



**Centre For A New South Asia**

**India-Nepal Seminar Vision Paper**

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## **India-Nepal Development Cooperation Youth Leading Sustainable Development**

### **1. Abstract**

As India and Nepal transcend into a period of economic growth and development, global circumstances enforce a social responsibility to develop sustainably. Along with the various areas of cooperation, India and Nepal cannot ignore sustainability. Rather, it presents an opportunity for the two nations to set an example before the world and emerge as leaders of sustainable development.

The sheer number of youth that the two nations comprise of, is in itself a testament to the impact they can create. Moreover, young people of the two nations have historically proven themselves to be leaders to drive change and shape not only their future but also the present they wish to live in. Global research has recognized the commendable role played by the youth in creating a sustainable planet and them being provided with an opportunity on the tables at which decisions are made will provide for new perspectives and innovative solutions to work towards sustainable development, along with building a stronger relationship between the two nations.

Keeping in mind UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17 – Partnership for goals, the vision paper intends to study qualitative data and analyse how the youth can strengthen bilateral ties between India and Nepal while being leaders of sustainable development for the two nations.

**Keywords:** youth, sustainable development, collaboration for goals, bilateral ties, leadership

### **2. Introduction and Background**

“The relationship between India and Nepal is as stable as a mountain, and as old as a mountain. We have to give a new height to our instinctive and natural relationships as much as the Himalayas. The relationships that we have lived for thousands of years, from food, music, festivals, and customs to family ties, now also have to be linked to new areas like science, technology, and infrastructure” (“English Translation of Prime Minister’s Address at 2566th

Buddha Jayanti and Lumbini Day 2022 Event in Nepal,” 2022). This section from the speech of India’s Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi provides a great gist of relationship between India and Nepal. The two countries have had a long-standing partnership and coming of the new age adds fresh avenues for cooperation. Though the relationship has seen its ups and downs, but Nepal continues to be one of India’s key neighbour country, especially because of India’s ‘Neighbour First Policy’ (“Brief on Development Partnership with Nepal,” n.d.). The regular diplomatic interactions and agreements have kept the two countries close and ensured amicable conflict resolution.

Nepal shares border with 5 Indian states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand (“India – Nepal Bilateral Brief,” n.d.). The geographical proximity and the visa-free cross-border movement has led India to become Nepal’s top trade partner. Along with that, Indians constitute of the highest percentage of tourists that visit Nepal and India is the only petroleum provider to the latter. The alliance has proved efficient in times of need, be it India providing vaccine support during the Covid-19 pandemic or being the first responders during any natural calamity (Sharma, 2024). Be it culture or religion, matters relating to defence or economy, the India-Nepal relationship includes all possible facets. Neither of the two countries can ignore each other and have often attempted to cooperate and grow together.

Even when it comes to sustainable development, the two countries have signed agreements on renewable energy, building sustainable infrastructure, hydropower (Joint Vision Statement on Power Sector Cooperation in 2022), and ease of mobility. This common goal of meeting sustainable development has been a catalyst in strengthening of the bilateral ties. The same has been signified by the Prime Ministers of both India and Nepal (“India – Nepal Economic Ties: New Horizons,” 2018). As the UN SDG 17 lists down nineteen (19) targets, India and Nepal have been tireless working towards being able to cooperate and be there for each other to ensure a collaborative growth. India being a larger country, both in size and economically, may have big role to play but Nepal’s contribution in the relationship is beyond commendable. The current scenario provides for the two countries to set example for the world and be role models for collaborative sustainable development.

Though the two countries are putting in tremendous effort, they are currently lacking in efficiently involving the youth. Over 50% of India’s population is under the age of 25, which amounts to over 70 million individuals. The median age for the country is 28.4, whereas for Nepal is 25. As the world will get older, India and Nepal will be young and remain young for

a long time. The India-Nepal relationship needs to be looked beyond the '*Roti Beti* and *Rozi Roti*' lens and must begin to align with the youth's aspirations. Sabyasachi Dutta, in her article suggests that youth's aspirations must be prioritized 'against the backdrop of several factors: ecological, economic, geopolitical, and socio-political' (Dutta, 2023). Issues relating to education and literacy continue to persist amongst the youth. The two countries haven't been able to get rid of crisis like hunger and poverty. Along with those, youth has not been given enough opportunity at the decision-making tables to share their perspective and insights for a more holistic approach to sustainable development. The United Nations Security Council has also made a call for 'Youth Sensitivity', which means to understand the unique perspectives and experiences of the youth within the same community and keeping them in mind while taking any action ("Youth, Peace and Security - A Programming Handbook," n.d.; Singh, 2024). This enforces a need for the youth to be brought to the forefront.

