

Workshop Proceedings Expert Multistakeholder Consultation Historical Evolution of the Agrifood System in Nepal

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Event Location: Kathmandu/Online Platform

Work Package 5, Event Report 1



Stakeholder participants at the Expert Multistakeholder Consultation Historical Evolution of the Agrifood System in Nepal
Photo credit: IWMI Nepal

ABSTRACT

As a part of the [Transforming Agrifood Systems in South Asia \(TAFSSA\)](#) initiative's holistic food systems approach, IWMI led a study tracing the historical evolution of food systems in Nepal. The expert consultation aimed to solicit views on framing and situating the historical study within the current food systems-related discussions. The study is conducted by Dr. Fraser Sugden from the University of Birmingham, Dr. Suresh Dhakal and Dr. Janak Rai from Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu. Stakeholders offered substantial feedback on increasing the geographical and community scope of the study, important timelines to include, and relevant issues of the local agrifood system relevant for the region.

OVERVIEW

The TAFSSA initiative aims to support actions that improve equitable access to sustainable healthy diets, improve farmers' livelihoods and resilience, and conserve land, air, and water resources in South Asia. As a part of this initiative's holistic systems approach, IWMI commissioned a study to trace the evolution of food systems with particular reference to agricultural policies that have shaped the current food systems and the challenges therein. The diverse political influences and agrarian histories in South Asia have played a significant role in determining the region's heterogeneous regional contexts of agricultural development. The roots of many current agrarian and environmental issues and policies lie in historical processes and developments. Learning from these historical policies and development pathways thus offers a critical perspective to inform and contribute to future agrifood systems transformation and policy.

KEY OBJECTIVES

The workshop was organized with an aim to seek critical engagement and insight from interdisciplinary experts to help shape the contours of the historical study and situate it within the current context.

PARTICIPANTS AND MODALITY

The workshop was designed for a small group of expert participants representing different stakeholder groups, including – government policymakers, policy implementers, international and grassroots civil society, research and academics, and user groups. The workshop was designed in a hybrid mode to enable broader participation. The workshop was attended by about 35 participants, including both in-person and online. The key institutions represented are listed later in this report.

