

Social Assistance Program for Education in Nepal

Introduction

This research brief explores the implementation of the school stipend program in the community schools in Nepal, popularly known as the “scholarship program.”¹ This brief is based on research conducted in a government school, that we call Sunaulo School,² located in a bustling hilly town of Nayadada, around 30 km away from Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. Every year, Sunaulo School distributes stipend amounts ranging from Rs. 400–1,700 per annum to approximately 100–150 students from different marginalized social groups. This cash stipend is provided directly to the targeted students or their parents, in addition to the provision for free tuition fees and textbooks for all students and free uniform for all girl students in all the community schools in Nepal. These scholarships are part of Nepal’s broader social assistance program and constitute direct cash transfer to all girl students, all Dalit students, students in Karnali district, selected poor students and students from conflict/disaster-affected families who attend any community schools. It also provides direct cash transfer to cover costs towards day meal for students from endangered and highly marginalized *Janajati* communities.³ Through these group-based social assistance policies, the state expects to advance equality on the basis of

¹ The state-supported schools, officially known as “community” schools, do not charge monthly tuition fees. Despite this provision for free school education, the community school students incur several additional costs such as annual registration fee, termly exam fee, uniforms, tie, belt, identity card, notebooks, pencils, etc. The school stipend program or the “scholarship” program is expected to act as an incentive and cover some of these additional costs. See, for details, Parajuli, Lokranjan, Devendra Upreti and Rukh Gurung. 2019. *Nepalka Samudayik Vidyalaya: Vidyalaya Sanchalan Prakriya Sambandhi Sarvekshan*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

² All names are pseudonyms.

³ *National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities* (NFDIN) Act 2002 officially recognized 59 social groups as *Adivasi Janajatis*. NFDIN has further categorized *Adivasi Janajatis* into five groups—endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged, and advantaged communities within the *Adivasi Janajati* category.



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the very grounds on which recognition had previously been denied.

The scholarship program exemplifies the “protective” dimension of social protection policies, designed as they are to provide recipients relief from deprivation⁴ and its coverage is considered “pro-poor.”⁵ These are also seen as a mechanism to bring about socioeconomic change and equality.⁶ Though these programs are still in a very nascent stage, they have remained controversial. The critics lament that such programs deepen identity-based social hierarchies, as “targeted” scholarships are distributed on the basis of membership in a particular marginalized group. They view that these programs should be distributed to “the poorest and the most needy” children, regardless of their background.⁷ Although this research brief is based on field research in one school, it situates the findings within the existing literature on scholarship programs in Nepal and draws attention to the wider context within which these policy dilemmas are embedded.

Group-based or Needs-based: A Policy Dilemma

Who “deserves” support in the form of social protection programs has remained a persistent policy

dilemma, especially in the context of Nepal. Despite the increasing recognition of strong synergies between social justice and social protection,⁸ social protection programs are often questioned for their effectiveness and whether resources have been distributed to the most needy population. The debates on whether social protection policies should be based on group-based inequality (such as caste, ethnicity or gender) or the poverty-based inequality have affected the policy discussions. These contradictions are not only a simple outcome of power relations between contending interest groups but also a discursive process that entails the framing of certain social groups as legitimate recipients of support and others as undeserving. Such discursive framing often entails explicit or implicit assumptions to deservingness and construction of which particular groups need support.

In Nepal, even while the inception of school stipend programs is embedded within the strong impulse towards social inclusion, social justice and equality in Nepal’s constitution, the broader discourse on implementation have often been inundated with discussion on whether the program should be based on group-based inequality or the poverty-based inequality. Discontentment with the discursive framing of the scholarship program is clearly discernible in various reports⁹ that criticize

⁴ Sijapati, Bandita. 2017. The Quest for Achieving Universal Social Protection in Nepal: Challenges and Opportunities. *Indian Journal of Human Development* 11(1): 17–36.

