

Know Your Citizens for Transforming Public Service Delivery: A Step Taken in Nepal by National Governance Survey

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This study examined a way, using data made available by Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 conducted by Nepal Administrative Staff College, for the country to comply with the monitoring requirement for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)'s governance target. Highlighting that the indicator asks peoples' satisfaction regarding public services, the study presented that the Survey data could be referred for global monitoring requirements such as SDGs. This study, on the other hand, also found that high satisfaction rate by a global indicator does not necessarily ascertain expected institutional maturity set by SDG's governance target. For transformation of country's public service delivery into a more citizen-centric one, then, delineation of true voices through in-depth look at survey results beyond nationally reported, aggregated indicators is required, this study confirmed.

Keywords: citizen-centric, governance, public service delivery, SDGs

Introduction

There is a global consensus that achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is premised on the availability of public service delivery capacities, as incorporated into SDG Target 16.6 (Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels). The validity of this premise is reconfirmed at 2018 United Nations (UN) Public Service Forum that took place in Marrakesh, Kingdom of Morocco, from June 21 to 23, 2018. It was a high-level forum attended by ministers and senior decision makers of UN member countries to discuss how to transform governance and innovate the way governments, institutions and public administrations perform in order to achieve SDGs (United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs [UN DESA], 2018). However, being a vehicle to assemble top level

ministers and senior decision makers, the focus of the discussion did not cover stocktaking of how far the member countries have already advanced toward meeting the Target (United Nations & Kingdom of Morocco Ministry of Administration Reform and Civil Service, 2018).

For measuring achievements, all the SDG Targets are accompanied by a set of indicators. In the case of Target 16.6, the degree of progress toward fulfilling the target – to what extent effective, accountable and transparent institutions are developed at all levels – are to be measured by the following two indicators:

- Indicator 16.6.1: Primary government expenditures as a proportion of original approved budget, by sector (or by budget codes or similar).
- Indicator 16.6.2: Proportion of the population satisfied with their last experience of public services.

The first indicator tracks financial figures. It is then assumed that each country's finance ministry and/or finance concerned entity would be expected to take charge. However, regarding the second indicator, there may not be a clear cut, standard approach neither a single national institution most suited to lead the task of measuring progresses. In this article, the authors focus on this challenge, and taking up Nepal as a case, explored how to meet the requirement of the indicator 16.6.2 through which we will be able to see our advancement in the governance mechanism.

SDG target 16.6's progress monitoring by indicator 16.6.2

Through laborious collaborative efforts of the experts from different corners of the world, general agreement on SDGs' 232 indicators has been reached and adopted by UN General Assembly on July 6, 2017, and is contained in *Global Indicator Framework for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations General Assembly, 2018; United Nations Statistics Division, 2019b). Since, *Global SDG Indicators Database* (United Nations Statistics Division, 2019c) has become the central platform for the provision of UN system compiled data. As the data captured is referenced for the preparation for the UN Secretary-General's annual report on *Progress towards the SDGs* (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2018), it is assumed that annually based updating of the progress is expected.

The development of *Global SDG Indicators Database* is still in progress, and regarding SDG Target 16.6., the *Database* navigates the viewer to check the indicator development status in a section called *SDG Indicators Metadata Repository* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). There, Indicator 16.6.2 is classified as Tier III indicator. As opposed to Tier I and Tier II indicators that have conceptually clear and internationally established methodologies and standards, Tier III is assigned to those indicators that do not have internationally established methodology or standards and therefore methodology/standards are being (or will be) developed or tested (United Nations Statistics Division, 2019a).

According to *Tier III Work Plan for Goal 16* (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019; United Nations Statistics Division, 2019d) for which United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is the lead agency, satisfaction survey instrument development and its piloting by national statistical offices that have been a part of this indicator development seem to be in progress, as per its latest reporting of July/August 2018 (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). Many national statistical offices have been involved in the process that includes sharing of experiences, offering advices, documenting relevant surveying practices, and reviewing proposed methodologies. However, Nepal has not been a part of this exercise, and does not seem to be on top of the unfolding global discussion on how and when the finalized measurement will be imposed for tracking progresses.

