

Research Report On

**Participatory Decision-Making in Nepal's Local Governments: Practices, Challenges, and
Prospects**

Submitted To:

Research Committee,
Research and Consulting Services Department (RCSD),
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAO	Chief Administrative Officers
CBO	Community Based Organizations
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
LG	Local Government
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study, *Participatory Decision-Making in Nepal's Local Governments: Practices, Challenges, and Prospects*, explores the status, challenges, and opportunities of participatory governance following Nepal's transition to federalism in 2015. With the Constitution conferring significant authority to 753 local governments, participatory decision-making is central to ensuring inclusive development and democratic accountability.

Using a qualitative, multiple-case study approach, the research draws on interviews with elected representatives, administrative officials, and citizens in three local governments in Sudurpaschim Province. Data were analyzed using inductive content analysis and MAXQDA software. Findings reveal that formal mechanisms, such as the Seven-Step Planning Process and ward-level mobilization, have institutionalized participation, particularly during annual planning. However, participation often remains procedural and symbolic, with limited influence from marginalized groups.

Key challenges include elite capture of participatory spaces, low awareness among citizens and officials, migration, and logistical constraints in remote areas. Marginalized groups—women, *Dalits*, and ethnic minorities—are present in forums but rarely exercise decision-making power. Participation outside the planning process, such as in policy formulation and service delivery, remains weak.

Despite these issues, the study identifies several pathways forward: targeted capacity-building, greater collaboration with NGOs and civil society, and locally tailored legal frameworks. Innovative practices, such as integrating traditional leadership structures (e.g., *Bhanmansa*) with

digital tools, have demonstrated potential for improving inclusivity, though equitable access remains essential to avoid reinforcing exclusion.

The research concludes that while Nepal's local governance structures have evolved, achieving meaningful citizen participation requires more than procedural compliance. Genuine engagement demands systemic reform, institutional support, and deliberate inclusion strategies. These findings offer actionable insights for strengthening local democracy in Nepal and inform broader debates on participatory governance in federal systems globally.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

The establishment of federalism in Nepal marked a significant transformation in the country's political and administrative landscape. Nepal has a long-standing history of being governed under a unitary system, characterized by centralized power and control largely held by a small group of elites. For over two centuries, this system perpetuated various forms of discrimination and exclusion, marginalizing large sections of the population based on caste, ethnicity, gender, and regional differences.

The demand for a federal system in Nepal began gaining momentum in the late 20th century, particularly following the restoration of democracy in 1990. This push was further accelerated by the Maoist insurgency that started in 1996, which highlighted the need for more inclusive governance and equitable regional development. Marginalized and regional groups, long sidelined in the political process, began advocating for federalism as a means to decentralize power and address the entrenched inequalities that had persisted under the unitary system.

The adoption of the new Constitution of Nepal in 2015 prepared the way for the nation's unitary system of governance to be replaced by a federal system of governance. As a result, three tiers of government system with one federal unit, seven provinces, and 753 local administrations were formed to address the historical grievances of marginalized groups, promote balanced regional development, and ensure inclusive governance. It was seen as a way to rectify long-standing issues of discrimination and promote equitable distribution of resources and power across all regions and communities. As Nepal transitioned from a unitary state to a federal democratic republic, the

establishment of federalism represented a fundamental shift towards a more inclusive and representative governance framework, aimed at fostering political stability and peace in a post-conflict society. (Ghimire, 2019).

The main aim of restructuring the country into federal system was to practice power distribution among the three levels of government. The Constitution defined and distributed federal government with 35 rights, the provinces with 21 rights, and local governments with 22 rights. Among the three tiers of government, it is the local government that operates in closest contact with the local people. Additionally, the local government is a people-focused government and responds to the need of the citizens to use resources for their development by offering daily goods and services. Therefore, along with the 22 rights, the current new form of local government is in charge of numerous local matters, such as the political role, administrative function, development activities, and service delivery at the grassroot level. Thus, the local government is responsible to improve the residents' living conditions (Dahal, 2024).

Another major responsibility of local government towards its citizens is facilitating mechanisms for citizen engagement in decision making process to enhance transparency and accountability. Moreover, designing and implementing needs-based policies that reflect the interests and needs of the community, while promoting local development and welfare stands as its primary obligation. Actively involving community members through consultations, surveys, and participatory forums to gather input on their needs and priorities paves way for the local body to be able to formulate a tailored policy. (Pandeya, 2015)

Participatory decision-making is a critical element of democratic governance, enabling citizens to contribute to the decisions that affect their lives. In the context of Nepal, particularly in the diverse

and geographically challenging areas, the implementation of participatory governance varies significantly across rural and urban local levels. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal marked a significant shift towards federalism, empowering local governments with substantial authority and responsibility (Government of Nepal, 2015) . However, the extent to which this power has translated into effective participatory decision-making remains inconsistent.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Local governments in Nepal play a pivotal role in fostering democratic governance, decentralizing power, and enhancing citizen participation in development planning. Established under the Local Self-Governance Act of 1999 and further reinforced by the Local Government Operation Act of 2017, these frameworks aim to involve citizens directly in decision-making processes, including development planning, budgeting, and project implementation. The decentralization of authority is intended to make governance more inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs and priorities of communities, thereby fostering accountability and transparency. When citizens actively participate in planning and oversight, they are more likely to ensure the proper use of resources and achieve sustainable outcomes.