⁵ Kabeer, Naila. 2009. *Social Protection in South Asia: A Review. Social Protection Scoping Study*. UK: Centre for Social Protection. Available at www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/SocialProtectioninSouthAsia.pdf; accessed December 2, 2019.

⁶ Gurung, Harka. 2005. *Bahiskaran dekhi Samabeshikaran samma: Nepalka lagi Samajik Rajnitik Agenda*. Kathmandu: Social Inclusion Research Fund (SIRF); Kharel, Sambriddhi. 2007. The Struggle for Full Citizenship for Dalits in Nepal: Approaches and Strategies of Dalit Activists. *Himalaya* 27(1): 55–69.

⁷ Government of Nepal. 2014. *Consolidated Equity Strategy for School Education Sector in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, p. 13.

⁸ For further discussions on the relationship between social protection programmes and social justice, please see Maxwell, Simon. 2008. *Global Social Justice as a New Focus for Development Policy?* Available at www.odi.org.uk/resources/odi-opinions.asp; accessed November 25, 2019; and Morvaridi, Behrooz. 2008. *Social Justice and Development*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan.

⁹ See Department of Education (DoE). 2017. *A Study on the Effectiveness of the Scholarship Provided at School Level and Identification of Measures for Its Improvement*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education; Upadhyay, Jayakrishna. 2015. *Role of Private Sector in Enhancing Access to and Quality of Education in Nepal*. Kathmandu: The Norwegian Embassy; Acharya, Susan and Bal Chandra Luitel. 2006. *The Functioning and Effectiveness of Scholarship and Incentive Schemes in Nepal*. Kathmandu: UNESCO.



the scholarship program for targeting girls and Dalit students rather than incorporating “merit” and “needs” in its design. One study conducted by the Department of Education claimed that scholarships had not reached all needy students, especially upper caste boys from poor family background.¹⁰ Another study claimed that using the term “scholarship programs” confused teachers since it muddled ideas of merit and equity.¹¹ These contentions over the discursive framing of the transfers are crucial for the ensuing discussion.

Nepal’s school scholarship program is part of the larger impetus to address the existing group-based inequality in education, in particular, and to address the long-standing concerns on social exclusion of various groups across various sectors and institutions. Various studies¹² on social exclusion in Nepal show that different social groups have low school completion rate.¹³ Responding to these disparities, the 1990 Constitution introduced provisions for advancement of “those who belong to economically, socially or educationally backward” groups. The 2015 Constitution built on this and declared that

special provision can be made for the “protection, empowerment and advancement” of marginalized groups. Under these constitutional provisions for affirmative action, several scholarship programs have been instituted and are considered one of the “largest programs” towards ensuring equity in school education.¹⁴ According to the Government of Nepal, the scholarships are expected to “present an opportunity to enhance access and retention in school.”¹⁵

As a decidedly group-based program, the scholarship recipients are identified on the basis of their belongingness to the marginalized groups, which have faced both socioeconomic inequality and cultural marginalization such as Dalit, girls and marginalized ethnic groups. However, as discussed above, the criteria for choosing scholarship recipients on the basis of group memberships is often contentious. In response to these criticisms, the government of Nepal is planning to provide “more high value scholarships for poor and marginalized students.”¹⁶ There is also an increasing emphasis on revising the group-targeted scholarship program to “needs-based” in order to redirect the funds to the students who need it the most.¹⁷ According to the *Consolidated Equity Strategy for the School Education Sector in Nepal*, “currently, the Government has adopted a ‘blanket approach’ for the dissemination of these incentives, which often causes them to be insufficient for the poorest and most needy children.”¹⁸

¹⁰ Department of Education (DoE). 2017. *A Study on the Effectiveness of the Scholarship Provided at School Level and Identification of Measures for Its Improvement*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, p. v.

¹¹ Acharya, Susan and Bal Chandra Luitel. 2006. *The Functioning and Effectiveness of Scholarship and Incentive Schemes in Nepal*. Kathmandu: UNESCO.

