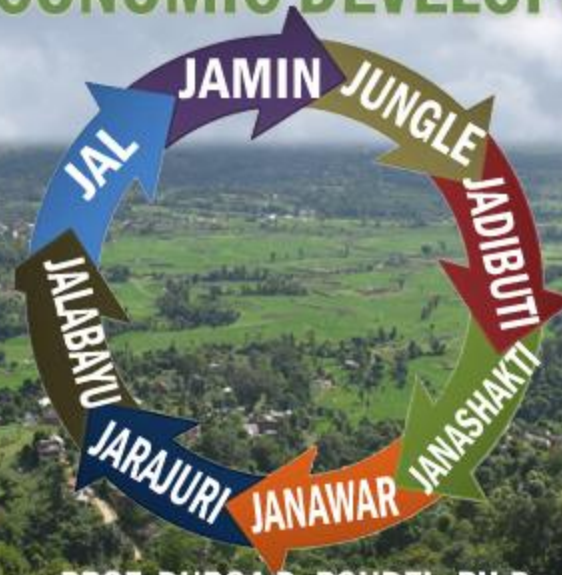


ASTA-JA FOR GRASSROOTS-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



PROF. DURGA D. POUDEL, PH.D.,
UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA AT LAFAYETTE

Prof. Durga D. Poudel, Ph.D., University of Louisiana at Lafayette

A decade ago, I founded a groundbreaking Asta-Ja Framework for nation-building and socio-economic transformation of Nepal. Asta-Ja Framework includes eight “Ja”, Nepali letter “Ja”:

1. Jal (Water),
2. Jamin (Land),
3. Jungle (Forest),
4. Jadibuti (Medicinal and Aromatic plants),
5. Janashakti (Manpower),
6. Janawar, (Animals),
7. Jarajuri (Crop plants), and
8. Jalabayu (climate)

and, Eight principles:

1. Community awareness,
2. Capacity-building,
3. Policy decision making,
4. Interrelationships and Linkages,
5. Comprehensive assessment,
6. Sustainable technologies and Practices;
7. Institutions, Trade, and Governance and
8. Sustainable Community Development

and Socio-economic transformation (Poudel, 2016).

Based on Asta-Ja Framework and Nepal's current socio-economic and environmental challenges, I have also developed Nepal Vision 2040, which aims elevating Nepal at par of a developed nation by 2040 (Poudel, 2018). Nepal Vision 2040 embraces nine developmental themes:

1. Food self-sufficiency,
2. Reliance on renewable resource energy,
3. Thirty million tourists annually,
4. Export of organic foods, medicinal and aromatic plants, and other products,
5. Corruption control,
6. Infrastructural development,
7. Community resiliency,
8. Social services, and
9. Asta-Ja resource conservation, utilization and development.

Nepal has competitive advantage on sustainable conservation, utilization, and development of its vast Asta-Ja resources for accelerated economic growth and fast-paced socio-economic transformation.

Local Communities and Governments:

The 2015 Constitution of Nepal gives autonomy to local and provincial governments for raising and spending revenues while driving their planning and development processes by themselves (Payne and Basnyat, 2017). Federal government is responsible for planning and development of big projects such as large hydropower, multi-provincial projects, national highways, and railways. In agriculture, local governments will manage local irrigation projects, agricultural roads, extension services, and livestock health; provincial governments will manage province level agriculture, livestock, and irrigation projects; and the central government will manage the issues of quarantine and large-scale irrigation projects (Kyle and Resnick, 2016). In this context, the Asta-Ja model complements thoroughly to grassroots awareness and participation on problem identification, program development, project implementation, and monitoring and evaluation for natural resources conservation, development and utilization. The Asta-Ja framework requires a high level of community awareness, capacity-building, assessment of Asta-Ja resources, and working collaboratively with various stakeholders and the government. Local communities across the nation are facing multitudes of problems including poor agricultural productivity, lack of drinking water, forest degradation, lack of health facilities, lack of farm labor, diseases and pests on animals and crops, lack of sanitation, lack of employment, and lack of economic activities, climate change impacts, policy conflicts, lack of financial resources, and ecological degradation. It is critical for local communities to identify and prioritize their problems, develop alternative measures for problem solving, evaluate alternative measures and identify the most appropriate one for problem solving, implement them, and perform monitoring and evaluation of these solution measures. Local communities can adopt various approaches for integrated development including watershed approach, commodity approach, block approach, specialized zone approach, etc. Through resource inventorying and problem analysis, local communities can develop alternative resource conservation and development scenarios and evaluate them for their implementation. This national focus on grassroots-based planning and development will empower and engage all of the 753 local governments on economic development and natural resources conservation fully in the country. Capacity building of local governments and the communities is necessary for sustainable community development. Local governments should lead and actively guide the local communities in their planning and development processes, while national level policies and programs must be very supportive to the local level programs and policies. There should be a great deal of vertical and horizontal integration of national and local level policies and programs for their successful implementation. Building local capacity for resource inventorying and analysis, program development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of programs and projects is very critical for grassroots-based resource planning and development.