However, despite the existence of these formal structures for citizen engagement, there remains a significant gap between policy and practice. As (Bhusal, 2023) highlights, it is crucial to examine how ordinary citizens, particularly in rural municipalities, can effectively participate in decision-making processes. The dominance of formal structures often overlooks local sociological factors, suggesting a need to understand the interplay between formal and informal participatory mechanisms and their impact on citizen engagement in local governance.

Furthermore, (Pandeya, 2015) notes the challenges local governments face in formulating policies that genuinely reflect community needs and interests. While these governments are tasked with promoting local development and welfare, they also confront barriers to citizen engagement, such as ensuring data-driven decision-making and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. This indicates a disconnection between policy intentions and ground-level realities, where the intended participatory processes do not always translate into meaningful citizen involvement.

Similarly, (Gupta, 2021) points out that despite these legal frameworks, the actual level of citizen participation in local development planning remains low. This is due to persistent challenges such as socio-economic disparities, varying educational levels, and political dynamics that hinder the ability of local governments to fully engage their communities. These issues suggest that while local governments are designed to promote inclusive development, their effectiveness is often compromised by systemic barriers that prevent the genuine participation of all citizens.

Moreover, the existing governance structures, based on representative democracy, lack exclusive mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of traditionally marginalized communities in local governance. The current budgetary frameworks allow village and municipal councils to decide on budget allocations, but they do not provide specific methods to guarantee the participation of excluded communities and groups in decision-making processes. This raises concerns about whether electoral winners may dominate local decision-making, potentially sidelining the voices of electoral losers and other marginalized groups.

Therefore, this study seeks to analyze the current state of participatory decision-making in Nepal's local government, focusing on identifying the barriers that hinder genuine citizen participation. By examining these challenges, the research aims to provide insights into how local governments can

more effectively engage all citizens in governance processes, ensuring that development is truly inclusive and representative of the diverse needs of the population.

1.3 Research Objectives

The general objective of this research is to comprehensively understand the participatory decision-making practices in Nepal's local governments by analyzing current practices, identifying challenges, and exploring opportunities for improvement. The specific objectives are as below:

- **To document and analyze current participatory decision-making practices in Nepal's local governments.**
 - Document specific processes, mechanisms, and institutional frameworks for widespread citizen engagement including marginalized groups.
 - Identify variations and commonalities in participatory practices across rural and urban contexts.
- **To identify and examine the challenges that hinder effective citizen participation in local governance.**
 - Explore socio-economic inequalities, political dynamics, lack of awareness, and logistical issues.
 - Investigate cultural norms that may prevent marginalized groups from participating fully.
- **To explore potential opportunities and strategies for enhancing participatory governance in Nepal.**
 - Identify innovative practices and policy reforms suitable for the local context.
 - Explore initiatives that could strengthen local governance.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions and sub-questions guided this study:

- 1. How are participatory decision-making practices implemented at rural and urban local governments?**
 - What formal and informal mechanisms are used to engage citizens in decision-making processes and how do these mechanisms vary across different local levels (rural and urban)?
 - What roles do community leaders, local government officials, and ordinary citizens play in these processes?
- 2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current policy framework regarding participatory governance?**
 - How effectively do current policies facilitate public participation in local governance?
 - What specific aspects of the policy framework support or hinder participatory decision-making?
- 3. What challenges and opportunities exist for enhancing participatory decision-making in different local contexts?**
 - What are the main obstacles to effective public participation in local decision-making and how do these challenges differ between rural and urban areas?
 - What strategies have been successful in overcoming these challenges, and what lessons can be learned from them?

1.5 Rationale

Nepal's transition to a federal system in 2015 has granted significant autonomy to local governments, aiming to decentralize power and enhance citizen participation in governance. However, the practical implementation of participatory decision-making processes remains uneven across the country, particularly in diverse and marginalized regions. This research was crucial in understanding how local governments engage their citizens in decision-making, with a specific focus on rural and urban contexts. By documenting and analyzing current practices, the study has revealed the variations and commonalities in participatory governance, providing a comprehensive assessment of its effectiveness. This research also explored opportunities for innovation in participatory governance, such as the use of digital technologies to enhance citizen engagement. By examining best practices from other regions and similar contexts globally, the study identified strategies that can be adapted to improve participatory decision-making local levels.

One of the core mandates of Nepal Administrative Staff College is to enhance the capacity of elected representatives and employees working at sub-national level. The findings of this research offer valuable insights to identify the gaps and align the capacity building efforts accordingly. Ultimately, the study has the potential to inform policy reforms and enhance local governance practices, contributing to more effective and inclusive governance in Nepal.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Participatory Governance

Participatory governance is rooted in democratic theories that advocate for the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes. One of the most influential frameworks in this field is (Arnstein, 1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, which categorizes participation into eight levels, ranging from non-participation (e.g., manipulation, therapy) to tokenism (e.g., informing, consultation, placation), and finally to degrees of genuine citizen power (e.g., partnership, delegated power, citizen control). Arnstein argues that meaningful participation occurs only when power is redistributed to allow citizens to influence decisions.

Building on these ideas, (Fung, 2006) Democracy Cube expands the analysis to include who participates, how they participate, and the impact of their involvement. His framework emphasizes the need for participatory processes to be inclusive, deliberative, and consequential. Similarly, (Gaventa, 2005) highlights the importance of adapting participatory approaches to local socio-political contexts, particularly in settings with entrenched power asymmetries.