Nepal's corresponding situation on SDG 16.6 monitoring through official records

Located at the foot of the Himalayas, Nepal is a small nation bordering with China on the north and India on the south. The present formation as a nation state is credited to King Prithvi Narayan Shah who unified many small principalities in 1769. The country remained a monarchy till 2008 during which period different forms of rule and governance were experienced ranging from direct rule by the king, to hereditary prime minister and parliamentary form of government. Despite these different ruling and governance patterns, Nepal remained largely unitary and centralized (Sharma & Muwonge, 2010). In 2008, restoration of democracy signified by a general election for the Constituent Assembly set a tone for a move to federalism. However, the realization of three-tiered federated governance mechanism came only later when provincial as well as local elections were held in 2017 following new Constitution promulgated in 2015.

Nepal is a developing country who relies on foreign aid to fill resource gaps for her budgetary requirements. According to a study by the Ministry of Finance (2017), foreign aid contributions account for approximately 25 percent of the country's total budgetary requirement every year. For such a nation, compliance with international commitments such as SDGs is a national priority. Referring to the country's results for Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), SDG's predecessor, as "relative success," the Government of Nepal expressed its unwavering commitment in pursuing and achieving SDGs by 2030 (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2017b). Unlike the predecessor MGDs for which terms were non-negotiable, SDGs allow adopting countries some room to adapt the targets as appropriate for the country contexts. Thus, in Nepal, a deep-thinking process took place in tailoring a "home-grown" roadmap for the achievement of SDGs (NPC, 2017b, p. 1).

Cognizant that strong monitoring system accompanied by credible data is a prerequisite for the success, the Government of Nepal, while emphasizing its determination to strengthen the mechanism, admitted upfront that data for more than 100 global SDG indicators are not readily available in the country. One example of such acknowledgement is a mention of the unavailability of data on citizen's perception on public service delivery, reported in the roadmap document as "there are also much qualitative information to be collected such as perceptions of citizens on public services..." (NPC, 2017b, p. 21) .

Thus, in Nepal, while intermediate annual target figures for Target 16.6's other indicator 16.6.1 had already been filled, drawn from the country's Management Information System (MIS) data (NPC, 2017b), SDGs implementation started without a sense of what level of baseline and/or target to anticipate for Target 16.6's indicator 16.6.2. Given the status, a national review for the year 2017 conducted by Nepal Planning Commission (NPC), the lead agency for the country's SDG efforts, only selectively reported on the SDG implementation in reference to five out of the 16 Goals adopted (NPC, 2017a) and that does not include Goal 16. As the lead agency, NPC has already set up a web portal (NPC, n.d.) to publicize SDGs' monitoring status, and the latest blank status on the indicator 16.6.2 can be readily seen.

Nonetheless, the Government of Nepal must know the overall implementation scale of its committed SDGs inclusive of those for which indicators are not yet specified. For now, one way of making sense seems to be by the budget projection trends, as presented by an NPC representative on the occasion of "South Asia Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals," held on October 4 to 5, 2018, in India (Table 1).

Table 1: Government of Nepal SDGs budget projection trends by sdg budget coding in NPR billion

	FY 2018/19		FY 2019/20		FY 2020/21	
SDG16	130.3	10%	137.4	9%	151.0	8%
SDG Total	1,315.2		1,577.7		1,865.0	

Note. In NPR billion.

Adapted from implementation of the SDGs in Nepal: Status and challenges, by K. Koilala, 2018.

We can see that SDG Goal 16 is allocated 10% of the total SDG budget for the fiscal year 2018/19. Although with an incremental decreasing trend over the subsequent years, the budget allocation for Goal 16 is still sizable out of the 16 nationally selected SDGs in total, indicating the level of the country's priority towards Goal 16.

Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 as SDG indicator 16.6.2's baseline data source

Background and objective of the survey

Triggered by the new Constitution promulgated in 2015 which authenticated the three-tiered governance mechanism run by federal, provincial, and local governments, Nepal held a series of local elections in 2017 for the 753 newly established local government units. It was after a long transition period of 15 years during which time the country's local bodies were managed by civil servants in lieu of democratically elected representatives. Public service administered by centrally hired bureaucrats did not fully succeed in the delivery, and built unfavorable legacies such as lack of efficiency, failure to reach rural areas, hotbed of corruption and nepotism

(Bhattarai, 2017; Kyle & Resnick, 2019; Sharma & Muwonge, 2010). A new thinking was thus pursued for the changed structure: inter-governmental sharing of power and jurisdictions on the part of those that govern the country, and differentiated expectations on the part of the citizens.

With the aim of capturing citizens' perceptions on various dimensions of the state of governance in Nepal at this juncture, Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) carried out its first nationwide Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 (NASC, 2018) in partnership with the country's national statistical office, Central Bureau of Statistics. This survey was conducted following 2017 local elections with the intention of establishing a national-scale baseline of people's perceptions about major aspects of governance to which elected leaders and policy makers at different tiers of the government could refer for their informed decisions. In reference to the established baseline, follow-up surveys are planned at five-year intervals, the same interval as Nepal's five-year planning cycle for national development and election interval of federal, provincial and local governments.

Method and coverage of the survey

The survey was designed to capture the perceptions of a representative sample of Nepali adults aged 18 and over, residing in the country at the time of data collection that was between December 2017 and March 2018. As the latest available census data was from 2011, instead, the current voters' list compiled by the Election Commission of Nepal in August 2017 was referred as the best latest alternative resource for the sample population. Multistage cluster sampling approach was adopted based on a four-stage sampling design at a) districts, b) municipalities/rural municipalities, c) polling centers, and d) individual levels. In total, 12,920 individuals (out of whom 12,872 individuals were interviewed: a coverage of 99.6%) were selected as the survey' statistically representative sample.

For survey design construction, Steering and Technical Committees as well as thematic experts on governance, anti-corruption, surveys, and public policy were consulted at an early stage. This consultation series led to the formulation of definition and parameter setting of the concept of governance for the study.

Governance was defined as:

“a system or process for the exercise of authority by state authorities and other entities, in reference to broadly shared values (foundations of governance) and through democratically-established institutional mechanisms (infrastructure of governance), that deliver on the state's commitments for public goods and services (service delivery) that together define and consolidate the relationship between the state and citizens.”

From this definition, study parameters were identified as:

“each of the three major dimensions of governance: foundations (values), infrastructure (institutions), and service delivery” (NASC, 2018, p. 2).

These parameters guided a group of national and international experts from the government, civil society, research organizations, academia and other relevant stakeholders who gathered for a three-day design workshop to come up with a questionnaire. The draft questionnaire was reviewed and refined by the technical team for further input by the experts and then for approval by the Steering Committee. The identified three broad dimensions of governance, namely (a) foundations of governance (voice and participation, integrity and accountability, justice and social inclusion, rule of law), (b) infrastructure of governance (elections, constitution and constitutional provisions, realization of constitutional freedoms, provincial and local government, political institutions, social association and civic awareness, information and communication, security and protection), and (c) service delivery (experience of public service, support for receiving services, attempts made to receive services, source of information about services, service fee and additional expenses, public service environment). For this study, the authors referred to the service delivery section and reconfigured the dataset in order to analyze survey results from the standpoint of SDG indicator 16.6.2. Specifically, the authors created a sub-set of survey responses of those individuals who visited the government offices for the last 12 months (N=6,775, as a sub-set of the survey's total sample of 12,920 individuals). For the subset of the responses, the authors re-calculated frequency, percentages, and crosstab using the same statistical procedure as the original survey to ensure sampling validity adopted for the original survey was maintained. The original survey employed 53 enumerators most of whom possessed background required for rapport, including familiarity with the research methods, previous work experience in rural communities, knowledge on local culture and language of the assigned community. In order to ensure that these enumerators conduct ethically mindful interviews, a four-day in-class training was organized to be sensitive and not imposing on the respondents.