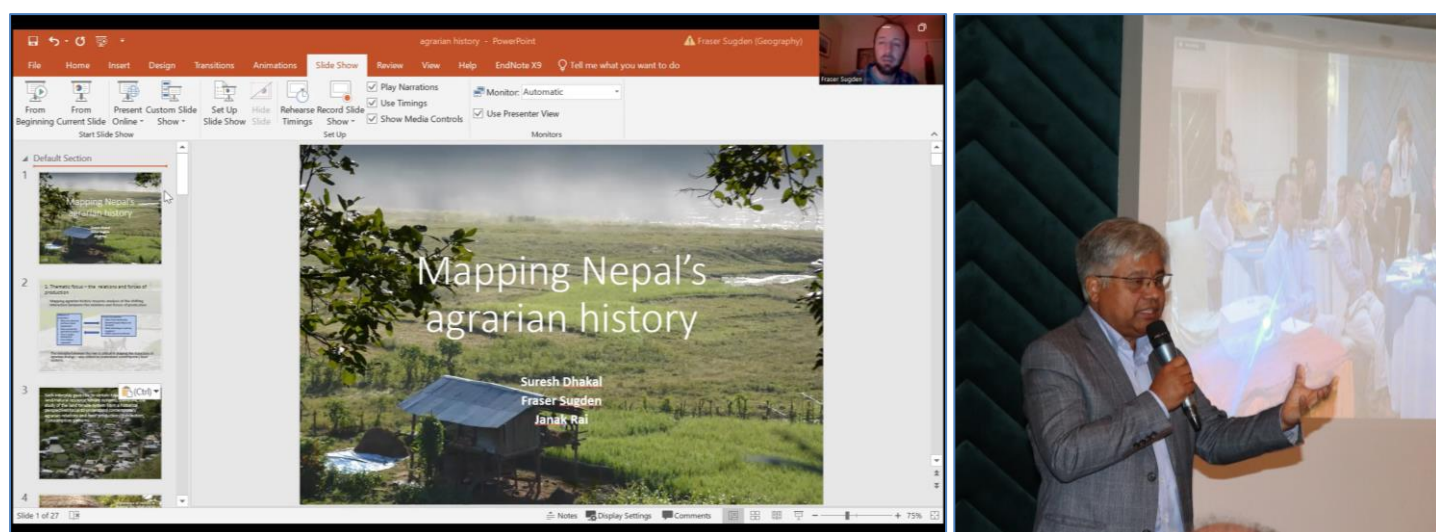
DISCUSSION

Presenting the objective of the study and project: Dr. Aditi Mukherji

Dr. Aditi Mukherji briefly introduced the TAFSSA project and the key vision for this study. The TAFSSA project looks at five work packages (WP) integrating several components of the agrifood sector – data systems, food production and availability, food access and affordability, consumption, and cross-cutting environmental sustainability and social inclusion challenges. The project works across a continuum from the farmer, traders, processors, distributors, and consumers integrated these actors of the agri-food systems. This integrated, holistic approach to the project drives the need for a historical understanding of the current problems to ensure we understand the contexts and path dependency within which these issues currently manifest and function. Without knowledge of how these problems arose, it would be difficult to identify and diagnose the complexity of the problems adequately to find the appropriate and sustainable solution.

Presentation by the research team on the Nepal study: Dr. Fraser Sugden, Dr. Suresh Dhakal

The aim was to go beyond an academic exercise and relate this study to understand better some of Nepal's current plans, programs, and policy priorities. Eg. Chure Range restoration and tubewell development in the Terai. The research team comprising Dr. Fraser Sugden, Dr. Suresh Dhakal and Dr. Janak Rai (who could not be present at the workshop) presented the study.



Dr. Fraser and Dr. Dhakal presenting study on Historical Evolution of the Agri-food System in Nepal
Photo credit: IWMI Nepal

The presentation brought out the key aspects of the ongoing study with regard to the historical, social, and political trajectories that shaped modern agri-food systems in Nepal. The major thrust of the study was on major shifts in land tenures, relations and forces of production, indigenous tenures, and historical pathways of current initiatives and systems, e.g. maize, potato, wheat farming. With changing political regimes Nepal's agricultural history is marked by frequent evolutionary shifts in agrarian relations. In these gradual transitions, as seen through a historical perspective, there have also been elements of significant transformational changes that have defined the trajectory of the agri-food system in Nepal. Based on these transformational changes, the study has identified key time periods for their analyses of Nepal agriculture - Pre-Gorkhali period (17th-18th century), Gorkhali conquest to early Rana period (the 1770s – 1900s), Late Rana era (1900s-1950s), Panchayat era (1960s-1991), and Neo-liberal era (1991-2022). The ongoing study presented, used readily available documents including secondary literature and archival data as data sources.

In addition to agrarian relations of production, which were discussed in great depth, the research team also introduced some other issues that are currently relevant and still under process of being studied from the historical perspective in the study. These included issues around changing irrigation systems (public surface water provision to private groundwater-led strategy) and their role in shifting agriculture in Nepal, constraints in access to irrigation resources determining their access, and water resource sustainability outcomes. Other themes of research tracing historical trajectories of currently relevant process in Nepal covered were migration and agriculture linkages (through effect of remittances and transitions triggered by returnees), abandonment of coarse grains and introduction of new crops in changing food habits, and finally the importance of caste-based historical relations which still strongly determine the contours of resource distribution and access in Nepal.

Stakeholder discussions, feedback and takeaways

Stakeholder critical engagement was facilitated and structured around 3 key questions and the attendees were divided into groups to discuss these questions and provide feedback:

1. List some of the important events and turning points in the past that are influencing current outcomes on agri-food systems in Nepal
2. What source of information (eg. Archival databases) can we use to document and study these time periods and historical turning points?
3. Are there any current initiatives and policy priorities in the agri-food sector that you feel we should study from this historical lens?



Stakeholder group discussions for consultation on key feedback questions and issues

Photo credits: IWMI Nepal

Takeaways from feedback sessions:

Suggestions about the scope of the study

Stakeholder discussions revealed potential timelines and initiatives that may contribute to the structure of the study to make it more relevant to the region's specific context and its current policy milieu. Key among these was to ensure expanding the scope of the study to provide representation and coverage of the varied geographies of Nepal (high mountains, hills, Terai), including the understanding of the emergence and reproduction of marginalities and inequalities along the lines of indigeneity, caste groups, gender, landless etc., and to move beyond agrarian/land relations and incorporate more components of the agri-food system. In terms of extending the study beyond agrarian/land relations in order to understand the agri-food system determinants as a system, stakeholder discussions offered varied components of the system that would be very relevant for the context of Nepal.