¹² E.g., The World Bank. 2006. *Unequal Citizens: Gender Caste and Ethnic Exclusion*. Kathmandu: The World Bank and DFID; Lynn Bennett, Dilli Ram Dahal and Pav Govindasamy, 2008. *Caste, Ethnic and Regional Identity in Nepal: Further Analysis of the 2006 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey*. Calverton, MD: Macro International Inc.

¹³ The analysis of the 2004 National Living Standards Survey (NLSS II) data cited in Bennett *et al.* 2008 shows that 76 percent of the Tarai Dalits, 62 percent of the Muslims, 45 percent of the Hill *Janajatis*, and 43 percent of the Hill Dalits have never attended school. Completion rates for primary education among Dalits are the lowest in the country. Gender disparities are particularly high in the Tarai Middle Caste group, where 94 percent of the 6–10 year old boys are enrolled in school compared to only 58 percent of the girls.

¹⁴ Government of Nepal. 2014. *Consolidated Equity Strategy for School Education Sector in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education.

¹⁵ Government of Nepal. 2016. *School Sector Development Plan (SSDP)*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, p. 171.

¹⁶ Government of Nepal. 2016. *School Sector Development Plan (SSDP)*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, p. 50.

¹⁷ Government of Nepal. 2016. *School Sector Development Plan (SSDP)*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, p. 171.

¹⁸ Government of Nepal. 2014. *Consolidated Equity Strategy for School Education Sector in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, p. 13.



This emerging policy direction signals sympathy for the idea of “need” that is based on income-inequality and the notion that “poor people deserve social protection” more than group-based inequality. In the following sections, this research brief will assess the potential repercussions of such policy emphasis in reaching out to the needy populations. The following sections will present an analysis of the actual implementation of the scholarship program in Sunaulo School, by closely studying the list of students who received cash stipends between the year 2015 and 2019. It will draw particular attention to the cash amount, social composition, and distribution mechanism for scholarship for Dalit, girls, and poor and needy students.

How Much Do the Students Get?

The scholarship program entails an annual cash stipend of between Rs 400 and 500 per annum for Dalit and girl scholarships (based on their grades); Rs 1,700 per annum for poor and meritorious students; and Rs 1,000–1,500 per annum for girl students in Karnali zone. The scholarships operate under the School Sector Development Program. These cash transfers are made by the Ministry of Education, through the municipal education office, to the school for the cash to be presented to the child in the presence of their parent or legal guardian. The selection process for these scholarship programs is delegated to the School Management Committees (SMCs), which receive recommendation on eligible students from scholarship subcommittees and an oversight from municipal-level education officials. This cash stipend complements the free primary education to which they are entitled. It is estimated that the scholarships reach at least two million children attending primary school. Nepal’s School Sector Development Plan (2016/17–2020/21) has budgeted a total of Rs 40,516 million (USD 386 million) for scholarship and incentive programs.

This amounts to six percent of the total education budget for the period.¹⁹

The school records in Sunaulo School (see Table 1) shows that the students have received scholarships within the range of Rs 350 and Rs 1,700. All the girls and all the Dalit students in the school received Rs 350–500 and selected poor and meritorious (*gariv tatha jehendar*) students received Rs 1,700 per annum. While these annual cash transfers were praised for easing financial burden of schooling, parents criticized the meagre amount. They reported that the direct cost of sending a child to school (primary level)²⁰ is at least Rs 4,000, apart from any opportunity cost, transportation, and lunch costs. This increases dramatically up to Rs. 10,000–15,000 at higher level. The scholarship amount is very small compared to this actual cost of schooling. Nonetheless, parents do appreciate the support that they get from the scholarship.

