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## **Bridging Sociology and Public Policy: An Analytical Inquiry with Reference to Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the sociological engagement with public policy by highlighting the discipline's critical role in shaping, analyzing, and improving policy processes. While public policy has traditionally been driven by technological innovation and economic rationalism, these approaches often neglect the underlying social structures, actions, and power dynamics that influence policy outcomes. Sociology, through empirical investigation and theoretical insight, offers a deeper understanding of human behavior and social systems-providing policy actors with tools for more informed and equitable decision-making. The paper explores sociology's role in various stages of public policy, including agenda setting, policy formulation, globalization, and the function of epistemic communities. It underscores the discipline's unique capacity to connect structure and agency, as well as macro and micro dynamics, in a way that reflects current trends in public policy development. Ultimately, sociology contributes to a more holistic and inclusive policy process by illuminating marginalized perspectives, questioning formalistic assumptions, and offering new conceptual frameworks for problem-solving and coordination. The paper also draws on Nepal's evolving public policy landscape as a contextual reference, illustrating how historical legacies, socio-political transformations, and efforts toward inclusive governance shape the interplay between sociological insights and policymaking in a developing, multicultural democracy.*

### **Keywords**

Sociology, Public policy, Agenda setting, Globalization.

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# 3

## **Bridging Sociology and Public Policy: An Analytical Inquiry with Reference to Nepal**

### **1. Introduction**

Public policy has long been dominated by technological innovations, administrative pragmatism, and economic rationalism. While these approaches offer important tools for governance, they often overlook the complex social dimensions underlying public issues. The exclusion of sociological perspectives has contributed to policy outputs that are frequently ineffective, inequitable, or disconnected from the lived realities of diverse populations. As Wilson (1993) critically observed, sociology has often been marginalized by policymakers and the media, given minimal attention in decision-making arenas. Yet, sociology is uniquely positioned to illuminate the contradictions embedded in categorical value judgments and to offer scientifically grounded insights that enhance the quality of instrumental decision-making.

Sociology's engagement with public policy is both analytical and normative. It provides a deeper understanding of the social structures, cultural patterns, and power relations that shape policy outcomes. Wilson (1993) advocates for a renewed sociological presence in the policy domain through four key contributions: (1) broader use of even preliminary sociological data in policy debates, (2) greater incorporation of theoretical concepts and hypotheses, (3) alternative mechanisms for communicating sociological insights, and (4) confronting the formalistic fallacy in conventional policy research. Sociological data—both qualitative and quantitative—can reframe public controversies and expand the horizons of policy discourse.

From persistent poverty and environmental degradation to urban planning and criminal justice, sociological research offers indispensable insights into how communities function and how policies affect them. Sociology does not merely describe social problems; it redefines them, offers critical perspectives on causality, and introduces new interpretive frameworks. As Kingdon (1984) notes, sociology contributes to every stage of the agenda-setting process—problem recognition, proposal generation, policy formu-

lation, and public deliberation-by embedding these processes within broader social narratives and relational structures.

Moreover, sociology has historically aligned itself with marginalized voices, earning a reputation as a 'champion of the underdog'. This orientation equips sociology to interrogate power relations, reveal structural inequalities, and advocate for more inclusive and just policy outcomes. Sociological inquiry reveals the experiences and needs of disadvantaged groups-poor minorities, inner-city populations, or working-class communities-that are often overlooked in policy debates. In doing so, sociology becomes not only a tool for understanding but also a vehicle for transformation. The influence of sociology on government policy is often indirect yet profound. Policymakers may adopt sociological language, theories, or concepts to frame debates, legitimize decisions, or broaden their understanding of complex social dynamics. As Weiss (1993) argues, the impact of sociology on policy may be diffuse, slow-moving, and difficult to quantify, but it nonetheless reshapes the conceptual terrain on which policies are built. Theories of social mobility, class conflict, participatory governance, or linguistic rights have all left their mark on diverse fields such as education, health, and social welfare.

