

**Nepal's Pathway to Inclusive, Resilient
Development in the Evolving National and
International Context**

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

By

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Ms. Chandni Joshi is a seasoned leader and advocate for gender equality, labor rights, and policy reform, with decades of experience driving change across South Asia. As the Enforcer of HomeNet South Asia, she has been at the forefront of championing the rights of home-based workers, influencing key international conventions such as ILO C177 and C190. As Chair of the Women-Friendly Disaster Management Group, she has led efforts to ensure that disaster response strategies

prioritize the needs of marginalized communities, survivors of violence, and differently-abled individuals. She is the Patron of Former International Professionals of Multilateral Organizations - Nepal (FIPMO) and a Trustee of the University of Nepal. Her tenure as Regional Director of UNIFEM South Asia was marked by groundbreaking achievements, including the introduction of gender-responsive budgeting in multiple countries, working in National Development Plans, Census, and creating accountability mechanisms. Earlier in her career, as Joint Secretary & Chief of the Women Development Division in the Government of Nepal, she institutionalized transformative programs like the Production Credit for Rural Women, mobilizing over several million USD in funding. Throughout her journey, Ms. Joshi has worked closely with governments, civil society, and international organizations, relentlessly advancing gender justice and inclusive development.

I wish each one of you a joyful and prosperous New Year 2082! As we step into Basanta (Spring), the most beautiful season of all, nature reminds us of renewal, hope, and fresh beginnings. Today, my heart is filled with deep appreciation. My sincere thanks to the leadership of Nepal Development Research Institute (NDRI) and the dedicated team for bringing us together. This rich mix of minds and hearts in the audience and my fellow panelists. I am truly humbled to share this space with you.

As someone who has spent a lifetime working at the grassroots and in policy corridors, I stand here as a firm believer in the power of research, skill, and knowledge. Credible, rigorous research that produces data, both qualitative and quantitative, which leads to the heart of the matter. I have never jumped to conclusions based on superficial symptoms and hypotheses. I firmly believe in knowledge-based advocacy, built on evidence, lived realities, with authentic voices and action research. When research centers its respondents as excluded groups, it is no longer just a study, it becomes a call to action.

One such turning point for me was the gender-responsive budgeting research, led by IIDS with two remarkable minds, Dr. Meena Acharya and Mr. Yuvraj Khatiwada. That work shaped not just policies, but the GESI (Gender Empowerment and Social Inclusion) principles in Nepal. I could name many other groundbreaking studies on trafficking, migration, engendering National Development Plans, and the census exercise led by experts like the Late Dr. Mohan Man Sainju and his team. Their work continues to guide us to date.

As we gather here today to map out Nepal's future pathway to Inclusive and Resilient Development in the present context, we must pause and reflect.

Yes, we've made significant progress. Our national policies and plans are sound, our long-term plans—be it on agriculture, industry, or environment—are all well crafted and visionary. We have people-friendly laws that have evolved with time and several amendments. We are graduating from the LDC category. We are meeting international commitments and obligations under CEDAW, CRC, Beijing Platform For Action, the Paris Agreement, COP, and many more.

And let us not forget, Nepal's resilience development has been celebrated globally - be it after the different forms of Government - structural adjustments, several reforms, or natural disasters, in particular the mega earthquake of 2015, or during the dark days of COVID-19. We suffered, yes - shortages, loss, chaos; yet, we learnt to unlearn and relearn. But we rebuilt. We endured.

And of course, there's the pride and honor of being "*Bir Gorkhalis*" (Brave Gorkhas) - the people who have never been colonized and are standing tall in history. But friends, today we need more than pride and resilience.

We must turn our gaze to the emerging realities:

- A rapidly changing demography with a growing elderly population.
- A youth exodus draining not just the money (which is in billions of dollars) but our talents, dreams, and future too.
- Increasing the care burden on women.
- A remittance-driven economy is vulnerable to shifting migration patterns.
- Heavy reliance on the tourism sector.
- External risks, such as geopolitical uncertainties and rising trade restrictions.
- Shrinking external foreign aid for development and humanitarian aid, too.

I'm not an economist by profession, yet let me quote a few data points from the recent World Bank Report. Though the real GDP grew by 4.9% in FY25 from 4.3% in FY24, due to the pickup in the agriculture and industrial sectors' growth. But a slowdown was seen by the disruption of the service sector, especially the tourism sector, and natural disasters caused damage to 0.8% of GDP.

- The inflation eased to 5% in FY 25, down from 6.5% in FY 24.
- The remittance inflows fell from 12.9% of GDP in FY 24 to 12.4% in FY 25
- The fiscal deficit is expected to stay at 2.5% of GDP.
- But "Nepal's economy is projected to grow by 4.5% in FY25 up from 3.9% in FY24 and is expected to average 5.4% in FY26 – FY27."