Survey results relevant for SDG indicator 16.6.2

The indicator SDG16.6.2 specifically asks for “proportion of the population satisfied with their last experience of public services.” To most closely approximate the responses to the conditions entailed in this indicator, the authors reconfigured Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18's applicable data by drawing a subset of those who visited the government offices for public services within the last 12 months (N=6,775), and sorted their satisfaction levels by three point-scale of (a) satisfied (by aggregating “fully satisfied” and “satisfied to some extent” responses), (b) dissatisfied (by aggregating “dissatisfied to some extent” and “fully dissatisfied responses), and (c) “don't know/can't say.” The result shows that more than 80% of the those who made (a) visit(s) to government office(s) in the last 12 months were content with the services rendered. Interpretation of this high level of satisfaction, however, requires careful understanding on the country's context.

Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 also asked the respondents if they sought service provision by themselves or felt the need and acquired assistance from someone. While 55% of the respondents answered they could manage getting the service just by themselves, the

remaining 45.2% sought help from others, such as family members (34.2%). To the question if they obtained the desired service on their first visit to the office, or had to come back for document insufficiency, etc., while 74% of the respondents said that they received the service on the first attempt, the remaining 26% reported that they had to return to the office for multiple times to meet the requirement. Furthermore, 12.7% of the respondents described that they paid additional (broker) fee other than service charge to receive the service. While overshadowed by the overall high satisfaction as survey response, citizens clearly remarked on their difficult experiences in acquiring public services for which they are entitled. Need for multiple visits or broker fee payment are rampant phenomena in Nepal but in not many other places, and thus such a status clearly flags doubts about performance standard of Nepal's public service delivery. This result raises an important point to question if the institutions that provide public service delivery are upholding SDG's governance tenet of being effective, accountable, and transparent, although seemingly well-performing from the perspective of SDG16.6.2 indicator.

Survey results relevant more broadly for SDG target 16.6

For development programs/projects/activities, indicators play an important role as a common milestone denominator to judge if we are moving towards the target progressing through the milestones. However, over-dependency on indicators as a sole measure for the objective can deceive us from looking at a bigger picture, as narrowly meeting the numerical indicators might not necessarily fulfill the goals implied by the target. In the case of SDG Target 16.6 (Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels), by fulfilling the numerical indicators (that are yet to be specified, as discussed in the earlier sections of this article) for (a) sectoral budget allocation (Indicator 16.6.1) and (b) proportion of the population satisfied (Indicator 16.6.2), we will be able to declare we achieved the Target. However, that does not ascertain if effective, accountable and transparent institutions are developed at all levels, as determined. Cautioned by such a rhetorical trap, the authors considered delving further into the survey data could add certainty to the plausibility of what the indicator suggests.

For example, the dataset of Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 can be desegregated using the two types of offices visited as proxy for the different tiers of government service outlets: District Administration Offices and Municipality Offices. Across different tiers of the government outlet, nationally aggregated, overall satisfaction levels are relatively high at over 80%. Then, for the purpose of SDG16.6.2 indicator compliance, the baseline situation for Nepal could be assumed quite high attainment to start with. However, Nepal is a country with significant diversity: multi-racial, multi-linguistic, and multi-ethnic, lying on the terrain characterized by three distinct ecological zones where human settlements can be found at the altitude of 3,000 meters above sea level (Chidi, 2009) while lowest point of lowland, Terai, measures only 60 meters above sea level (Nepal Tourism Board, 2019). As such diverse conditions embrace how citizens live, a ballpark figure might not illustrate the complexities entailed in the country's reality.

Figure 1 to Figure 3 show the breakdown results of satisfaction by caste/ethnic groups, education levels, and location of residences respectively, by using re-configured data from Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18. In terms of caste/ethnicity, there is a 11.6 percentage point difference between the percentage of people satisfied among Hill Janajati (82.6%) and that of Terai Caste (71.0%) (Figure 1). Looking at the education level, sub-groups having either no education or higher education tend to feel less satisfied (78.7% and 76.3% respectively) compared to people who has in-between level of education experiences (83.5% for people with no formal education, 83.8% for those with basic education, and 82.1% for those with secondary education) (Figure 2). Furthermore, regarding the perspectives of residents in different Provinces, there is a significant, 21.0 percentage point gap between the Province with the highest satisfaction rate (86.0% of Province 1) and the that with the lowest (65.0% of Province 2) (Figure 3).