In the context of globalization, the challenges of governance have become even more intricate, requiring multi-scalar analyses and culturally informed responses. Here too, sociology offers tools for interpreting transnational flows, local adaptations, and the shifting nature of state-society relations. As the world becomes more interconnected, sociological engagement with public policy becomes not just relevant, but essential-for both understanding and shaping the future of collective life. This article has discussed the linked the sociological theory and public policy by applying review of previous reading and secondary sources.

In Nepal, the trajectory of public policy reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, socio-political transformations, and struggles for inclusion. Rooted in ancient South Asian governance traditions yet shaped by centuries of elite-dominated, centralized rule, Nepal's policymaking has historically marginalized popular participation. The shift from oligarchic Rana rule through monarchy-centered Panchayat governance to the restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, and ultimately to a federal democratic republic after the 2006 People's Movement, illustrates a gradual but incomplete democratization of policy processes. Despite consti-

tutional reforms and efforts to institutionalize inclusivity, Nepal's policymaking often remains elite-driven with limited engagement of marginalized communities. The 2015 Constitution enshrined principles of inclusion and participatory governance, highlighting citizen involvement as essential for democratic legitimacy and social cohesion. This evolving political context underscores the urgency of integrating sociological insights into Nepal's public policy to better address the country's diverse social realities and ongoing demands for justice and equity.

This article adopts a qualitative research methodology to bridge sociological theory and public policy through a comprehensive analytical inquiry. It is grounded in a critical review and interpretive analysis of a wide range of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature, theoretical writings, policy documents, governmental and non-governmental reports, and historical records. The study employs thematic analysis to identify, categorize, and interpret key sociological concepts, frameworks, and debates relevant to public policy processes. Special attention is given to how sociological insights can inform more inclusive, equitable, and context-sensitive policy-making, with particular focus on Nepal's historically layered and politically transitional context. Rather than producing new empirical data, the research prioritizes conceptual synthesis and critical reflection to articulate the relevance of sociological perspectives in shaping effective and socially responsive public policy frameworks.

## **2. Sociology as a 'Champion of the Underdog' and Public Agenda**

Sociology exerts a significant influence on the public agenda by shaping both how societal problems are understood and how they are addressed by policymakers. Through its theories, empirical research, and conceptual frameworks, sociology contributes to the identification, framing, and prioritization of social issues within the public and political spheres. As Burawoy (2005) argues, public sociology serves as a dialogical process between sociologists and diverse publics, influencing not only what people think about but also how governments respond to pressing social concerns. Sociological research challenges dominant narratives, provides alternative explanations, and introduces critical perspectives that redefine public debates around social problems.

One of the central contributions of sociology lies in its ability to illuminate the underlying structures of power, inequality, and social relations that shape collective outcomes. By connecting individual experiences with broader institutional forces, sociology helps to uncover the systemic causes of issues such as poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion. It also offers interpretive tools to reframe the terms in which such problems are discussed, moving beyond simplistic or technocratic solutions (Fraser, 1989). In doing so, sociology broadens the understanding of policy processes by highlighting how actors, events, and decisions are embedded within complex power dynamics and historical contexts.

Sociology has long been viewed as the “champion of the underdog” within the policy arena due to its sustained focus on marginalized and disadvantaged populations. From its foundational studies on class, race, and gender to contemporary analyses of urban poverty & structural inequality, sociological inquiry has consistently given voice to those often excluded from formal political processes (Gans, 1995). Policy-relevant sociological research frequently reflects the lived experiences and concerns of these groups, thereby enriching the policy discourse with grounded and inclusive perspectives.

A vital role of the sociologist, particularly in applied or public settings, is to capture and interpret the diverse viewpoints of various social groups. This includes identifying how different communities experience similar social problems in distinct ways and how their perspectives can inform more equitable policy interventions. For instance, research on urban poverty, ghettoization, and residential instability has revealed the long-term effects of social disinvestment and structural racism—insights that are crucial for designing effective urban and housing policies (Wilson, 1996; Massey & Denton, 1993).