Table 1: Types and Amount of Scholarships

Year	Girl child (Rs 350–400)	Dalit (Rs 350–500)	Poor and Meritorious (Rs 1,700)
2014/15 (2071 v.s.)	Class 1-5: Rs 350 Class 6-8: Rs 400	Class 1-5: Rs 350 Class 6-8: Rs 500	Class 10: Rs 1,700
2015/16 (2072 v.s.)	Class 1-5: Rs 350 Class 6-8: Rs 400	Class 1-5: Rs 350 Class 6-8: Rs 500	NA
2016/17 (2073 v.s.)	Class 1-8: Rs 400	Class 1-5: Rs 400 Class 6-8: Rs 500	Class 9-10: Rs 1,700
2018/19 (2075 v.s.)	Class 1-8: Rs 400	Class 1-8: Rs 400 Class 9-10: Rs 500	Class 8-10: Rs 1,700
2019/20 (2076 v.s.)	Class 1-8: Rs 400	Class 1-8: Rs 400 Class 9-10: Rs 500	NA

Source: School records

¹⁹ Government of Nepal. 2016. *School Sector Development Plan (SSDP)*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, p. 110.

²⁰ Since Sunaulo School is a “community school” it does not charge monthly fees. However, students and parents incur some additional costs such as annual registration: Rs 100, termly exams: Rs 150, textbooks: Rs 1,000, uniforms, tie, belt, identity card: Rs 1,500, notebooks, pencils: 1,200. Some of the costs such as textbook costs are later reimbursed.



The school records and the general practice in the school show that the scholarships are distributed regularly every year. According to the rule, scholarships should be distributed in the first quarter, i.e., by April-June of every year. However, the contradiction between the Government rules and ground reality surfaced very early during the fieldwork. The scholarship amounts most often do not reach until second or third quarter. The parents in Sunaulo School, therefore, do not usually know when these scholarships are distributed. Once the school is ready to distribute the scholarship, the distribution day is announced to the students in the morning assembly and the classrooms. However, this information does not always reach all the students and the parent. Therefore, every year there are some students who do not eventually receive the amount.

How are Scholarships Distributed?

Scholarships are provided on the dual, and interrelated, criteria for social assistance: income poverty and historical exclusions; the ideals of inclusion incorporated in the 2015 Constitution of Nepal.²¹ In order to address the historical exclusion of Dalit, girls, and marginalized students, the program design ensures that all the students in these categories receive the scholarship amount. The income poverty is, however, addressed indirectly through some level of “self-selection.” Since the scholarship is distributed only via government schools (officially known as “community” schools), it is assumed that it reaches the poor families. This dual criteria is expected to ensure that the otherwise excluded groups have access to and continue their education. The school records in Sunaulo School (see Table 2) shows that students receive this scholarship amount every year.

With regard to income poverty, studies have shown that scholarship programs have been successful in targeting the poor students in Nepal. The World

²¹ The 1990 Constitution of Nepal introduced provisions for advancement of “those who belong to economically, socially or educationally backward” groups. This was further reiterated in the 2015 Constitution of Nepal.

Bank study of 2011 shows that the scholarship schemes have been highly successful in categorically benefitting the poor families. This study shows that due to its targeting and geographical coverage, it covers the poorer quintiles of the population very well.²² According to the simulations conducted by the World Bank, these programs also marginally address the poverty rates in the country. In the absence of cash transfers and scholarships, the poverty rate would have been 25.5 percent (an increase of less than 0.5 percentage points compared to the current rate of 25.2).²³

Table 2: Total Number of Scholarship Recipients

Year	Girls (Rs 350–400)	Dalit (Rs 350–500)	Poor and Meritorious (Rs 1,700)
2014/15 (2071 v.s.)	89	34	21
2015/16 (2072 v.s.)	105	22	NA
2016/17 (2073 v.s.)	100	29	22
2018/19 (2075 v.s.)	113	30	21
2019/20 (2076 v.s.)	127	45	NA

Source: School records

However, despite the design of the program, not all the target students receive scholarships every year. As mentioned in the previous section, the information distribution is extremely poor in most of the schools, including Sunaulo School. This results in uneven

²² The World Bank. 2011. *Can Social Safety Nets Help Peace Building in Nepal? Results from a Social Protection Technical Assistance Program*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. Available at http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SAFETYNETSANDTRANSFERS/Resources/281945-1131468287118/BBL-SSN_Nepal_7-21-2011.pdf; accessed December 2, 2019.