Agricultural Transformation:

Nepal has been aiming for self-sufficiency since its First Five-Year Plan (1956-61), when its major exports included jute products, rice, wood, medicinal herbs, bamboo, and sabai grass, and major imports included textiles, sugar, cement, and cigarettes (Consing, 1963). For import substitution, the U.S.S.R. and China assisted Nepal by establishing sugar, cigarette, and cement factories as early as in 1960s. However, despite high potential for food self-sufficiency, Nepal has been importing wide range of agricultural products in recent decades.

Major agricultural commodities imported in 2014/2015 included:

- Cereals (Rs. 35.12 billion),
- Fat and edible oil (Rs 22.51 billion),
- Vegetables (Rs 15.93 billion),
- Fruits and nuts (Rs 10.54 billion),
- Animal fodder (Rs. 10.02 billion),
- Oil seeds (Rs. 9.11 billion),
- Coffee, tea and spices (Rs. 4.27 billion),
- Sugar and confectionary (Rs. 3.49 billion),
- Beverages (Rs. 2.92 billion),
- Tobacco (Rs. 2.55 billion),
- Live animal (Rs. 2.42 billion),
- Dairy products (Rs.2.15 billion),
- and Fish (Rs. 1.15 billion)

(CBS, 2016b)

Of cereals,

- Rice and Paddy Constituted Rs. 23.79 billion (684,130 MT) and
- Maize Rs. 7.43 billion (290.993 MT).

More than 95% of rice and paddy and maize imports came from India.

I have discussed thoroughly in my recent publication (Poudel, 2019) about the five key drivers of agricultural transformation in Nepal:

1. Smallholder mixed-farming system,
2. Incentives,
3. Pro-poor market,
4. Infrastructure, and
5. Policies and programs, for agricultural transformation in Nepal.

It is important to keep in mind that smallholder mixed-farming system, which is being practiced nearly by four million households in the country, is the “nucleus” of Nepalese agriculture and must not be ignored at all for its development. While scientific communities are talking seriously about many different types of agricultural production systems including regenerative agriculture, climate-smart agriculture, organic agriculture, sustainable agriculture, and integrated agricultural production system, the millenniums old and ecologically evolved smallholder mixed-farming system in Nepal presents a great value and opportunity for sustainable agricultural production. Various features that are common to these agricultural systems include the integration of livestock, forestry and crop production for nutrient management; use of organic sources for nutrient supply, systems approach on the

management of resources, crop diversification, integrated pest management techniques, biodiversity, minimum tillage or no-till systems, crop rotation, healthy soils, and the production of nutritious and wholesome foods. These crop production philosophies and practices constitute the core values and measures of Nepalese smallholder mixed-farming system. The notion of small farming size, lack of mechanization, difficult terrains, lack of productivity in Nepalese agriculture, and more importantly labeling the smallholder mixed-farming system as unproductive and subsistence agriculture and taking this system as a hurdle in agricultural development is totally a misconception and it is wrong. There is an enormous value of smallholder mixed-farming system for sustainable agriculture and natural resource management, climate change adaptation, diversified income generation, wholesome food production, and grassroots-based economic development. Of course, appropriate government policies and programs must be formulated aiming promotion and advancement of smallholder mixed-farming system. The blunder we have made in our vision and direction in agricultural development in Nepal is ignoring and undermining the value of our smallholder mixed-farming system in resource conservation, employment and income generation, and agro-industrialization. This system brings all Asta-Ja resources to a farm and forces farmers to become a system scientist in resources management, development and utilization. This is where our competitive advantages lie.