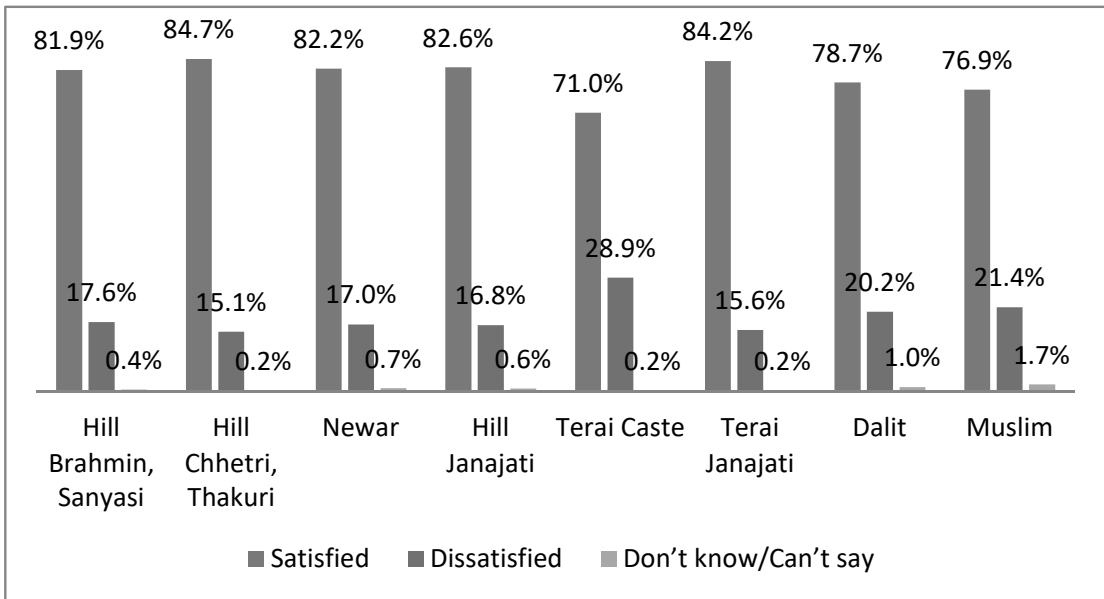


Figure 1. Satisfaction levels by caste/ethnic groups. Adapted from Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18, by NASC, 2018, p.485.