Moreover, sociology contributes to policy debates on market relations by examining the social norms, institutional practices, and power asymmetries that shape economic behavior. It provides analytical tools for understanding the motivations and constraints faced by actors such as finance-oriented managers and institutional investors, thereby informing regulatory and governance strategies (Fligstein, 2001). Through both qualitative and quantitative methods, sociology offers nuanced analyses of social issues ranging from inner-city inequality and working-class decline to the cultural dynamics of the lower middle class—all of which hold significant implications for setting and shaping public policy agendas.

In sum, sociology not only informs what issues enter the public agenda but also transforms how those issues are perceived and addressed. Its emphasis on social justice, interpretive depth, and critical engagement makes it an indispensable resource for developing policies that are both effective and socially responsive.

### **3. Sociology and Government Policy**

For policy actors, it is often difficult to trace specific research studies that have directly altered their perceptions or decision-making processes. The influence of sociology on public policy is rarely immediate or overt; rather, it tends to be diffuse, incremental, and embedded within broader cognitive and institutional frameworks. As Weiss (1993) notes, the impact of social research, particularly sociology, is often “indirect, sometimes amorphous, sometimes slow”, and more perceptible to those deeply involved in the policy process than to external observers. Nevertheless, policymakers frequently draw upon sociological research and theory to provide legitimacy, justification, and intellectual coherence to their positions. In this sense, sociology does not simply inform policy—it becomes a rhetorical and cognitive resource used to persuade, advocate, and justify.

Sociology offers critical forms of enlightenment that extend beyond empirical data, contributing conceptual clarity and normative guidance to the policy arena. Sociological information is often used not as definitive evidence for action, but as a means of shaping how policy actors frame social problems and envision appropriate responses (Weiss, 1993). For example, broad theoretical frameworks—such as those concerning class conflict (Marx), social stratification (Weber), or individual mobility (Blau & Duncan, 1967)—have had a lasting influence on government interventions in education, community development, and social welfare. These theories guide the formation of policy agendas by offering interpretive tools that highlight the structural roots of inequality and the mechanisms of social change.

In addition, more specific sociological concepts have entered into public discourse and practice, influencing various sectors of policy. Ideas such as “labeling theory” (Becker, 1963) have reshaped thinking in criminal justice and mental health, challenging punitive models of behavior and promoting rehabilitative or restorative approaches. Concepts like “participatory decision-making” and “community

empowerment” have informed democratic governance, social planning, and development initiatives. Even seemingly technical areas, such as language policy in education, have been shaped by sociological understandings of identity, cultural capital, and social integration-emphasizing the significance of maintaining native language competence for cognitive development and social inclusion (Bourdieu, 1991).

Crucially, it is often sociological ideas-rather than isolated datasets-that shape how policy actors conceptualize issues. These ideas reorient debates, reduce misunderstanding over factual disagreements, and help bridge ideological divides by introducing more nuanced understandings of social dynamics. Sociology helps decision-makers move beyond simplistic or individualistic explanations of social problems, enabling them to recognize the complex interplay between agency and structure, and between cultural norms and institutional constraints.

Furthermore, sociology enriches public decision-making by offering deeper insights into social structure, group processes, and the subtleties of human behavior. It refines political discourse by introducing more sophisticated notions of social conflict, disorganization, collective action, and normative change. The intellectual tools provided by sociology allow for the redefinition of public problems and open space for alternative solutions that may be more equitable, inclusive, and contextually grounded (Burawoy, 2005; Mills, 1959). Over time, these contributions accumulate and subtly reshape the political and policy landscape-expanding the boundaries of what is seen as possible, legitimate, or just.

In sum, while the impact of sociology on public policy may be indirect and difficult to quantify, it remains profound. It equips policy actors with interpretive frameworks, legitimizing narratives, and analytical tools that transform both the understanding of public issues and the range of policy options considered viable.

#### **4. Globalization and Public Policy**

Sociology provides critical analytical tools to understand the evolving dynamics of globalization and its profound implications for public policy. The contemporary trend of globalization, especially under the influence of neoliberal ideology, has significantly altered the traditional role of the state in policymaking. Sociological inquiry allows us to examine globalization not just as an economic or political

phenomenon, but as a broad structural transformation that reshapes the relationships among states, markets, and societies.