Nepalese Diaspora:



Prof. Durga D. Poudel, Ph.D

In the past 10 years, more than 3.5 million workers received permits from the Government of Nepal for foreign works in more than 150 countries (Dhungana, 2018; The Himalayan Times, 2018). Major destination countries for foreign works include Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and South Korea. Nepal received \$6.6 billion (31.3% of Nepal's GDP) in remittances in the FY 2016/17 and ranked the fourth largest country in relation to the contribution of remittances in 2016 followed by Krygyzstan and Tajikistan (Nepal Sansar, 2018). The biggest sources of remittances to Nepal in 2016 were Qatar, Saudi Arabia, India and the United Arab Emirates. However, problems related to worker's safety due to harassing job environments in foreign countries along with adverse socio-economic conditions at home are very serious. Similarly, a total of 146,870 no objection letters permitting students to go abroad, mainly Australia, Germany, USA, Ireland, Canada, and New Zealand, for higher studies, were issued from FY 2010/11 to December, 2016, (Aryal, 2017; Nandi, 2018). The large number of migrant workers together with an increasingly high number of Nepalese students bound for foreign countries every year constitute a relatively robust, widespread, and large Nepalese diaspora around the globe. Nepalese diaspora especially in western countries including Australia, New Zealand, and Japan have been quite successful in getting higher education, acquiring access to new technology and skills, and getting experience in business management. There exists a huge pool of global knowledge, skills, and technology with Nepalese diaspora, which can be utilized for the development of Nepal through effective transfer and management. For this, it is important to understand the form and location of knowledge, capability of diaspora for knowledge transfer, knowledge transfer mechanism and successful implementation of knowledge in Nepal. While knowledge transfer is regarded as one of the most important processes for economic growth of developing countries, successful knowledge transfer is a quite challenging task. According to Cummings (2003), at least five factors affect successful knowledge transfer: the source's knowledge

sharing capability, the broader environment of knowledge sharing, recipient's learning conditions, the relationship between the source and the recipient, and the form and location of knowledge. In addition, the fitness of the knowledge that is being transferred, level of capacity-building of source and recipient organizations through training for knowledge transfer, identification of barriers of knowledge transfer, and having correct understanding of social and technical systems of recipient (Newell, 2005; Paulin and Suneson, 2012; Ekore, 2014) include additional factors for successful knowledge transfer. Nepalese diaspora can effectively help on capacity-building at national, regional, and local levels. Capacity-building is a process which involves identification of problems, analyzing the problems, developing collaborative projects, project implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the projects, and reporting (Poudel, 2012). Nepalese diaspora can contribute significantly on planning and management, knowledge transfer, investment, trade and tourism promotion and sustainable community development. It is important the Nepalese government fully empower Nepalese Diaspora and facilitate the process of the direct involvement of Nepalese Diaspora in political processes and nation-building. There must not be any hesitation on the part of Nepalese government for embracing Nepalese Diaspora through appropriate legal processes and privileges such as granting Nepalese citizenship with full rights.

Community Resiliency:

Nepal is highly affected by climate change impacts and natural disasters (Sharma, 2010; Devkota and Bhattarai, 2012). Declining precipitation, increasing temperature, drying springs, extreme rain events, droughts, increasing risks of flash floods, decline in yield of agricultural crops, soil erosion and land degradation, and emerging diseases and parasites were identified as some of the major impacts of climate change in Nepal (Yang et al., 2014; Poudel, 2015; Poudel and Duex, 2017). Due to low level of economic development and high dependency on agriculture for economic growth, vulnerability of Nepalese society to climate change impacts remains very high. Rapid climate change coupled with unsustainable developmental practices and strategies has called for urgent development of comprehensive national policies and programs gearing Nepal towards green economy for poverty reduction, climate change adaptation, and sustainable development (Karki, 2013). Community resiliency entails building communities that are less vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, landslides or climate change. Nepal is currently facing historic rebuilding challenges following the devastating 7.8 Magnitude Gorkha Earthquake on April 25, 2015 which took the life of more than 9,000 people injuring more than 19,000 and a complete loss of more than half million building structures affecting more than eight million people. Adverse economic impact of the Gorkha Earthquake coupled with the economic blockade by India is evident by the overall GDP growth rate of 0.01% along with the growth rates of 0.03% and 0.16%, respectively, for agriculture and non-agriculture sector in 2015/16 fiscal year (MoF, 2017). Another natural disaster, the 2017 Terai Flood, has reportedly caused a total loss of more than Rs. 63 billion destroying 41,000 houses completely and damaging 151,000 houses partially. An estimated cost for the recovery of the 2017 Terai Flood is Rs. 73 billion. Additional natural disasters of high magnitude that occurred within in the past 25 years in Nepal include the devastating flood of August 2014 in western Nepal and the 1993 landslides and debris flow (Poudel, 2016). Increased investment on infrastructures such as communication system, early warning system, and flood control, evacuation routes, etc., and income diversification, and community capacity-building is necessary for developing resilient communities against natural disasters and climate change impacts in Nepal.