Arnstein's model has been widely applied in evaluating participatory practices in both developed and developing countries, especially in decentralized governance contexts e.g., (Fung, 2006); (Cornwall, 2008). For instance, a ten-year study of Malaysia's public sector projects found that although citizen engagement had increased procedurally, it remained limited to tokenistic forms such as consultation and placation (Rom, Soda, & Drianda, 2022). The study underscored the need to overcome structural barriers to enable deeper and more meaningful participation.

This framework is especially relevant in Nepal, where the 2015 Constitution mandates participatory governance across all levels, but implementation often remains inconsistent. Arnstein's ladder provides a critical lens through which to assess the effectiveness and authenticity of local participation. In Nepal's local governments, citizen involvement may be institutionally required, yet often lacks the depth needed to influence decisions substantively (Bhusal, 2023); (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024). By applying this framework, scholars can evaluate whether participatory spaces empower citizens or serve as procedural formalities that reinforce existing hierarchies (KC & Dahal, 2024).

2.2 Global Practices in Participatory Decision-Making

Around the world, various models of participatory governance have been implemented with varying degrees of success. In Brazil, participatory budgeting is a well-documented example of how citizens can directly influence public spending, leading to increased transparency and improved public services (Wampler, 2007). The Brazilian experience demonstrates that participatory processes can empower marginalized communities, provided that they are designed to be inclusive and responsive to local needs (Abers, 2000).

Similarly, in India, the Panchayati Raj system has institutionalized citizen participation in local governance. However, studies have shown that despite the legal provisions, challenges such as elite capture and lack of capacity have limited the effectiveness of participatory decision-making (Chhotray, 2007).

These global examples offer valuable lessons for Nepal, where the success of participatory governance will depend on how well local governments can adapt these models to their specific contexts.

2.3 Participatory Decision-Making in Nepal

Nepal's local governance system has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly after the introduction of federalism. The constitution mandates that local governments engage citizens in decision-making processes, particularly in areas such as planning, budgeting, and service delivery. However, the extent to which these provisions have been implemented varies widely across the country (Bhusal, 2023). Nepal has undergone long years of political instability and lack of participatory governance is often perceived as a hindrance for governance and democracy (KC & Dahal, 2024).

Studies by (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024) indicate that while local governments have established mechanisms for citizen participation, such as public hearings and community consultations, these processes often lack depth and inclusiveness. In many cases, participation is limited to consultation rather than active decision-making, and marginalized groups, including women, Dalits, and indigenous communities, are often excluded from these processes.

Despite these challenges, there are several opportunities to strengthen participatory decision-making in Nepal. The use of digital platforms and e-governance tools can make participation more accessible, especially in remote areas where physical participation is challenging (Gaventa, 2005). Similarly, strengthening the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) as intermediaries between

citizens and local governments can promote more inclusive and effective participation (Cornwall, 2008).

2.4 Research Gaps

The existing literature on participatory decision-making in Nepal highlights several gaps that this study seeks to address. While some studies have touched on the exclusion of marginalized groups from participatory processes, there is a need for more in-depth research on how these groups can be better included in local governance. There is a lack of comparative studies that analyze how different local governments in Nepal implement participatory decision-making and what factors contribute to the success or failure of these practices. The potential of e-governance and digital tools for enhancing participation has been recognized globally, there is limited research on how these innovations can be applied in the Nepali context. Existing studies often focus on documenting practices without providing actionable policy recommendations. This study aims to bridge this gap by offering concrete policy suggestions based on empirical evidence.

CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This research mainly aimed to comprehensively understand the participatory decision-making practices in local governments of Nepal. For this purpose, a descriptive qualitative research design was adopted to explore ground realities due to the need for rich data that could facilitate the generation of various categories. Qualitative research is often used in cases where the categories cannot be satisfactorily determined from existing data (Locke, 2003). A multi-case study (or collective case study) approach was employed where multiple cases were selected to illustrate the same. In some instances, more than one issue was explored within a single case, while in others, cases were selected to reflect different perspectives on the same problem. As (Creswell, 2013) stated, researchers frequently also deliberately select a number of cases to illustrate various viewpoints on the problem. Utilizing replication logic, the researcher or inquirer duplicated the procedures for every case to ensure consistency in the multiple case study design. While qualitative researchers typically avoid generalizing from one case to another due to variations in context, (Yin, 2018) emphasizes the importance of selecting representative cases to support broader analytical insights. Consequently, this study employed a multiple case study methodology, in which the subject of analysis remained consistent across cases. The resulting data were clustered based on common tactics and success factors, and subsequently categorized into emergent themes. For this purpose, an inductive content analysis approach was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), enabling the researcher to derive meaning from patterns within the qualitative data.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

The primary data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, selected for their capacity to generate rich, contextual insights. While an interview guide was employed to ensure consistency across respondents, the discussions frequently evolved into a more unstructured format, allowing participants to articulate their lived experiences in greater depth. This flexible approach facilitated the emergence of both guided and unanticipated themes, enhancing the overall analytical depth of the study. The data were collected from elected representatives of the local governments – mayors, deputy mayors, ward chairs and ward members of the LGs and from administrative leaders i.e., chief administrative officers (CAO) or senior officers who are available in case of absence of CAOs. Besides that, the data were also collected from local citizens who actively participated in the meetings. For selection of the local citizens, help from ward members was sought to identify the respondents.