One of the key developments in the global policy landscape is the increasing influence of transnational actors, including multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and global governance bodies. This transformation is well captured in the work of Cerny (2001), who contrasts the classical “iron triangle” model of policy formulation—comprised of politicians, bureaucrats, and interest groups—with what he terms the “golden pentangle.” The “golden pentangle” reflects the growing complexity and internationalization of policymaking, wherein five broad actor groups interact: traditional national actors (politicians and bureaucrats), non-governmental organizations, international financial institutions (e.g., the IMF, World Bank, WTO), multilateral forums (e.g., G7, G20), and hybrid public-private institutions (such as transnational markets).

According to Cerny, the rise of these exogenous policy actors—often operating across borders and beyond the formal control of democratic institutions—has led to a profound shift in how policy agendas are set. In contrast to the relatively closed and nationally bounded iron triangles, the golden pentangle model grants greater influence to elite transnational actors who are better positioned to navigate and shape the global policy environment. These elites—often drawn from the financial sector, multinational business networks, and technocratic policy circles—have acquired enhanced structural and relational power due to their mobility and strategic positioning within global markets.

This shift also contributes to what Cerny identifies as a “democratic deficit” in contemporary governance. The declining influence of organized labor, along with the increasing constraints on welfare states imposed by global financial markets and institutions, has marginalized national actors and weakened domestic accountability mechanisms. As Cerny (2001) explains: “Globalization is a complex process that, while generally driven at the elite level, also creates new playing fields for a wider range of groups to participate. However, it is also a circumscribed process, constrained by underlying structural change—financial globalization in particular. It involves the continual evolution of both new constraints and new opportunities”.

This sociological perspective reveals that while globalization may open new arenas for participation and exchange, the structure of global governance often privileges highly mobile sectors of international capital, particularly finance, and entrenches unequal power relations. Consequently, the role of national governments in shaping public policy is increasingly subordinated to transnational forces, raising urgent questions about democratic representation, accountability, and social justice in the global era.

Sociology, therefore, plays an indispensable role in decoding these transformations. It brings to light how global institutional arrangements and neoliberal ideologies shape national policies, influence welfare systems, and constrain the agency of domestic actors. By situating policy processes within global power structures, sociological analysis fosters a deeper understanding of the challenges and contradictions of contemporary governance.

#### **4. Epistemic Community and Policy Coordination**

Sociology plays a crucial role in the formation of epistemic communities-networks of knowledge-based experts who contribute to policy coordination by creating transnational relationships and illuminating the salient dimensions of complex issues. These communities are composed of individuals with shared normative and principled beliefs, common causal understandings, and a consensual knowledge base, often grounded in sociological theories and empirical research. They operate beyond national boundaries and help shape policy debates on global concerns, especially where technical uncertainty and complexity hinder clear decision-making.

As Haas (1992) explains, epistemic communities are instrumental in articulating cause-and-effect relationships of multifaceted problems, helping states define their interests, framing issues for international deliberation, and identifying key points for negotiation and policy resolution. He notes: "The networks of knowledge-based experts-epistemic communities-play [a role] in articulating the cause-and-effect relationships of complex problems, helping states identify their interests, framing the issues for collective debate, proposing specific policies, and identifying salient points for negotiation".

Within this framework, sociology does not merely provide empirical data but also fosters the interpretive lenses-such as frames, narratives, and paradigms-through which policy actors comprehend

and respond to public problems. Scholars like Campbell (2002) have emphasized that ideas-including theories, worldviews, principled beliefs, and institutional norms-are socially constructed and significantly shape policy-making. Sociology, therefore, contributes to the construction and diffusion of these ideas across policy networks, reinforcing the embeddedness of the policy process in broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts. It plays a key role in interpreting the meaning of policy problems, framing alternatives, and legitimizing policy choices.