National Planning and Development:

Planning and development system of Nepal is seriously underperforming. National plans developed by NPC are poorly coordinated between programs and the budgets, largely ad hoc, highly politicized, and are failure in their implementations (Wagle, 2017). National plans are lacking clarity on their long-term visions. Federalization of Nepal through the promulgation of 2015 Constitution has led discussions on restructuring National Planning Commission (NPC) to fit into the new governance and administrative structures. It is critical restructuring NPC with a view of further strengthening its roles as the apex institution for policy advising and developing national plans encompassing regional and

sectoral development within federalized governance. Nepal has competitive advantage on sustainable conservation, utilization, and development of its vast Asta-Ja resources for accelerated economic growth and socio-economic transformation, which demands highly integrated, comprehensive, and long-term planning and development. Strengthening of NPC is also necessary for implementation of Nepal Vision 2040. I have suggested restructuring of NPC in my recent publication (Poudel, 2018), where I have suggested the formation of an Asta-Ja Assembly of Experts and Policy Makers and constituting six units: Project Analysis and Development; Implementation, Monitoring & Evaluation; Policy Research and Advisory, Capacity-building; Data Analysis and Synthesis; and Planning and Development. The new NPC would coordinate closely with line agencies and local governments, and other stakeholders in developing integrated national plans and their implementations.

Political Discourse:

Despite the promulgation of 2015 Constitution and declaration of Federal Republic and Secular Nepal, signs of discontent of general public on new political and administrative structure have clearly and loudly surfaced in the form of political parties, social organizations, interest groups, and masses and rallies at various occasions. There is an increasing criticism on the political and administrative discourses in media and forums. It has still been very difficult for publics to digest and forget the 12-point agreement that was reached between the Seven Party Alliance and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in New Delhi on November 22, 2005. The 12-point agreement can be summarized as:

1. Bringing the absolute or autocratic monarchy to an end for democracy, peace, prosperity, and social advancement,
2. People's Movement for restoring the parliament, forming an all-party government, and holding the election of Constituent Assembly,
3. Keeping "the Maoist Armed Force and the Royal Army under the United Nations or a reliable international supervision during the process of the election of Constituent Assembly after the end of the autocratic monarchy, to conduct the election in a free and fair manner and to accept the result of the election. We also expect the reliable involvement of the international community in the negotiation process."
4. "Making public its commitment in an institutionalized and clear manner towards the democratic norms and values, including competitive multiparty system of governance, civil liberties, fundamental rights, human rights and the concept of rule of law, the CPN (Maoist) has expressed its commitment to move forward its activities accordingly."
5. "The CPN (Maoist) has expressed its commitment to create an environment to allow people, leaders and workers of political parties who were displaced during the course of armed conflict, to return and live with dignity in their respective places; to return their homes, land and property that were seized in an unjust manner and to allow them to carry out political activities without any hindrance."
6. "Making a self-assessment and a self-criticism of the past mistakes and weaknesses, the CPN (Maoist) has expressed its commitment for not allowing the mistakes and weaknesses to be committed again in the future."
7. "Making a self-assessment of the mistakes and weaknesses committed while staying in the Government and Parliament in the past, the Seven Political Parties have expressed their commitment to not repeat such mistakes and weaknesses in the future."
8. Complete press freedom and full respect for the values and norms of human rights.
9. "As the announcement of the election of municipality is backed by the ill-motive of deluding people and the international community and of giving continuity to the autocratic and illegitimate rule of the King; and the rumor of the Parliament elections are a crafty ploy, we announce its complete boycott it actively in our own respective way, and the general public are appealed to make such elections a failure."
10. "The people and their representative political parties are the real guardians of the nationality. Therefore, we are firmly committed to the protection of the independence, sovereignty, geographical integrity and national unity of the country. It is our common obligation to maintain friendly relations with all countries of the world in the principle of peaceful co-existence, and to maintain good relations with

neighboring countries, especially India and China. We request all the patriotic people to remain cautious against the false attempt of the King and the monarchists to create confusion among the patriotic people by projecting the illusory the fake ('Mandale') nationalism to prolong the autocratic and illegitimate rule of the King and to raise a question mark over the patriotism of the political parties; and we appeal to the international powers and the communities to support the democratic movement against the autocratic monarchy in Nepal in every possible way."