The Nepal National Governance Survey 2017/18 highlighted that citizen participation in meetings of social organizations, committees and community forums was approximately 29%. Comparing the provincial data, the lowest attendance was observed in Madhesh province followed by Karnali and Lumbini provinces with participation rates in these three provinces falling below the national average. Similarly, considering the ecological zones, the Terai region recorded the lowest participation of 23% followed by Hill and Mountain region (Nepal Administrative Staff College, 2018). Madhesh province is mainly located in the Terai region while Karnali province is situated in the Hilly and Mountainous region. To ensure representation from all ecological zones,

Sudurpaschim Province was selected as the study site. From within Sudurpaschim Province, three local governments were chosen based on the researchers' accessibility and convenience.

3.3 Data Analysis and Management

Data were analyzed using inductive content-analysis technique. Standard software like MAXQDA was used for data management and analysis in this study. The qualitative data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim into English. The general principles of data translation, data transcribing and coding were carried in the first stage of data analysis (Rugg & Petre, 2007). In the second stage, sorting, summing and categorizing were carried out. Data from multiple case studies were used to analyze and generate meaningful insights.

To facilitate this, main categories—such as public participation, challenges, and strategies—were identified, along with relevant sub-categories based on the depth and nature of the data collected. Each sub-category included sufficient codes to extract and organize meaningful data from textual units (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Open codes with similar content were grouped into sub-categories, which were then further categorized to produce a structured and concise presentation of results (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The data from all the LGs were analyzed together, generating various themes and sub-themes, along with a coherent and logical interpretation of the findings.

3.4 Quality Assurance

The quality of this study was ensured by focusing on the trustworthiness of the research, particularly through the dimensions of credibility and dependability (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). To enhance credibility, the research team engaged in prolonged field-based

interactions. Rich and in-depth insights were generated through direct contact with respondents and persistent observation of ground realities.

Data collection methods were applied rigorously, with both verbal and non-verbal responses being carefully documented and considered during analysis. Dependability was ensured by adhering to a systematic process of open coding, sub-categorizing, and final categorization. The interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to ensure that all relevant meanings and insights were accurately captured and incorporated into the analysis.

CHAPTER IV ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter mainly deals with the analysis of the collected data using various methods. The data was collected using in depth interviews with the elected officials, senior officials and locals of the selected local governments. After that, the interview data were transcribed and coded using MAXQDA software. Thematic analysis was conducted using the same software. The analysis and interpretation of the data is done, and major findings are presented.

4.1 Current Practices of Participative Decision Making

The first area of analysis in this research was the current practices of ensuring citizen participation of the local governments and how they are managing and ensuring the participation for better performance and output. The various themes and sub-themes generated after data analysis are presented in table 4.1

Table 1 Thematic Analysis of Current Practices of Participative Decision Making

SN	Themes	Sub-Themes	Remarks
1	Use of Seven-Step Planning Process	• Good Understanding of The Planning Process • Follow the Process in Planning Stage	
2	Mobilization of Elected Ward Members	• Work Division Among Ward Members • Role of Ward Members for Information Flow	
3	Discussion in Subjective Committees	• Subjective Committees Actively Discuss the Projects • Decision Made on Consensus/Majority	
4	Local Participation Ensured in Ward and Lower-Level Meetings	• Discussion/Meeting with <i>Tole Samiti</i> • Participation of Local Population	

5	Wider Participation for Matters of Larger Concern	• Multi-Party Level Discussion • Two-Third Majority Ensured	
6	Inclusion of Marginalized Groups	• Marginalized Groups Considered while allocating budget • Role of Ward Members Crucial • Discussion with Concerned Groups	
7	Communication Strategies	• Ward Members Utilized for Reach • Use of Various Media for Information Dissemination • SMS/Calls as per Urgency of Issue	
8	Grievance Handling	• Encourage Open Dialogue on Grievances • Multi – Tiered Dispute Settlement	

4.1.1 Use of Seven -Step Planning Process

The local levels were found to use the seven-step planning process as per the “Local Level Planning Guidelines, 2078”. All the local governments (LGs) considered in this study were found to use the bottom-up approach for planning process. The elected representatives and employees at the local level were found to be well versed with this planning process. This guideline has clearly pointed out the various works to be undertaken for planning and the local levels have used this guideline to identify, prioritize and select various projects for the LGs.

One of the participants pointed out:

...we follow a systematic seven-step process as outlined in the "बजेट तर्जुमा दिग्दर्शन." (Respondent 02)

The senior officials also pointed out that elected representatives ensure attendance and meeting minutes, agenda etc. before submitting the projects in the municipal executive meeting.

4.1.2 Mobilization of Elected Ward Members

The LGs were found to effectively utilize ward members for ensuring the participation of the citizens. In one of the LGs, the work was properly divided among the ward members and ward chairperson, avoiding duplication of work. The ward members visit the office regularly and attend to the citizens for proper service delivery and catering to them.

... We have efficiently divided our responsibilities, with Chandra Baini managing administrative functions and serving as the primary point of contact, while I oversee education initiatives. (Respondent 08).

Since ward offices are the primary point of contact for local citizens, the work division and presence of representatives ensure that people's voices are heard, and involvement is encouraged.

Similarly, the LGs have also strategically utilized ward members for flow of information to the citizens. The ward members are closer to the people and belong to various marginalized groups, so their reach is higher compared to chairperson or other elected officials. The information about planning meetings and other issues of importance is disseminated through ward members. Such a practice has also helped ward members feel their importance.