Beyond agenda-setting and formulation, sociology also informs the processes of policy implementation. Traditional implementation models-such as the top-down or bottom-up approaches-have often failed to account for the contextual, relational, and transnational dimensions of policy outcomes. In response, sociology advocates for more integrated and dynamic frameworks that bridge the macro-micro divide, and highlight the interplay between structure and agency. This perspective emphasizes the contextual embeddedness of implementation processes, recognizing how local practices, institutional arrangements, and transnational connections interact to influence policy delivery and effectiveness.

By linking global epistemic networks to grounded local realities, sociology offers an essential analytical toolkit for understanding and improving both the design and execution of public policy in an increasingly interconnected world. It highlights the importance of social interpretation, contextual variation, and the co-construction of meaning among actors situated across different scales of governance.

## **5. Public Policy in Nepal**

Public policy in Nepal has been a subject of discussion and development across both state and non-state arenas over different historical periods. Broadly defined, public policy encompasses constitutions, legislative statutes, judicial rulings and precedents, as well as administrative rules and regulations that guide societal actions and interactions (Dye, 2017). The roots of public policy in Nepal can be traced back to ancient times, drawing intellectual and normative references from classical South Asian texts such as Sukraniti and Kautilya's Arthashastra. These early texts emphasized governance, ethics, and statecraft, and have influenced policy perspectives in various South Asian polities, including Nepal.

Despite such ancient foundations, structured and participatory policy formulation was limited in Nepal's historical periods. During the Lichhavi (c. 400-750 CE) and Malla (12th-18th centuries) periods, policymaking was highly centralized in the hands of monarchs and ruling elites. The general population had little to no involvement in the development of public policy. This historical continuity of elite-centric governance meant that participatory policymaking mechanisms never had the opportunity to take root in the early phases of Nepal's state formation.

The advent of the Rana regime in 1846 marked the beginning of a 104-year-long oligarchic rule characterized by authoritarianism and systemic exclusion of the public from policy processes. The Rana rulers monopolized state authority and governance, using public policy as a tool to consolidate power and enrich their own families at the expense of national resources and the general populace (Joshi & Rose, 1966). The state's coercive machinery was employed not for inclusive development but for extraction and domination. Public policy under the Ranas lacked social legitimacy, as it was crafted through a top-down approach devoid of public engagement or consultation. One of the first formal and codified expressions of public policy during this period was the promulgation of the Muluki Ain (National Civil Code) in 1854 by Jung Bahadur Rana. Although significant as a written legal framework, this policy document emerged from an autocratic, hierarchical process and reflected the Rana regime's interest in social control rather than democratic inclusion.

The downfall of the Rana regime in 1951 following a popular revolution ushered in a new era of political openness and democratic aspiration. With the introduction of a constitutional monarchy and the first general election in 1959, Nepal appeared poised for democratic governance. However, this experiment was short-lived. In 1960, King Mahendra dismissed the elected government and introduced the partyless Panchayat system, which re-centralized power in the monarchy. Under this system, the King held executive, legislative, and judicial authority, and public policy was formulated under royal prerogative. Nonetheless, a major reform was introduced in 1963 when the Muluki Ain was amended to promote caste equality and abolish untouchability, signaling a shift toward more progressive legal norms, albeit within a non-democratic framework.

The restoration of multiparty democracy in 1990, following the first People's Movement, marked a critical juncture in Nepal's public policy landscape. A new liberal democratic constitution was adopted, which limited monarchical powers and recognized political pluralism (Upreti *et al.*, 2010; Upreti, 2010). Political parties became the dominant actors in the policy process. However, the new constitution failed to fully accommodate Nepal's deep-rooted socio-cultural diversity and marginalized communities. Public policymaking remained elite-driven, and meaningful participation from various social groups was minimal. This exclusion generated widespread dissatisfaction, particularly among historically oppressed and under-represented communities.