Pakistan, which gave us the Human Development Index, is shaking the global obsession with GDP alone. That index taught the world to center people and not just profit, it revolutionized the global landscape of recognition and accounting systems.

Yet today, we lag on many indicators. Our gender index, which tells us how far behind we still are, even within South Asia. I am quoting this indicator as it represents more than 51% of the population.

Nepali women face a chronic gender gap in education, health, and economic opportunities. They are discriminated against from *womb to tomb*. Just a few affirmative actions and a few quotas in the political arena and civil service are not enough to undo generations of systemic exclusion and structural discrimination against many.

Let me share my own experience. I am the first generation of literate women in my family. My mother was never sent to school, though my father had a double master's degree. And even today, 30 percent of the population is deprived of education, and similarly, millions of girls are

denied birth itself; victims of sex-selective technology because of son preferences; the scary numbers of foeticide and infanticide. We've grown immune to these injustices. We see them so often, day in day out, that they disappear into the background.

And then, there's unpaid care work - invisible labor that ties women down and shuts them out of the formal economy. ILO estimates 606 million working-age women around the world consider themselves unavailable for employment because of unpaid care responsibilities, which is around 2 billion full-time jobs, and it involves 16.4 billion hours of work annually. According to the ILO Regional Report, women in Nepal carried 85% of daily unpaid work, spending a total of 29 million hours a day cumulatively. This is indeed a global challenge of equality and equity.

And yes—we must address time poverty too. That invisible thief of potential, especially for women, who lose hours, days, lifetimes to unpaid labor, without ever seeing the dignity of rest, choice, or economic freedom. Let's reclaim it!

Let's not forget that during the MDGs, Nepal performed well in education and health. But Goal 3 'gender equality' remained unmet. Not just in Nepal, but in every single country in the world. Now, with the SDGs, we have a chance to do better, yet only five years are left to reach the expiry date of the SDGs. I saw a ray of hope in the recent 69th UN Commission on the Status of Women this year in March 2025, where Beijing +30 was celebrated. The inauguration session saw the unanimous passing of the "Political Declaration," which was a huge achievement, given the resistance shown by powerful nations.

In these testing times of international aid shrinking and the Global South facing several challenges, to achieve inclusive and resilient development, we need to rethink our strategies for a quantum leap now. We must embrace intersectionality. We have to find those who are invisible and

make them visible, listen to them, amplify their voices, walk beside them, and make them decision-makers and not just beneficiaries. Because their lives, their labor, and their dreams have not yet been counted in our national accounting systems.

I do not mean to preach here. I only wish to offer a vision for the narrative we must now write together. We need to:

- Mobilize domestic resources
- Invest differently, innovatively in Technology
- Start-up ecosystem
- Promote high-skilled digital training
- Start the value chain for local entrepreneurs
- Create jobs to stop brain drain
- Attract external funds
- Truly empower producers
- Focus not only on the supply chain, but complete the value chain cycle, which would get them out of the vicious circle of poverty

Let our entrepreneurs climb up the value chain ladder and generate lucrative jobs and wealth, too. Let's look at what we can do with the agriculture sector and our other untapped natural assets – the agro-based economy, the non-timber forest-rich goods which lie in the belt of the Hindu Kush region.

Let's also rethink migration, not only as an economic escape but as a strategic investment. Let's send trained, informed, and empowered workers instead of the vulnerable, undocumented, and unskilled ones. This shift in approach - training and sending skilled human power - will boost our economy, and more importantly, offer dignity and security to our migrant workers.

We are living in a new global order where the national and regional context is changing drastically. A sharp shift in foreign aid, where the NGO space is shrinking from traditional donors who are pulling their aid from the development scenario to protect their national security.

They will no longer be unprotected laborers in foreign lands but confident professionals, assured of their rights, earning fair wages, and building a secure future for themselves and their families. We must move away from the guilt of sending vulnerable, untrained workers and move toward a new era where we send capable, trained, and proud citizens into the global workforce.

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- A sharp shifting foreign aid where the NGO space is shrinking from traditional donors who are pulling their aid from the development scenario to protect their national security.
- The rising debt burdens prevail.
- Our LDC graduation, while a milestone, also comes with a price - the loss of economic privileges we've relied on for decades.

Now, once we identify the gaps and challenges, we can begin crafting a pathway of forward-moving strategies. But if we are truly aiming for inclusion, in every sense of the word, then the task ahead must be multifaceted.

Once we find the excluded invisible groups, we must not generalize. We cannot throw apples and oranges into the same basket. We must design interventions tailored to each group - different skills, different knowledge, different support systems, as one-size-fits-all no longer works. We need strategies that fit, empower, and respect the uniqueness of every category.