However, before even being able to lead, the gap that needs to be filled is the lack of interaction between Indian and Nepali youth. There were times when the senior most Nepali leaders grew up in India. Former Nepali Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala is an Indian born and was a graduate from Kirori Mal College of the Delhi University in India. It is this interaction from an early stage, within schools, colleges and universities and even amongst these institutions across borders will foster stronger ties and greater opportunity for them to collaborate. Thus, this vision paper wishes to analyse how collaboration can be enhanced amongst Indian and Nepali youth, allowing them to together lead the path of sustainable development for the two countries.

### **3. Policy Outlook**

As stated previously, India and Nepal have signed various agreements together and the policies which may involve the youth are discussed in this section of the paper. How useful are these and their relevance in respect to honing youth-to-youth ties will be analysed in the next section of the paper.

One of the benchmarks in relations to educational and research collaboration is the Memorandum of Understanding signed in collaboration between Kathmandu University (KU), Nepal and Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT-M), India. Another similar step is the Letter of Agreement (LoA) between Kathmandu University (KU), Nepal and Indian Institute

of Technology (IITM), India [For Joint degree program at Master's level] ("List of MoUs/Agreements Signed and Exchanged during Prime Minister's Visit to Lumbini, Nepal," 2022). The two work towards fostering student exchanges, faculty collaboration and collaborative research projects between premium educational institutions in India and Nepal. Another prolific project is decision to collaborate on promoting Sanskrit education. India and Nepal have come together to work on a research project on Sanskrit, to study the texts in detail and promote the language ("Nepal, India to Collaborate to Promote Sanskrit Education," 2024).

One cannot ignore the significance of the MoU between Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service (SSIFS) and the Institute of Foreign Affairs, Nepal which allows for exchange of training methods and knowledge, faculty and diplomat-to-diplomat interactions. It will help both the countries build common knowledge and learn from each-others best practices. Under the High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs), there has been an inclusion of three new projects, one each in education, health and culture sector at an estimated cost of NRs 122.52 million (US\$ 9,14,863 as on September 2024) ("India, Nepal Sign MoUs for 3 Projects in Education, Health, Culture Sector," 2024). The educational project has already kickstarted and the construction of the school in Nepal's Pyuthan district has begun.

There are several Scholarship schemes also which the Embassy of India offers to Nepali students. The list of scholarship schemes includes, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee General Scholarship Scheme (ABVGSS), the Silver Jubilee Scholarship Scheme (SJSS), the COMPEX scholarship scheme, and more ("About Scholarship," n.d.). Nearly 1,500 scholarships are offered by India every year. Along with the above schemes and policies, a few other pioneer tie ups on the educational front are:

- Nepal-Bharat Library
- B.P. Koirala India-Nepal Foundation
- India-Nepal Alumni Network

This section encompasses the key educational and youth centric tie-ups between India and Nepal. The two countries have made a huge progress in terms of their educational collaboration but its impact on youth-to-youth collaboration and involvement is yet to be looked up, rather analysed.

#### **4. Problem Identification and Analysis of Findings**

India and Nepal have been able to transition their relationship with time. The educational reforms adopted are extremely beneficial. However, the question before us is that are they sufficient? Do the current policies, tie-ups and agreements provide for a conducive environment for youth to collaborate and for them to be leading change? Responding to the question with an affirmative yes, would not be possible. Yes, the collaboration between education institutions will lead to engagement and interactions. Yes, the eight million Nepalese citizens living and working in India and the six million Indians living Nepal build a closely knit network (“India-Nepal Bilateral Brief,” 2022). But, for rapid change to take place and for India and Nepal to successfully meet their sustainable development targets, the two countries will have to involve their youth more effectively.

Our study regarding the India-Nepal ties shows us that the former has been the one providing for a lot of opportunities to the latter. Scholarships to Nepalese students certainly gives them the opportunity to live and study in India and learn more about India. However, the opportunity for Indian students to explore Nepal and know about its good things and internal issues is limited. This acts as a hindrance between the youth of the two countries and makes it difficult to understand each-others issues, let alone work towards solving them. Be it climatic events, political unrests or any other notable occurrence, news remains to be the primary source of information. Human-to-human interaction continues to be limited.