While visiting every household is not feasible, it is the responsibility of ward members and political party representatives to inform the public, and we rely on them to help spread the word. (Respondent 01)

4.1.3 Discussion in Subjective Committees

LGs have established subject-specific committees to discuss and decide on various plans and projects submitted from the ward levels. These committees thoroughly examine the budget

ceilings and assess the proposed projects from both wards and the municipality. Since the projects originate from citizen input, decisions are made based on set criteria, through either consensus or majority opinion. These discussions play a crucial role in formalizing the planning process and ensuring that citizens' voices are meaningfully incorporated into local decision-making. One of the respondents expressed:

.... sector-wise committees are formed within the municipality, such as the सामाजिक विकास समिति, पूर्वधार विकास समिति, आर्थिक विकास समिति, वन बातावरण तथा विपद व्यवस्थापन समिति, and सुशासन तथा संस्थागत विकास समिति. (Respondent 02)

4.1.4 Local Participation Ensured in Ward and Lower-Level Meetings

The ward chairperson and other elected representatives were found to actively ensure the participation of local citizens in various settlement-, village-, and community-level meetings. These meetings are primarily held during the planning process to gather information on the needs and priorities of developmental projects. Typically, they take place at the tole (settlement) level, where members of the settlement development committees and other local residents are invited. If necessary, additional rounds of meetings are conducted at the ward level as well. One of the elected members expressed:

Meetings are convened with a seven-day prior notice, clearly stating the time, venue, and date. For Tole/Settlement meetings, we assign a Ward Secretary, a Ward-elected representative, and a technical staff to facilitate discussions. The bottom-up approach is followed for collecting suggestions... (Respondent 05)

4.1.5 Wider Participation of Matters of Larger Concern

In cases involving issues of broader public concern, the local citizens, representatives of political parties and various other stakeholders are invited to the meetings and public hearings. The LGs stated that they make efforts to ensure active participation from all relevant stakeholders in such issues. These processes enable local voices to be heard and decisions to be made through democratic means. As per some respondents:

When necessary, we even conduct public referendums (polling). For example, we've called meetings that included representatives from 2/3 of all political parties as well as the general public to discuss important matters such as the use of public lands, management of stray cattle, DPR, disaster management, and even local market (haat bazaar) management. (Respondent 01)

... For example, during the ongoing construction of the bus park, we ensured that all relevant stakeholders were consulted, and decisions were made through collective agreement. In a democratic system, making decisions against public interest is never a viable option, as it leads to backlash and challenges. Anyone can go around and ask the public themselves—the bus park construction is progressing with full public consensus and support. (Respondent 07)

4.1.6 Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

Elected and administrative officials of the local governments (LGs) stated that marginalized groups are taken into account during decision-making processes, particularly in project selection and budget allocation. Specific budgetary provisions are set aside to support the upliftment of these groups, with their needs and priorities considered during planning. Officials also emphasized the crucial role of ward members in representing marginalized voices. *Dalit*, female, and other ward

members are actively involved in decisions related to their respective communities. As per opinion of one respondent:

We place strong emphasis on representation and inclusiveness, ensuring the participation of ethnic/tribal groups, both genders, and diverse castes and classes. (Respondent 05)

4.1.7 Communication Strategies

One of the important aspects of inclusiveness in decision making is the dissemination of information relating to the meetings and public hearings. The LGs have adopted various strategies to ensure that the information is spread properly. The ward members have the primary responsibility to inform the citizens as they are closer to the general public. In addition, multiple communication channels are used to facilitate the information flow. Public notices are displayed at ward offices and simultaneously shared through official social media platforms, particularly Facebook, by elected representatives. Currently, social media is the first choice for flow of information due to widespread internet usage in the community. One respondent opined:

For instance, in our ongoing Employment Fair, we actively shared updates through our Facebook page, which led to valuable public engagement, generating both constructive feedback and criticisms. These multiple communication channels allow us to stay connected with the public and address concerns in a timely and transparent manner. (Respondent 06)

In some cases, the elected members also rely on traditional community-based information system for information dissemination. In one ward of LG with majority of Tharu population, they utilize the local community leaders for flow of information:

... we also rely on "भनमन्सा" (Bhanmansa)—traditional village heads responsible for governance and community decisions—to spread the word effectively. (Respondent 05)

In addition to social media, SMS and Telephone communication are also used when necessary. These channels are typically reserved for matters of broader concern that involve multiple stakeholders, rather than for routine information sharing. In some cases, formal written invitations are also issued to ensure participation. In some cases, they also issue formal written letters for participation.

4.1.8 Grievance Handling

One of the important facets of citizen participation is the formal mechanism adopted for submitting and handling grievances. Grievances are common in LGs where the resources are limited and fulfilling aspirations of every citizen may not be possible. The LGs have adopted formal grievance handling mechanisms through various social media platforms and other traditional media channels. In a democratic system, open communications are encouraged to address various issues. One respondent expressed:

Both the administrative side and elected representatives handle grievances from individuals or communities, and we actively welcome them to share their concerns. While protests are sometimes a part of this process, we always encourage open dialogue to address issues (Respondent 01)

The elected representatives also hear grievances from citizens, as they are directly accessible both in the office and within the community. They have used various social media platforms to give a voice to the people, and such mechanisms provide valuable feedback.