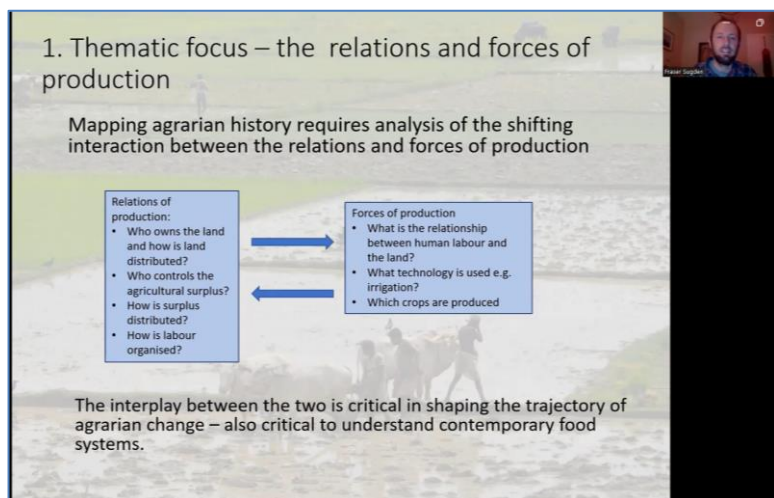
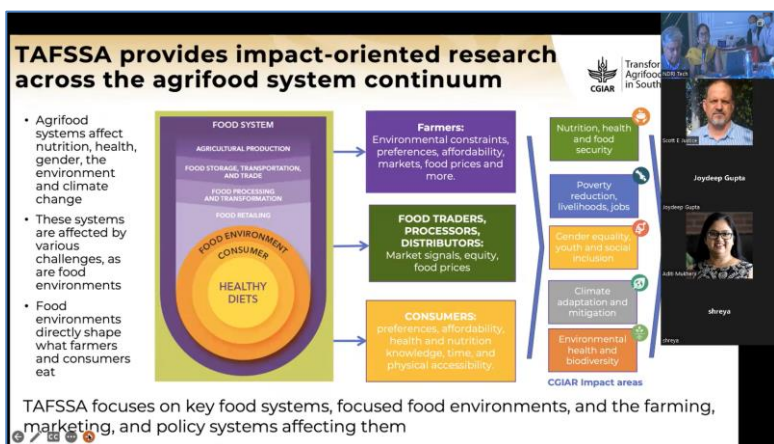
Components of the agrifood system

- *Technology, mechanisation, and policy linkage* was an important component considered. For instance, it was proposed the study cover lift irrigation technologies and their impact on agriculture practices. Also, how farm mechanisation led to changes in crops and farm practices.
- *Traditional crop varieties and emergence of new crops* was considered immensely significant in in Nepal's agrifood system, such as tea, cardamom, potato that have shifted many from sustenance to commercial agriculture. This shift has also impacted production of traditional crop varieties of Nepal and is thus closely related to local food systems.
- *Food cultures*: Several stakeholders brought out aspects of the changing local food cultures that have been brought about by western influences, shifting food trade dependence, and class aspirations associated with foods. For example, caste and class relations are manifested in food habits – eg. dry foods like chewda would get associated with poorer access to resources as food items with low water content provide easier and cheaper storage and therefore more accessible in harsh terrains, conditions of low storage capacity, and as food buffers.
- *Shifting ownership of resources*: Stakeholders brought out that agrarian relations often overlooked relations of productions vis-à-vis water resources, thereby calling for an inclusion of water in addition to land is historical understanding of distribution of ownership and control of resources between state, classes, bureaucracy, and indigenous collectives.
- *Labour migration* was discussed as a key determining factor of Nepal's agricultural society and practices as it gets related to issues of feminization of agriculture, land abandonment, land selling from rural areas and migration to cities.
- *Gender-land-migration*: In relation to the previous discussion on labour migration, stakeholder discussions also brought out the importance of women in Nepal's agriculture and thereby importance of tracing the history of questions around womens' land entitlements and relevant policies such as land registration for women.
- *Storage, transport, and market access for food*: Cost of transport and market access in Nepal is crucial (road connectivity and terrain significantly reduces market access, wider marketing, and cost of transport and storage) - eg. it is cheaper to import avocado from Uganda than it is to purchase domestically grown avocado. Under this component other relevant points discussed included the development of cooperatives and linkage with local/domestic food markets and food market access – now defunct – and how this affected dependence on, access to, and control over local food production. The important position of Nepal in the cross-border trade market of food and inputs has also historically affected food and input prices in Nepal and thereby determining production and food access.