Also, as important as it is to interact in an educational setting, Indian and Nepalese youth also need to be brought together to deliberate upon key issues and work towards a way forward. The youth are as much part of the population as any one else and must have a say in the decision-making processes because they too bear the impact of all that occurs on the planet. Rather, they are going to bear it for even a period longer than people making decisions today.

Age cannot continue to be a factor to permit leadership opportunities. The youth are not just the leaders of tomorrow but also of the present (Singh, 2024). We have three core reasons behind advocating for youth leadership. First, the sheer number the youth exists in is the highest ever in the history of our planet and strength lies in numbers. If the youth decide to come together to bring change, it will surely be made possible (“As World Marks Arrival of 8 Billionth Citizen, the Largest Ever Generation of Youth Call for Change,” 2022). Secondly, young people in both the past and the present have displayed tremendous ability and have been able to bring magnanimous change in the society. Be it young revolutionary leaders during India’s independence movement or the numerous climate activists today. Youth are not to be

controlled and forced to a particular kind of system (Steinberg, 2011). They need to be guided and mentored while they lead change and build something no one envisioned before. And lastly, young people have been a more active participant of the technological shift in society. Not only do they have to equip themselves with the latest of technologies but keep updating themselves with them. As the stated in the definition of ‘Youth Sensitivity’, the context of the youth needs to be brought to the forefront to enable any change. We cannot miss-out on such an integral part of our population.

## **5. Proposed Policies and Recommendations**

Considering the current situation and our analysis, we would like to propose a few recommendations and policy suggestion to enable youth engagement and active participation in leading sustainable development. We would like to share the recommendations in two categories, namely ‘Engagement and Cooperation’ and ‘Leadership for Sustainable Development’.

### **Engagement and Cooperation:**

- i. Setting up of educational institutions, especially to provide primary and secondary education, in the border areas. The Himalayan region lacks access to a lot of resources and institutions in which both Indian and Nepalese students can study together must be established. It will provide for interaction from the very beginning. Contextualization and recognition of problems will also be enabled.
- ii. Skill development centres in the border areas. To meet the needs of today’s job market, skill education becomes as important as textual/theoretical education. Providing access to skills will allow the young people to get introduced to a new array of opportunities and they will be able to play an active role in nation building through economic contribution, innovation and problem solving.
- iii. Organization of youth engagement camps for young people of both the countries, which will help them get familiarized with each-others culture, heritage, society, positives advancements and practices and issues.

### **Leadership for Sustainable Development:**

- iv. Setting up of youth dialogues for the young people of India and Nepal. Such dialogues must bring together youth from both India and Nepal to discuss solutions

for local, national, bilateral and global issues. Youth must share their perspectives, analysis and suggestions in these dialogues. The point of views should be then communicated to higher authorities who must consider them while taking decisions.

- v. Inter-organizational collaborations to create an impact on-ground. There are various youth-led organization both in India and Nepal which are working towards addressing issues to meet the sustainable development goals. These organizations must collaborate, share knowledge and best practices, to catalyse change.
- vi. Robust mode of communication through youth ambassadors. India and Nepal must nominate a set of youth ambassadors from the various universities present in the two countries. These ambassadors then should act as representatives and continuously work towards cooperation and collaboration, both through discussions and actions.

## **6. Conclusion**

The 'Engagement and Cooperation' set of recommendations will allow for mutual understanding and respect. It will fill the existing communication gap and build a stronger bond between the Indian and Nepalese population. As interactions and discussions will not remain limited to diplomatic levels, the strengthening of the community will give lead to new avenues of cooperation. Further, the recommendations made in the 'Youth leading Sustainable Development' will help the two countries pick up pace in meeting the sustainable development goals as it will now include participation from a larger population. The capitalization of the youthfulness of the young will help the two countries grow. With the active participation of youth, SDG 17's call for partnership will be met in a more effect manner.

This paper has attempted to cover the India-Nepal bilateral relationship and while highlighting on the success of the two countries, has tried to showcase the gap that exists regarding youth engagement, primarily in the area of cooperation for sustainable development. Moreover, our study emphasizes on the impact youth can create and take evidence from the role young people have played in driving change historically as well as in the present times. Finally, we have come to the conclusion that when it comes to cooperation for development between India and Nepal, the youth of the country can be key agents of change. The only thing is that the youth need to be enabled to lead the change and certain steps need to be taken by both the countries to do so. Thus, we conclude by stating our recommendations for enhance



engagement and interaction between the youth and creating a space for them on the decision-making tables to create an impact.

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