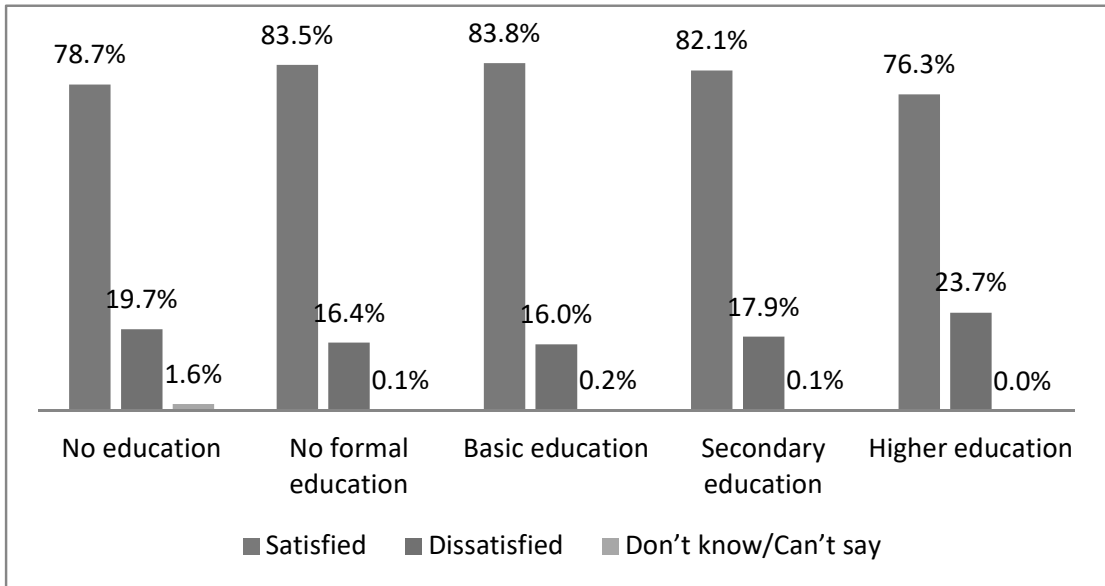


Figure 2. Satisfaction levels by education levels. Adapted from Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18, by NASC, 2018, p.485.

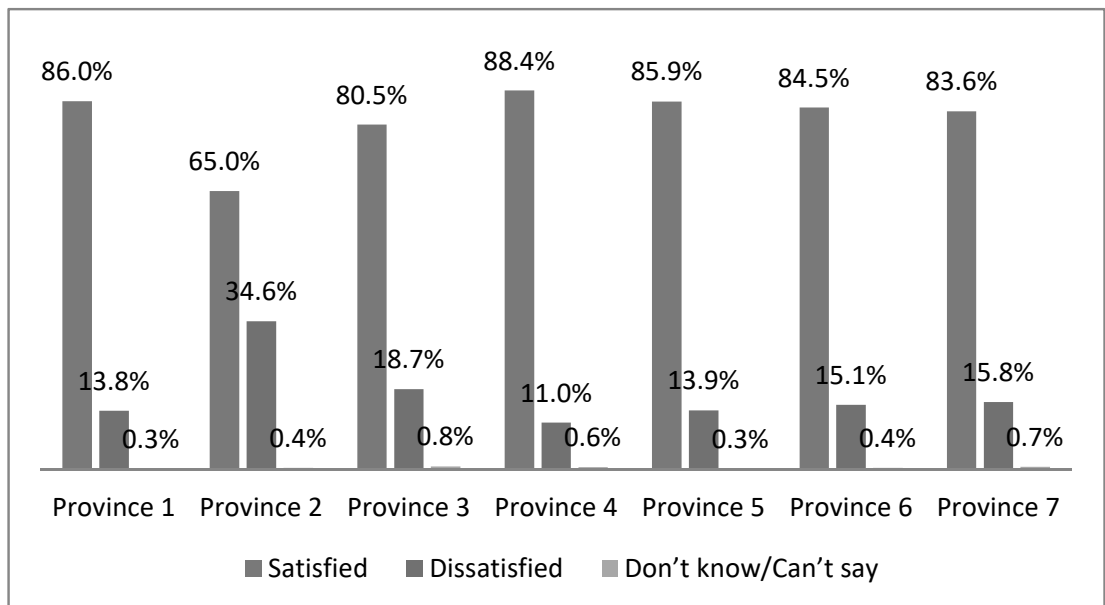


Figure 3. Satisfaction levels by residence (Province). Adapted from Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18, by NASC 2018, p.485.

These breakdown results illuminate different shades of public service delivery realities that need to be addressed for institutions' effectiveness, accountability, and transparency. Yet, these differences are buried in an aggregated, national level measure. To not only to satisfy numerical requirement but to genuinely improve the country's public service delivery, therefore, it is evident that we need to address beyond global/national indicators by looking deeper into the various sub-group-based perceptions illuminated by the breakdown results. And it must be done in view of the changing government context for which transformation/decentralization of previously ministry led and nationally organized sectoral service delivery. The importance of such an in-depth analysis is further illustrated by Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 where people's perception on the barriers for accessing governments' public service is captured (Figure 4).