The participatory decision-making process mainly revolves around the annual project planning process, where the guidelines have clarified the procedures. Similarly, the practice of participatory decision-making is also evident in issues of wider importance. However, there are challenges in ensuring participation in other areas of local governance.

4.2 Issues and Challenges of Participative Decision Making

There are some issues and challenges that are observed in ensuring citizen participation as envisioned by the current legal and governance system. The various themes and sub-themes generated after data analysis are presented in table 4.2

Table 2 Thematic Analysis of Issues and Challenges of Participative Decision Making

SN	Themes	Sub-Themes	Remarks
1	Ensuring Larger Number of Participation	• Migration and Lack of Active Population • Geographical Hardships • Limited Voluntary Engagement • Seeking Incentives for Participation	
2	Capture of Elite Groups	• Attendance Ensured as Per Party's Affiliation • Some Groups not Informed • Policy Misinterpretation by Elites	
3	Lesser Participation of Marginalized Groups	• Passive Attendance of Marginalized Groups • Lack of Awareness of Marginalized Groups • Problem of Patriarchy	
4	Knowledge Gap	• Citizens Not Well Versed in New System • Elected Representatives also Not Trained Properly • Limited Knowledge of Laws and Policies of Elected Representatives • Gap Due to Abrupt Restructuring	
5	Lack of Participation in Other Functions of LG	• Participation Ensured only in Planning • Other Functions Overlooked	

4.2.1 Ensuring Larger Number of Participation

The LGs have made efforts to ensure participation in planning process through various strategies but the actual participation is very less compared to the total population of the village or wards. The data was collected from various LGs of Far Western Province indicate a serious issue of migration among the locals of these areas. Most of the active population has either moved to urban areas like Kathmandu and some have already left the country. As a result, the aspirations and ideas of the active working population are not adequately expressed, increasing the likelihood that real issues are not being discussed. One of the participants expressed:

Silgadhi market was once a vibrant commercial hub, predominantly led by the Newar community, who played a significant role in trade and investment. However, over time, the market has gradually lost its vitality, and today, it feels almost abandoned (Respondent 07)

The lack of larger participation is a challenge for elected officials to formulate locally tailored policies for local development. Similarly, there is another challenge where the participants expect some incentives for participating in various meetings and events:

Despite our best efforts to engage with them, their participation often hinges on whether they receive something in return. Their involvement largely depends on the availability of stipends or allowances, which, unfortunately, we are unable to provide or support. (Respondent 01)

In the same way, there are geographical hardships in the hilly areas where villages are situated far from each other and with limited public transportation. Thus, attending meetings might not be feasible every time. Voluntary engagement is hence limited in these LGs.

4.2.2 Capture of Elite Groups

The participatory decision-making process followed by LGs appears to have been captured by elites in some of the LGs. Some local people expressed that the meetings are usually attended by citizens loyal to the elected representatives' political party. They also pointed out that the members of the political parties are usually invited ensure attendance and the projects are chosen based on the discretion of elected officials. The elites mostly dominate the meetings and voices of marginalized groups are often overshadowed. In such cases, participation is ensured on papers but genuine participation is missing. One respondent expressed:

The process often feels like a form of elite capture, where policies and resource allocations are ultimately shaped by the interests of those in power, rather than addressing the needs of the most vulnerable. (Respondent 04)

Some local citizens also reported that they are not called for meetings because the current elected officials perceive them as being affiliated with different political parties. One local expressed:

Me and my family have been living in this town for three generations and I am one of the respected business owners of this area. I live very near to the ward office and municipal executive office but neither the ward, nor the municipal executive has invited me to a single meeting until now (Respondent 09)

4.2.3 Lesser Participation of Marginalized Groups

The participatory decision-making process envisions active involvement of marginalized groups in decision-making within LGs. However, the reality appears to be quite different. Marginalized groups are usually not present in meetings and even if they are present, their participation is very

passive. The elites and other groups often control the discussions and may influence decisions as well.

One of the key challenges in fostering participative decision-making is the lack of active engagement from lower-income groups with limited access to information (Respondent 06)

Another common problem seen is the patriarchal construct of the society. The females expressed that their voices are often neglected or not even given platforms when it comes to decision making. One of the elected representatives expressed:

...this could be attributed to the deep-rooted patriarchy in our society or the historically male-dominated political culture of Nepal, where it remains challenging for women to voice their opinions or even be included in discussions. (Respondent 03)

Further analysis reveals that this marginalization is not limited to committee representation but extends to procedural dynamics within local government. The lack of delegated authority—especially in the absence of senior officials—restricts the ability of women in leadership roles to exercise their mandates or initiate participatory mechanisms. The respondent expressed:

One of the biggest challenges I have faced... is the lack of delegated authority. Even in the Mayor's absence, he does not transfer responsibilities to me... This limitation... ultimately hinders the effectiveness of governance. At times, being a female Deputy Mayor feels like a 'cartoon character'... nothing more than a symbolic role with no real influence. (Respondent 03)

One of the major reasons behind such passive engagement could be due to the lack of awareness of these marginalized groups.

