yield (1999-2001) at 2089 kg per hectare (world average is 3,096 kg per ha) and average roots and tubers crop yield (1996-1998) at 7,958 kg per ha (world average is 12,958 kg per ha) (Land Reform and National Development in Nepal).

Substandard road construction and maintenance have been major stumbling blocks throughout Nepal's history. In a landlocked country such as Nepal, it is imperative roads are kept in pristine condition to facilitate trade and allow impartial allocation of various resources to rural areas. Currently, only 43 percent of the population has access to all-weather highway, making shipping and transporting goods costly. The subpar conditions of major road systems connecting urban cities to rural communities has prevented much trade and has adversely affected the ability of the communities to produce perishable crops. Road and traffic administration is governed by multiple political agencies with unfortunately weak capacities due to the lack of even task distribution and ability to acquire funding. The government of Nepal has yet to produce a yearly budget that gives any priority towards improving rural infrastructure (Nepal Road Sector Assessment Study). As a result, the amount of funding is extremely sporadic and ineffective. The lack of monetary assistance has led to the thin dispersal of funding over a large number of low-impact projects, reducing the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the capital expended.

With 42 domestic (and one international) airports, it has recently become clear that air transportation is a plausible alternative to trade dependant on India-controlled railways and highways. In particular, the installation of domestic airports in the Mountain Region has enabled connections between high and low elevations that were previously unreachable. Continuing the growth of air transportation in Nepal carries with it enormous benefits, as Nepal will be able to broaden the spectrum of international markets agriculture and other industries can access and will limit Nepal's reliance on India for international trade. For international air trade to become viable in Nepal, it is important that the government fund and regulate airports and improve their technological capabilities. With this investment, Nepal will not only begin to enjoy a broader market and experience a wider variety of commerce, but also create employment opportunities within the country.

Although the average rural farm is reasonably sized at 0.7 hectares, multiple families farm and survive below the poverty line off of this land. The average rural farmer is held in a feudal-like balance of power with their landowners. Under the current system, rural farmers do not typically own land. Instead, farmers are expected to 'rent' land from their landowners and are therefore extremely vulnerable to drought and disease, which often prevents them from making a profit. Through this system, the entire economics of the family is determined by the landowner. According to CSRC News, farmers that cultivate the land rarely have any form of security or tenure and are forced to vote in political elections determined by the whim of a wealthy landholder.

Land ownership in Nepal is politically corrupt, acting as a discriminant in determining those who may have access to state services, credit opportunities, and even citizenship certificates, tethering generations to the land and employer (CSRC News). Although Nepal has pursued numerous land reform acts since 1957, the failure of their government to maintain these changes has done little to protect its citizens from their currently unstable habits. These reforms have made many unfulfilled promises to rural populations, including legal redistribution of land previously held by prominent landowners. As of yet, the government has been largely unsuccessful in redistributing, as many reform legislatures contain technicalities that allow semi-legal landholding to persist. Perpetuating this feudal system restrains the effectiveness and limits the progress that can be made by the government and is sometimes compared socially with slavery.

Nepal currently imports 6.42 billion USD per year, the majority of which is food, clothing, and other manufactured goods. Nepal has historically exported less than 894 million USD per year, creating an unhealthy trade balance and a massive deficit (Trading Economics). This deficit severely limits the amount of financial aid the government can use to redistribute resources to improve the living conditions and market accessibility for rural communities and families. Thus, the average rural family is left behind as Nepal's urban communities develop economically and scientifically.

A series of crises within the past 20 years have further prevented Nepal from reaching economic stability. In the past century, Nepal has suffered both war and political volatility. Most recently, the Nepali Civil War (1996-2006) resulted in the divergence of several political parties and the dissolution of a 240 year old monarchy. Although the war officially ended in 2006 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2006, an unstable and unreliable government continues to govern Nepal and control its policies. Parties including Communism, Maoism, and other groups have drawn a wide range of support from around the country, leading to further damage from protests and strikes. Natural disasters have also been key determinants in Nepal's lack of agricultural stability. In 2015, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake and a series of aftershocks resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and caused severe infrastructure damage throughout the country (Insight on Conflict). If Nepal was able to obtain agricultural stability, many of the issues brought about by political and natural disasters would be resolved, resulting in a more peaceful and prosperous nation.

The government of Nepal has long been criticized for its methodology in providing subsidies to farmers. Nearly all subsidies are received in the form of imported fertilizer, which, when used in excess, is damaging to the environment (Managing Agricultural Research for Fragile Environments). The resulting algae blooms will first clog the water supply stream, causing a surplus of wild animal life in concentrated areas but limiting water supply further downstream. When the algae dies, further damage is done as the water is depleted of carbon dioxide. Without algae to regulate chemical levels in the water supply, the oxygen levels fall dramatically. Subsequently, wildlife will die from lack of food and their natural decomposing toxins will poison the water. By enabling farmers to abuse nitrogen-based fertilizers, the government is setting Nepal up for a severe water crisis within the next few decades. In particular, rural people, who depend on rivers and underground wells for their water supply are at a major health risk. It is imperative that the government become more discrete in the distribution of its resources.