To weave this inclusive social fabric, we need deep nourishment, and that means substantial funding, strong investment policies, and practically

capacitating human power according to market demands. So here comes the strong role of the Private Sector. We've experimented with the PPP model for a while, but the trickle-down effect did not reach the bottom of the pyramid as anticipated. So now, we need not just reforms, but transformation with transparent systems, structural changes, and simplified procedures, less paperwork that ensures fast delivery to the last ones first.

The good news is that we now have tools at our fingertips. With the IT revolution, digital innovation, mobile connectivity, financial literacy, and AI's skills, now we can reach people faster and transfer skills more swiftly and widely than ever before. But we must be vigilant. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) must evolve and create ripple effects. Cash stuck in financial institutions should circulate and reach the needy. That money needs to flow into real communities, into the hands of real change makers, and then we will see the actual prism.

Yes, we've seen many reforms, but now, for this quantum leap and massive outreach, we need a silent revolution - a social and economic transformation. It must begin in our minds, reflected in our actions, and powered by our investments. If we want to reap the full harvest, we must plough the land now, be it by hand or by mechanized tools. We must invest in the soil of ideas, nurture it with wisdom, experience, and commitment.

This is the time for strategic positioning, for building a new narrative for Nepal. A vision that is rooted in our legacy, built on our strengths, and unburdened by self-pity or repetition of the past. Instead, let us position Nepal as the gateway, the bridge between two of the world's largest economic giants - India and China. (No more the cliché of *dui dhunga beech ko tarul* or "a yam between two stones")

In order to achieve this set of goals, though it may sound lofty, we can do it if we put our heart and soul into it. *Man Bachan ra Karma ley* (with soul, word, and deeds). We have to play our diplomatic card very tactfully, I

strongly feel we need to revive SAARC to be effective and functional. It can do miracles in collective bargaining and unification; it can be solidarity beyond borders, which is a non-negotiable for us as one of the small yet smart countries of South Asia.

I have signed two MOUs with SAARC and seen the gains of having a strong collective voice. We are moving towards BIMSTEC and I believe Nepal is hosting the next meeting. This is equally important with more players in it, but we should not be either or, with SAARC.

Let me end by saying that when the question of accountability arises, let us not play the blame game; it is not only the responsibility of the government but the private sector, NGOs, UN, donors, and we as citizens, are all equally accountable for fulfilling our duties too if we are enjoying our rights.

Let us dare to imagine a Nepal that is equitable, empowered, inclusive, resilient, and thriving. Yes, these are challenging times, but they are also a Call to Courage. A call to reimagine, redesign, reorganize, and rise with strength, synergy, and spirit. Let us rise together!

Thank you.

About the Nepal Development Research Institute

NDRI is an independent, non-profit institution dedicated to addressing contemporary and emerging challenges through quality research for evidence-based policy and programming. Established in 2004, NDRI comprises an interdisciplinary team of experts with the highest academic standings and a wealth of national and international experiences. With a multitude of activities across multiple sectors during more than two decades of existence, NDRI has now evolved as one of the leading think tanks in Nepal. NDRI believes in the power of evidence for social transformation and has been making relentless efforts to influence policies based on evidence from quality studies and research.

NDRI has been the recipient of the prestigious 'Niti Samman 2081' (Policy Award/Honor 2024/25), awarded by the Policy Research Institute (PRI), the Government think tank of Nepal, in recognition of the 'invaluable contribution to Nepal's policy research ecosystem and evidence-based policy-making system through research, feedback, advocacy, and capacity building in various policy areas'.

About NDRI Annual Lecture Series

Since 2021, NDRI has been organizing special Annual Lecture by inviting a distinguished person to speak on a contemporary or emerging issue. The first Annual Lecture entitled "Social Justice, Good Governance, and Development" was delivered by Hon'ble **Mr. Khil Raj Regmi** (Former Chairman, Council of Ministers, Government of Nepal and Former Chief Justice) (18th Annual Day). The second Annual Lecture entitled "Fifty Years of Asia's Development Experience: Relevance to Setting Development Priorities in Nepal" was delivered by **Dr. Bindu N. Lohani** (Former Vice President, Asian Development Bank, Chairman and Board of Directors of CAA) (19th Annual Day). The third Annual Lecture entitled "Learning from Thailand's Development Experience: Dos and Don'ts for Developing Countries" was delivered on by **Dr. Somkiat Tangkitvanich**, President of Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI); followed by a panel discussion on the "Role of Think tanks in the Economic Development of Nation" (20th Annual Day). The fourth Annual Day Lecture entitled "Climate and the Hindu Kush Himalaya – Critical Decade for Securing our Shared Future" was delivered by **Dr. Pema Gyamtsho**, Director General of ICIMOD, followed by a panel discussion session on "Way forward for a climate resilient future"(21st Annual Day).





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Learning from the Past, Supporting Evidence for a Better Future!

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