While they may attend meetings, they often remain passive observers, sitting quietly rather than voicing their concerns. This is largely due to their lack of full knowledge about governance processes, which makes them hesitant to participate meaningfully (Respondent 06)

4.2.4 Knowledge Gap

The federal system of governance is still a relatively new concept in Nepal, and there appears to be a gap in understanding both the structure of the current system and its potential benefits. Citizens are not well-versed in this new system, and as a result, the importance of their participation is not widely recognized. Although elected representatives are familiar with the basic principles of federalism, they also lack a thorough understanding of the procedural aspects of the new governance system. One respondent remarked:

... while training for elected representatives was provided, it came six to seven months into our tenure, by which time we had already faced significant challenges without proper guidance. (Respondent 08)

Since Nepal is in a transition phase of federalism, there is a severe lack of knowledge about the existing laws and policy frameworks that guide the various facets of federalism as well. Administrative staff specifically noted that elected representatives often lack sufficient knowledge of these legal provisions, which limits effective policy implementation and weakens institutional performance. As one respondent remarked:

.... the biggest challenge lies in awareness and literacy among municipal assembly members, many of whom lack a clear understanding of these policies. As a result, policies often remain on paper

only, with little to no implementation... policies are often forgotten after being drafted.
(Respondent 07)

In one of the LGs, there appears to be a gap in procedural knowledge among locals and elected officials due to the direct transition of VDC to Sub-Metropolitan City. Some parts of the city were VDCs in previous administrative structure but later turned into a big sub-metropolitan city. In such cases, the developmental status is lower, and priorities of such places may differ from priorities set by LGs. In such cases, the knowledge gap is evident:

Another major challenge faced by our ward is the direct transformation of our area into a Sub-Metropolitan City without first going through the transitional phases of becoming a Municipality. (Respondent 05)

4.2.5 Lack of Participation in Other Functions of LG

The LGs have not implemented the participative decision-making process in other functions of the government such as policy formulation and related areas. While the planning process explicitly mandates participation—leading to the establishment of various mechanisms and strategies—such efforts are largely absent in other domains. LGs should also ensure participation in other functions through policy dialogues, citizen-centric service design and delivery and other forms of engagement.

4.3 Opportunities and Way Forward

There are some opportunities for LGs to prioritize in order to ensure citizen participation as envisioned by the current legal and governance framework. The various themes and sub-themes generated after data analysis are presented in table 4.3

Table 3 Thematic Analysis for Opportunities and Way Forward

SN	Themes	Sub-Themes	Remarks
1	Capacity Building	• Training Right after Being Elected • Skill Enhancement of Employee • Knowledge Enhancement of Citizens	
2	Collaboration with Stakeholders	• Engage Local CBOs (Community Based Organizations) and NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) • Collaboration with State and Federal Governments	
3	Legal Frameworks	• Tailored Policies for LGs • Administrative Reforms in this Sector	

4.3.1 Capacity Building

The federal democratic structure is relatively new in Nepal, and the country has only recently entered the second phase of federalism. Various administrative and political mechanisms are in place to institutionalize the federal system. Capacity building of elected officials and government employees plays a crucial role in establishing effective mechanisms for participatory decision-making. However, elected officials receive limited training, and as a result, their understanding of various facets of federalism remains limited.

... the biggest challenge lies in awareness and literacy among municipal assembly members, many of whom lack a clear understanding of these policies. (Respondent 07)

Similarly, local citizens lack proper knowledge about the current mechanisms and functional areas of LGs. Thus, it is important to develop the capacity of various stakeholders to ensure proper participatory decision-making.

4.3.2 Collaboration with Stakeholders

Various stakeholders, such as community-based organizations, NGOs, other levels of government, and both private and public sectors, need to collaborate with one another to ensure a participative

decision-making process. Likewise, a collaborative approach should be adopted by elected officials and employees within the organization. One participant expressed:

I have observed a stark difference in governance led by bureaucrats versus elected representatives. Bureaucrats operate strictly within legal frameworks, ensuring compliance with laws and policies. In contrast, elected representatives are often influenced by political directives, which sometimes take precedence over policy guidelines. This, too, is beyond their control, as they must balance governance with political obligations.
(Respondent 07)

In some LGs the NGOs are actively involved in various sectors and are doing a good job. Collaborating with these organizations could pave the way for proper participative decision making.

4.3.3 Legal Framework

Another important approach to ensuring participatory decision-making is the strengthening of the legal framework in this area. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) provides a well-defined set of rights to local governments, enabling them to formulate their own policies as needed. While the current legal framework for the planning process is being followed, there are no tailored policies specifically designed to promote participatory decision-making.

Adding to these challenges is the lack of locally tailored policy guidelines. Until now, we have been following directives provided by federal and provincial governments. However, generic, one-size-fits-all policies do not work in practice (Respondent 04)

Administrative reforms should also be made for institutionalizing the participative process in various functions of the government. LGs should use the constitutional rights for formulating

policies and reforming the administrative and legal provisions to ensure participative decision-making in different functions of the government.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Discussion

This study's findings illuminate the complexities of participatory decision-making in Nepal's local governments, offering critical insights into the interplay between constitutional mandates, institutional practices, and socio-cultural realities. By situating these findings within global discourses on participatory governance and federalism, this discussion highlights both Nepal's progress and persistent challenges while proposing pathways for reform.