Many of these aforementioned issues are not brought to attention to criticize the efforts the government of Nepal has been making, particularly in the last several decades; however, there still remains the truth that

sustainability is not arising at the necessary pace. Progress toward economic stability has slowed dramatically since the Maoist uprisings in 2010 and has therefore deprived the younger generation of educational opportunities which would further stabilize the political structure. This will be potentially devastating for Nepal, as the population is already expanding much too quickly for the slow pace of economic growth when adjusting for global inflation. Theoretically, the resources of Nepal are capable of meeting the demands of this increased population size, but not until closer involvement in education and healthcare and increased collaboration between the infrastructural sector and the government has been achieved.

Local organizations are important to removing the barriers that prevent Nepal from creating a sustainable environment for its people. One notable project, the *Sustainable Agriculture Development Program* focuses attention on providing immediate relief to natural disaster and conflict victims as well as promoting sustainability for future generations. The goal of the SADP Nepal program is to limit the use of genetically modified organisms in favor of naturally occurring plant varieties and to improve water quality. Relying on foreign donations, the organization does not use national funds to facilitate improvement. Volunteers focus their efforts in the following categories: Education, Health, Community Development, Orphanages, the Disabled, Agro-Forestry, Environment and Ecology, and Poverty Alleviation. Foreign volunteers experience the effort first hand to create a more sustainable future for Nepal. In addition, SADP Nepal encourages rural communities and families to be closely involved in their recovery. While the efforts made by the SADP are admirable and have fostered many critical improvements in Nepal, it is important to recognize that it provides support in mainly superficial areas. Until changes in legislature and its application arise, these solutions will only provide temporary relief.

The first step in achieving economic stability in Nepal is to improve the infrastructure throughout the country, focusing on the most rural communities. International donations could be used to provide rural children low-cost or free educations and encourage volunteers to take teaching positions in their own rural communities. Education and increased access to urban areas will encourage community involvement in government and lead to changes improving the lives of people of all socioeconomic levels. While this will be a complex project, by targeting inequality in a variety of demographics it is achievable. To stabilize the social progress of Nepal, the feudal society must be abolished and/or carefully monitored to prevent the upper class from continuing to be the sole determinant factor of the outcomes of elections and legislatures. Disadvantaged religious and caste sects must also be monitored to ensure that they are not denied any basic rights. Laws regarding child labor should be enforced, and as an incentive, appropriate subsidies encouraging environmentally safe farming practices should be established. With the help of the government, many of the changes they make will have lasting impacts on the communities and individual families.

Consistent with the views of the Community Self Reliance Center, the government needs to form a collective front to represent the country in international and domestic communications. The national government should come to agreements after corresponding with local governments and considering future implications of emergency laws. All levels of government must provide more funding to the agricultural sector and better target the use of subsidies. The government should provide full cooperation with local organizations to improve the quality of life for its citizens. The government has shirked its responsibility of providing three basic necessities for its people: safe food and water, quality nutrition,

and environmental security. By continuing to ignore issues that place these necessities at risk, the government is essentially denying these rights to its people.

Today, political stability is one of the most important aspects for developing an independent and stable nation. Not only are food security and human rights reliant on political stability, but the nation's economy, education opportunities, and international influence are all factors contingent on effective legislature. Nepal has lacked the means to inspire a more prosperous government for the past 60 years, and the devastating effects on rural populations clearly demonstrate the ineffective policies that have arisen to combat the various insecurities. Nepal is home to nearly 28 million people, a number that is predicted to rise in the next decade. This population increase necessitates the immediate action of the rural community, local organizations, and above all the national government to prevent Nepal from falling further and further behind foreign powers and maintain independence. Several suggestions, including improving infrastructure, subsidizing rural farmers, and restructuring the political bureaucracy aim to improve the lives of the people who live Nepal. Improving these practices will prove to be extremely beneficial in alleviating instances of food insecurity and providing a necessary boost to the weak economic climate. Perhaps most importantly, these changes will provide political power to disadvantaged individuals, most commonly located in rural areas. Rurally located families are affected the most by these societal and agricultural changes, but are also the least represented in the legislative decisions facilitating them. By implementing these strategies, not only will Nepal improve economically and politically, but previously disadvantaged persons including victims of the caste system and the poverty stricken will be given a new voice in the world.

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