²³ The World Bank. 2013. *Nepal Report on Human Development: Access, Equity, and Quality in the Education, Health and Social Protection Sectors*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

distribution of the scholarship to all the students. Moreover, since the scholarship amount is only Rs 350–400, the opportunity cost (e.g., losing one day’s work, bus fare, etc.) for the collection of scholarship is much higher than the actual scholarship amount. The studies have found that this uneven distribution effects the Dalit families disproportionately. The World Bank’s 2011 Social Protection Survey shows that the existing scholarship schemes covers only 36 percent of eligible Dalit students while *Janajatis* and *Bahun/Chhetris* receive the bulk of resources.²⁴

An evaluation report on the implementation of scholarship program also found that “a significant proportion of Dalit students have not received the scholarship.”²⁵ Similarly, the report also noted that 50 percent of the girl’s scholarships were not distributed in all the districts. Studies also report “irregularity” in the financial management of the scholarship programs such as absence of systematic accounts for the monitoring and evaluation of scholarship distribution, the use of scholarship money for building school building, distributed amongst the school members, or retained in the school bank account.²⁶

Who Gets Which Scholarship?

As discussed in the previous section, the scholarship program targets certain categories based on dual criterion of income poverty and historical exclusion. While Dalit and girls scholarships are distributed to

all the students belonging to these categories, the “poor and meritorious” scholarship is distributed to students on the basis of the students’ academic performance. The school, along with the teachers, select students who are good in their studies but belong to the families with low income. Since the scholarship implementation rule mandates that different government scholarships are not distributed to the same student, “poor and meritorious” scholarships are rarely distributed to Dalit students. The school records of Sunaulo School (see Table 3) show that majority of the recipients of “poor and meritorious” belong to high-caste *Bahun* and *Chhetris*, along with *Janajatis* and *Newars*.²⁷

Table 3: Social Groups for Poor and Meritorious Scholarship

Social groups	2014/15 (2071 v.s.)		2016/17 (2073 v.s.)		2018/19 (2075 v.s.)	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Janajati	2	5	0	6	4	4
Newar	1	0	0	2	2	3
Dalit	0	0	0	1	0	1
Madhesi	2	0	0	1	1	0
Bahun-Chhetri	1	10	2	10	4	2
Total	21		22		21	

Source: School records

Other studies on scholarship programs have found that the coverage of Dalit scholarship were more pro-poor compared to the scholarship for poor and talented students and girls students, despite various issues in its implementation. According to the analysis by the World Bank based on NLLS data, 33 percent of students covered by the Dalit scholarship belonged to the poorest quintile of the population compared to 24.3 percent under “poor and talented”

²⁴ The World Bank. 2011. *Can Social Safety Nets Help Peace Building in Nepal? Results from a Social Protection Technical Assistance Program*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. Available at http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SAFETYNETSANDTRANSFERS/Resources/281945-1131468287118/BBL-SSN_Nepal_7-21-2011.pdf; accessed December 2, 2019.

²⁵ Centre for Educational Research and Social Development (CERSOD). 2010. *A Study on Scholarship Management and its Effectiveness in Terms of Enrolment and Retention*. Bhaktapur: Department of Education, p. 76.

²⁶ Budhathoki, Shak Bahadur and Pramod Bhatta. 2016. Akhtiyar ra Mahalekha Pratedanma Bidyalaya Tahama Hune Aniyamitata. *Shikshak* 8(95): 50–53.