- *Ecological impacts:* Finally, a critical aspect of the agri-food system that stakeholders considered important for a historical analysis was sustainability issues faced by Nepal and their role in determining the agricultural development in Nepal. Groundwater depletion emanating from the proliferation of private groundwater irrigation and the soil and health impacts of high use of pesticides, HYV crops, increased cropping intensity were key among them.

Liberalization and food import

Another critical issue that emerged as most relevant for Nepal in explaining current agri-food systems was liberalization and food import. Several points and observations emerged from the stakeholder discussions that may be brought under this theme. The imported technologies of the Green Revolution brought in new agricultural practices and methods, new crops, monoculture, ecological footprints, and health impacts. New food habits and corresponding exotic/new products, such as imported dragonfruit, and fast foods, have now become crucial in characterizing Nepal's agri-food system and understanding the processes over time that have led to these new food cultures would be essential. Changing religious restrictions and norms around local foods and development of modern aspirations around new food ('Prestige foods') have led to externally influenced dietary shifts. Nepal is therefore shifting as an economy from dependence on the production class to reliance on the trading class and a shift from rural to urban food marketing to a new form of urban-to-rural food transfer for imported food items. These promoted new crops and diets are often in conflict with the local ecological/geographical contexts and suitability. Thus, this process of liberalization and trade emerged as an important factor required to be studied as a historical and political process explaining Nepal's agrifood evolution.



Dr. Aditi introducing TAFSSA project (top-left),
Dr. Manohara introducing the workshop context (top),
Dr. Fraser introducing the study (bottom-left)

Some important timelines and events suggested for inclusion by stakeholders were:

- 1885: Nepali youth included in the British army – history of dependence on remittances
- 1940: Mass youth recruited in Indian/British army – imported goods Railways from west to east in India which connected with Nepal and affected colonial trade with Nepal
- 1997: Policy of removal of subsidies in agriculture including irrigation, lot of shallow tubewell installations during subsidies, led to reduction in irrigation in Terai (forced from external influence)
- Agriculture perspective plan 1995-2015
- 2004 WTO: opened import and export which changed the food systems in Nepal
- Agriculture development strategy 2015-2035
- 2015: New federal structure and constitution with a focus on food security, Right to Food, self-dependency for food, but without strong regulatory mechanisms to implement the same
- 1st periodic plan under King Mahender
- Five-year planning period and budgeting for agriculture
- Community Forestry (2045 Nepalese year)
- 2021 Land Reform
- Contract Farming Guidelines emergence
- Multiparty system
- Policies for specific incentives for particular crops such as procurements, subsidies etc

The stakeholder engagement also suggested that bringing in ethnographic methods in addition to archival and secondary literature would help shed light on sociological issues around food cultures, caste relations, religious customs etc.

CONCLUSION

The expert consultation offered many significant inputs for strengthening the Historical Evolution analysis of the Agri-food System in Nepal making it more relevant for the context and policy processes of Nepal. This included significant historical timelines, key policy events, and several region-specific sectoral processes.

PARTICIPATING STAKEHOLDER INSTITUTIONS

Some of the key institutions represented at the workshop were:

- Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MoALD)
- Nepal Academy of Science and Technology
- Department of Water Resources and Irrigation (DWRI)
- Centre for Crop Development and Agro-Biodiversity Conservation, MoALD
- Department of Water Resources and Irrigation (DWRI)
- Community Self Reliance Centre (CSRC)
- Nepal Agriculture Research Institute (NARI)
- Nepal Agriculture Research Council (NARC)
- National Agricultural Policy Research Center
- Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LI-BIRD)
- Farmer Managed Irrigation Management Trust (FMIST)
- Food First Information & Action Network (FIAN Nepal)
- CARE
- Actionaid
- Women Organizing for Change in Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (WOCAN)
- International Fund for Agricultural Development, Nepal
- Agriculture for Food Campaign
- Prime Minister Agriculture Modernization Program (PMAMP)
- The Third Pole



INITIATIVE ON
Transforming Agrifood
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<https://www.cgiar.org/funders/>

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ABOUT TAFSSA

TAFSSA is a CGIAR regional integrated initiative to support actions that improve equitable access to sustainable healthy diets, improve farmers' livelihoods and resilience, and conserve land, air, and water resources in South Asia. For more details about the initiative see

<https://www.cgiar.org/initiative/20-transforming-agrifood-systems-in-south-asia-tafssa/>

ABOUT CGIAR

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