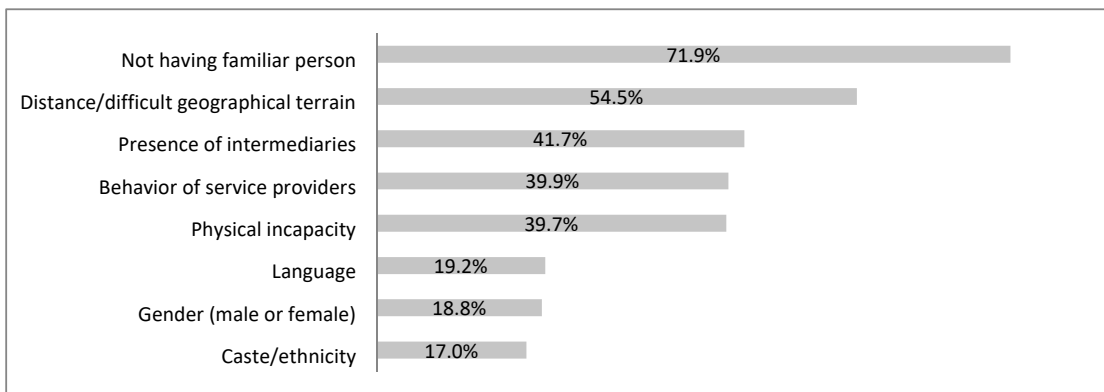


Figure 4. Perceived barriers in accessing services.

Out of 4,182 who responded, % of people who felt that the respective barriers exist for him/her to access services (multiple answers accepted.) “Afino mancche” used here refers to “someone you know closely” in Nepali. Adapted from Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18, by NASC, 2018, p.457.

Asked about the existence of barriers in accessing services, 79.1% of the respondents said they find it difficult to access service when they do not see familiar faces at the government outlet. In Nepali context, these familiar faces are regarded as “trusted contact” (NASC, 2018, p. 115). Flipside of it, then, boils down to the issue that citizens find it difficult to access public services unless one has personal connections to the service providing government officer(s). Such realities validate that the Government of Nepal has quite a long way still to transform itself into a public service provider friendly to all its citizens for what they are entitled.

Implication of survey results in the context of larger discussion on citizen-centric public Service Delivery

As illuminated in the previous sections, a further look into the data compiled by Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 elucidates a picture that Nepali citizens expressed relatively high level of satisfaction in the delivery of public service even though accessing it entailed challenges. It illustrates a reality that Nepali citizens have low expectations on the government as public service provider. There are empirical studies that describe why Nepal still has “a sizeable number of people (who) do not yet have access to basic public services” (Sharma & Muwonge, 2010, p. 88). For example, Bhattarai (2017), based on a mixed method study targeting three districts’ public service providers and recipients, points out that issues such as lack of resources, technology, and of information dissemination germinate a ground for below standard operation, bribery, nepotism, and denial of access to less privileged people. He argues that Nepal’s reform strategy has been limited to supply driven and voice or demand of the service seekers has not been attended. More recently, Kyle and Resnick (2019) conducted household and bureaucrats survey on agricultural extension activities with samples drawn from 48 districts and found that “local knowledge and motivation of bureaucrats play a significant role in shaping service access” (p. 133). It means that Nepal’s public service delivery is not yet shaped and conducted as per aspiration of SDG Target 16.6 that underlies effective, accountable and transparent institutional arrangement for service delivery.

With the roll out of federal structure moving the government closer to the citizens through its local government units, the Government of Nepal is now positioned to transform its thinking on their role in public service as citizens’ service providing entity tasked to satisfy their demands, as opposed to traditional supplier driven proxy agent of the central government. The required change boils down to that of the mentality of government officers whose job is clearly defined by the term “civil servants.”

Listening to citizens’ voices to improve public service delivery has become an undeniable global trend. Within the context of public sector reform, Andrews and Shah (2005) called for a mind-shift from top-down governance characterized by “unresponsive, unaccountable, inefficient, and ineffective bureaucracies” (p. 153) to citizen-centered framework as a new approach. Through new public management (NPM) discussion, treating citizens as clients and/or customers has mainstreamed, validating the adoption of a client-orientation in the public sector (Mizrahi, Vigoda-Gadot, & Ryzin, 2010). Then, for “results-based management” that came together, surveys of citizens has acquired a major position as a data collection tool to obtain evaluative data on the quality and effectiveness of service delivered (Nayyar-Stone & Hatry, 2010).