11. "We heartily invite the civil society, professional organizations, various wings of the parties, people of all communities and regions, the press community, intellectuals, and all Nepalese people to make the movement successful by actively participating in the peaceful People's Movement launched on the basis of these understandings reached by keeping the democracy, peace, prosperity, forward-looking social transformation, independence, sovereignty and dignity of the country in center."
12. Resolving "the problems if emerged among the parties now onwards through the dialogue by discussing in the concerned level or in the leadership level."

(For a full version of the 12-point agreement, please click at:

https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/NP_051122_12%20Point%20Understanding.pdf

Based on the 12-point agreement, a People's Movement was launched in the Spring of 2006, which ended in April 24, 2006, after the reinstatement of the old House of Representatives by King Gyanendra and the new government being led by Girija Prasad Koirala.

This incident clearly fulfills at least three objectives of the 12-point agreement,

1. End of the autocratic monarchy,
2. Reinstatement of old parliament, and the
3. Successful conclusion of People's Movement.

In addition, the agreement no. 9 , i.e. boycotting the election, was also achieved.

On May 2, 2006, Girija Prasad Koirala announced a new government in which the current PM, Mr. K.P. Sharma Oli, served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, and on May 18, 2006, to the surprise of most Nepalese, the reinstated parliament declared Nepal, by demolishing the Hindu State, a Secular State and stripped off most powers of the King. There was no mention of a secular state whether it was on People's Movement or in 12-point agreement. The questions of how did the agenda of secularism get into the parliament and why the Hindu State was declared as a Secular State by the reinstated parliament become central questions for most Nepalese now and may very likely emerge as formidable social unrest factor, possibly backfiring the current political discourse. The second powerful and far-reaching decision in Nepalese politics came on May 29, 2008, when the interim constitution that was voted by Nepalese Parliament declared Nepal as a Republican State by abolishing 240-year old Monarchy. The legitimacy of this declaration is also questionable because neither the 12-point agreement nor the People's Movement had clearly laid out the grounds for the abolition of the Monarchy. The question of what prevented political leaders from conducting a referendum on Monarchy increasingly remains a matter of great concern to the public.

A common sense in the context of good governance is keeping administrative budget small, having efficient administrative structure, promoting national integration among various regions and ethnicities, development of infrastructures across the nation, employment generation, economic development, and promotion of a national identity and integrity. In this context, federalism has become matter of another big concern in the society. We can learn from our northern neighbor that federalism is not necessary for fast-paced infrastructure and economic development. In fact, federalization slows down national development especially when conflicts arise on resources utilization and ownership among the states. Increased cost of governance may alone result in the failure of federalism in a poor country like Nepal. Failure of a political order is certain if the hopes and aspirations of new generation are

overlooked, appropriate steps for uniting societies and motivating publics for widespread development and nation-building are not undertaken, and compromises are made on the democratic rights of the people.

In conclusion, Nepal's political and administrative system is struggling for good governance, economic development, and social transformation. Public confidence on political parties and their leaders and the government is dangerously eroding. Questions are widespread on the ability of current political order on addressing nation's developmental needs, people's aspirations, geopolitics, culture and tradition, national sovereignty and integrity, and the realization of an accelerated economic growth successfully. Among many others, rampant corruption, massive unemployment, degradation of natural resources, deteriorating law and order, poor performance of agricultural sector, absence of agro-industries, and increasing foreign dependence of the country have caused serious resentment against the current government and the political order among Nepalese. If undressed correctly and in a timely manner, this public resentment may potentially lead to another round of political revolution in the country. Therefore, fast-paced grassroots-based economic development through the framework of Asta-Ja is necessary for avoiding any political and social unrest in the country.

N.B: References will be provided upon request.

The author is the Founder of the Asta-Ja Framework

January 14, 2019, Telegraphnepal, <http://telegraphnepal.com/asta-ja-for-grassroots-based-economic-development-of-nepal/>