²⁷ This table includes *Newars* under a separate heading recognizing their higher socio-economic advantage compared to other *Janajati* groups. Government of Nepal categorizes *Newars* as advantaged group within the broader *Janajati* category.



category and 25.6 percent under girls scholarship.²⁸ In this context, the government's plan for "needs-based redirection of scholarship funding" (in place of the current "blanket" provision) in order to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children may not achieve the desired outcome.²⁹

How is Scholarship Distribution Managed?

The scholarship program is expected to be formally managed through the Education Management Information System (EMIS), which keeps a comprehensive record of school-level data. However, this data management system rarely functions effectively, neither at the school-level nor at the municipality level. Several problems prevent the effective data management system. The municipality requires a list of eligible students within the first month of the academic year. However, the schools do not have the complete list of students in the beginning of the year. The schools register student throughout the first few months, due to various constraints such as parent's socio-cultural and economic situations. The schools, therefore, submit previous year's data to the municipality. This situation has contributed to inconsistencies in the information and, hence, a mismatch between the amount received by the school and actual number of eligible students. In addition, the academic and fiscal years begin in different months. If the quota is not determined within the first month of the academic year, the local authority is unable to disburse the funds to the districts within the current fiscal year, which expires by the end of the third month of the academic year.

scholarship program has an extensive presence across the student population and it is distributed almost regularly. Despite the small amounts disbursed, the scholarships seem to ease the financial burden of the students. Moreover, the coverage of Dalit and girls scholarship is more comprehensive due to its program design. This coverage of historically-marginalized groups builds on the overarching importance of access to education for all children. Secondly, the program is delayed in its distribution, information about specifics is rarely circulated among stakeholders, and governance mechanisms are not clear. These governance mechanisms are essential for the effectiveness of the scholarship program. Thirdly, the more selective component of scholarship program targeting "poor and meritorious" students tends, in reality, to concentrate more on high caste social groups. This finding cautions against the ongoing policy emphasis on the discourse of "need-based" approach. This research brief drawn on the empirical data from a single school; this is an obvious limitation of the study. However, while examining its findings along with the existing literature on scholarship programs in Nepal shows that the policy dilemma of a choice between group-based or need-based is a risky one. The needs-based program while may reach the income-poor population it does not always guarantee the reach to the historically-marginalized groups. The group-based programs, however, are more likely to reach both historically-marginalized groups and income-poor population simultaneously.



Conclusion

This study reveals three findings in terms of the scholarship program's implementation. Firstly, the

²⁸ The World Bank. 2013. *Nepal Report on Human Development: Access, Equity, and Quality in the Education, Health and Social Protection Sectors*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

²⁹ Government of Nepal. 2016. *School Sector Development Plan (SSDP)*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Education, p. 171.

Martin Chautari (MC) began as an informal discussion group in Kathmandu in 1991, allowing development professionals and academics to meet every two weeks to share insights and experiences. In 1995, the name 'Martin Chautari' was adopted after the late Martin Hoftun, one of the founders of the original discussion group. After being managed by the Centre for Social Research and Development for six years, in 2002 MC became registered as a separate non-government organization in Kathmandu.



Since its inception, MC's core objective has been to enhance the quality of public dialogue and the public sphere in Nepal. Started at a time in which Nepal had little, if any, culture of informed public discussion, MC is now nationally known for its discussions which are held two times a week. Chautari also conducts research focused on governance and democracy, media, education, health and livelihoods with cross-cutting themes of gender and social inclusion. A rigorous mentoring program of young researchers is in-built into MC's work.

Till date MC has published ninety-five books. MC is also the editorial home of the journals *Samaj Adhyayan* [formerly *Media Adhyayan*, established in 2006], and *Studies in Nepali History and Society* [SINHAS, published by Mandala Book Point since 1996]. Since 2006, MC has opened its research library and media documentation center to the public. The library's holdings total more than 22,500 books.

All five components—the discussions, research, mentoring, publications and library—feed into each other and form an intrinsic part of MC's primary objective: strengthening the social contract between the state and citizens and expanding and making inclusive the public sphere by promoting informed dialogues and analytically rigorous research.

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