This discontent culminated in the Maoist insurgency, which began in 1996 and evolved into a decade-long armed conflict affecting large parts of the country. The movement was rooted in demands for socio-economic justice, inclusion, and structural transformation of the state. The political deadlock was eventually resolved through the 2006 Second People's Movement, led by a coalition of seven political parties and the Maoists. This movement not only brought an end to the monarchy but also declared Nepal a federal, democratic, secular, and inclusive republic. Subsequently, two Constituent Assemblies (elected in 2008 and 2013) were mandated to draft a new constitution. The promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015 (often referenced as 2017 in the Nepali calendar) marked a significant step toward inclusive governance. The constitution-making process was envisioned as a participatory and inclusive exercise, acknowledging that genuine democracy requires public engagement in the formation of fundamental public policy frameworks (Ghai & Cottrell, 2008).

Citizen participation in the drafting of the constitution was viewed not only as a democratic imperative but also as a developmental process for individuals and society. As Adhikari (2010) argues, broad-based public deliberation enhances collective social learning, fosters mutual understanding across diverse societal sectors, and helps create a shared sense of purpose and public reason. The constitution thus serves as a meta-policy document that provides both the legal and normative foundation for inclusive and participatory policymaking in contemporary Nepal.

## **6. Conclusion**

Public policy, long dominated by economic rationalism and technological determinism, has often struggled to produce equitable and effective outcomes. While economic frameworks emphasize growth, efficiency, and cost-benefit calculations, they frequently overlook the underlying social complexities, power relations, and lived experiences that shape both the formation and impact of policy. This limitation highlights the indispensable role of sociology in enriching the policy process. By foregrounding the relationship between structure and agency, sociology offers critical insight into how policies are shaped by broader social forces and how they, in turn, affect diverse communities.

Sociological engagement with public policy introduces analytical depth by addressing questions that lie beyond narrow economic interests. It reveals how public problems are socially constructed, how power is distributed across institutions, and how social norms and cultural meanings influence both the perception of issues and the selection of solutions. The sociological perspective is particularly valuable in the agenda-setting phase, where it identifies problems that might otherwise remain invisible, especially those concerning marginalized or under-represented groups. Sociology also facilitates a more inclusive discourse by integrating the voices of those most affected by public decisions.

Furthermore, in the context of globalization and increasing policy interdependence, sociology plays a vital role in connecting domestic governance with transnational dynamics. Through the concept of epistemic communities, sociology helps explain how networks of knowledge-based actors coordinate policy responses to global challenges, such as climate change, migration, and inequality. These communities do not simply transmit technical knowledge; they shape policy debates by introducing new frames of understanding, identifying cause-effect relationships, and negotiating shared meanings across borders. As Peter Haas (1992) and John Campbell (2002) argue, ideas-rather than mere interests-are crucial in shaping the direction of public policy. Sociology, in this regard, serves as a generative force that supplies theories, worldviews, and conceptual frameworks to structure policymaking and implementation.

Moreover, sociology extends its influence beyond policy formulation to the implementation phase. By challenging the limitations of traditional top-down or bottom-up models,

sociological inquiry promotes more dynamic and contextual approaches that consider the complex interplay between global forces and local realities. It bridges macro-level institutional analysis with micro-level lived experiences, offering more responsive and adaptive models of governance.

In sum, the integration of sociological insight into public policy enriches the process at every stage-problem identification, agenda setting, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. It ensures that policies are not only technically sound and economically viable but also socially just, culturally resonant, and democratically legitimate. As the global policy landscape becomes increasingly complex, interconnected, and uncertain, the contribution of sociology is not merely complementary but essential. By advancing a deeper understanding of human behavior, institutional dynamics, and normative frameworks, sociology helps reimagine public policy as a more inclusive, reflexive, and transformative endeavour.

This is particularly evident in the case of Nepal, where public policy has undergone a long and turbulent evolution-from autocratic, elite-driven frameworks to efforts at participatory and inclusive governance. The 2015 Constitution marked a turning point, establishing a foundation for federal, democratic, and inclusive policymaking. Yet, the challenges of social inequality, exclusion, and elite domination persist. Here, sociology can play a pivotal role in ensuring that Nepal's public policies genuinely reflect the aspirations of its diverse population. By embedding sociological understanding into Nepal's policy discourse, we can better navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, central authority and local autonomy, and technocratic decision-making and grassroots participation-ultimately fostering a more just and responsive public policy environment in Nepal.

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