Even zooming into developing countries, exemplary cases are easily found where national governments themselves take the initiative of asking its people on how they are performing in the eyes of their citizens (Mauritius Ministry of Civil Service and Administrative

Reforms, 2018; Seychelles National Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Either by request of the governments or by own initiatives, watch dogs, research institutions, and nonprofit organizations are also active implementors of public opinion surveys (CIET International, n.d.; Mitullah, 2016; Nkomo, 2017; Transparency International Kenya, 2016). Then more recently, even private sector consulting firms, by establishing dedicated divisions targeting public sector clientele, have made their inroads into the service of measuring citizen satisfaction as its business menu (Accenture Consulting, 2017; Dudley, Lin, Mancini, & Ng, 2015; McKinsey Center for Government, 2018).

Recently compiled Indicator of Citizen Centric Public Service Delivery: Assessment Tool by the World Bank (2018) explains that “Citizen-centric service delivery indicators focus on the collection of data that can help governments become better at what they do—deliver services to citizens in a responsive and equitable manner” (p. 1). The compilation of Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 can therefore be considered as Nepal’s first step for joining this bandwagon of global trend towards capitalizing on citizens’ opinions for better public service delivery, in other words, a move towards citizen-centric public service delivery.

For the effort, however, this study cautioned two points to note. Firstly, a score by global indicator drawn from aggregated survey data hides important variances that need to be factored into the design of public service delivery. If a sizable population reported that they could not receive the expected services on the first attempt or without paying broker fees, it is a cue for investigating what has to be changed. But aggregated score will not show such realities unless breakdown figures are analyzed. Secondly, given Nepali citizens had long been deprived of public service delivery by local governments who are closely located and well informed of residents’ given situations, their level of expectations toward public service providers seem low. Thus, treating their baseline satisfaction as a default might portray government’s onward service delivery progress inflated even if the attainment is not framed as citizen-centric. Even if citizens say they are content with the service situation, them not being able to receive the service smoothly unless there is someone that they know at the service window is a simple proof that it is not at all citizen-centric. Such falsely satisfaction might guide policy makers to miss out the need to address deficiency in service providing institutions.

Conclusions

This study first reviewed SDG Target 16.6’s implementation monitoring arrangement focusing on the indicator 16.6.2, that tracks countries’ progress on the development of public service delivery institutions, and identified that indicator determination for the Target is still in process. Consequently therefore, although Nepal is fully committed to comply with the SDG requirement, it is so far tracking the progress by budget allocation trend. The study then introduced Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 as possibly the best data source for Nepal to fulfill SDG Target 16’s requirement for the indicator 16.6.2., and based on the re-configured data, confirmed that Nepal could make use of the dataset compiled by this national survey for its

progress monitoring. This study, on the other hand, also found that high satisfaction rate by a global indicator does not necessarily ascertain expected institutional maturity set by SDG's governance target.

Listening to citizens' voices to improve public service delivery has become an undeniable global trend, incorporated by national governments as well as by SDGs monitoring. With the roll out of federal structure moving the government closer to the citizens through its local government units, time is opportune also for Nepal to actively adopt its use. However, for Nepal, the true value of capturing citizens' opinions resides in their manifestations on where and on what they are not served. For transformation of country's public service delivery into a more citizen-centric one, therefore, delineation of true voices through in-depth look at survey results beyond nationally reported, aggregated indicators is required, this study confirmed.

Note:

This article is a revised version of a paper entitled "Know Your Citizens for Transforming Public Service Delivery: A Step Taken in Nepal by National Governance Survey" presented at the 2019 Annual Conference of the Asian Association for Public Administration, De La Salle University, Manila, the Philippines, 22-24 May 2019. The primary author attended the conference as a part of her advisory work at Nepal Administrative Staff College dispatched from Japan International Cooperation Agency.

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