5.1.1 Formal Structures and Tokenistic Participation

The Seven-Step Planning Process emerged as a cornerstone of participatory governance in Nepal, reflecting global models like Brazil's participatory budgeting (Wampler, 2007) and India's Panchayati Raj (Chhotray, 2007). However, while these frameworks are lauded for decentralizing power, Nepal's implementation often reduces participation to procedural compliance rather than substantive engagement. For instance, marginalized groups such as Dalits and women attended meetings but rarely influenced decisions. Participants expressed that while they are invited and 'heard,' their concerns are not always taken seriously in decision-making. This echoes the gap between presence and influence; 'voice heard' does not always mean 'voice listened to'. This mirrors Arnstein's (1969) critique of "tokenism" in participatory systems. This aligns with Acharya and Zafarullah's (2024) observation that Nepal's local governments prioritize "consultation" over "citizen control," a trend also noted in Kenya's devolution experiments (Cornwall, 2008).

Moreover, Citizens tend to engage only when formally invited or when issues are directly personal, reflecting a participation model shaped more by procedural obligation than empowered deliberation. This mirrors the findings of (Visser, van Popering-Verkerk, & van Buuren, 2021) that simply opening procedural space or relaxing formal rules is insufficient to foster genuine participation; rather, meaningful engagement emerges through iterative interactions and trust-building between citizens and authorities.

The dominance of political elites in meetings further undermines inclusivity. Respondents reported that agendas were often predetermined by elected officials, sidelining dissenting voices. This echoes Bhusal's (2023) finding that Nepal's rural governance is shaped by informal power networks, where local elites co-opt participatory spaces. Such dynamics contradict Fung's (2006) "Democracy Cube," which advocates for deliberative processes, where marginalized groups shape outcomes.

5.1.2. Bridging Formal and Informal Systems

The mobilization of ward members as intermediaries highlights Nepal's innovative blending of formal and informal governance. For example, Tharu communities in Sudur Paschim Province leveraged traditional *Bhanmansa* (village heads) to disseminate information, complementing social media outreach. This mixed approach resonates with Gaventa's (2005) argument that effective participation requires adapting global models to local sociocultural contexts. However, reliance on ward members risked reinforcing exclusion, as seen in Uganda's Local Council system, where intermediaries became gatekeepers for elite interests (Escobar, 1988).

Similarly, modern digital tools like Facebook and SMS have improved transparency. Still, they excluded non-literate and rural populations, reflecting Cornwall's (2008) caution that e-

governance can foster inequalities because the literacy rate of rural district like Doti is lesser compared to national average (National Statistics Office, 2021). Contrastingly, Kerala’s “People’s Planning Campaign” successfully combined digital platforms with grassroots literacy drives (Chhotray, 2007), suggesting Nepal could adopt similar strategies to democratize access.

5.1.3. Marginalization and Structural Barriers

The passive participation of marginalized groups underscores prevalent inequities rooted in Nepal’s caste and gender hierarchies. For instance, *Dalit* respondents often showed hesitancy to voice concerns in mixed-caste forums, a phenomenon also observed in India’s Scheduled Caste communities (Abers, 2000). Similarly, women’s participation was often symbolic, with their input confined to “soft” issues like healthcare, mirroring findings from Pakistan’s local governance reforms (Gupta, 2021).

Migration has further impacted participation, as youth out-migration left meetings dominated by older, less dynamic voices. This parallels rural depopulation trends in Latin America, where absenteeism weakens communal decision-making (Wampler, 2007). Nepal’s geographical challenges—such as hilly and rugged terrain of Far Western Hills—compound these issues, limiting physical access to meetings, akin to Ethiopia’s highland regions (Gaventa, 2005).

5.1.4. Federalism’s Unfulfilled Promise

While federalism aimed to decentralize power, the study reveals gaps in institutional capacity. Elected officials and employees lacked proper training in participatory mechanisms, leading to ad hoc implementation. There is a need for enhanced training and capacity-building to address these

deficiencies, improve decision-making, and support sustainable development (Adhikari G. , 2024). This also aligns with Dahal’s (2024) critique of Nepal’s “hourglass federalism,” where local governments remain under-resourced despite constitutional mandates. For example, respondents cited delayed training programs that left officials unprepared to navigate complex planning processes, a challenge also faced by South Africa’s post-apartheid municipalities (Fung, 2006).

5.1.5. Opportunities for Transformative Participation

The study identifies three avenues for reform:

- i) *Capacity Building*: Training programs for officials and citizens, modeled on Brazil’s Escola de Governo (Wampler, 2007), could bridge knowledge gaps. Nepal’s Local Government Institutional Capacity Self-Assessment (2023) provides a blueprint to identify gaps but requires more funding and political will.
- ii) *Collaborative Governance*: Partnerships with NGOs and CSOs could mitigate elite capture. For instance, Kerala’s “*Kudumbashree*” women’s networks empowered marginalized groups through micro-planning (Chhotray, 2007), a model adaptable to Nepal’s context.
- iii) *Legal Reforms*: Tailored policies, such as quotas for marginalized groups in committees, could institutionalize inclusion. Colombia’s Ley de Participación Ciudadana (2014) offers lessons in codifying participatory rights.

5.2 Conclusion

Nepal’s transition to federalism in 2015 marked a historic shift toward decentralizing power and democratizing governance, yet this study reveals persistent gaps between constitutional ideals and grassroots realities. The findings underscore that while participatory decision-making

mechanisms, such as the Seven-Step Planning Process and ward-level mobilization, have institutionalized citizen engagement in theory, their implementation remains uneven and often symbolic. Marginalized groups—Dalits, women, and geographically isolated communities—continue to face systemic exclusion, echoing global critiques of participatory governance as a procedural formality rather than a transformative practice. The dominance of political elites in decision-making forums, coupled with migration-driven demographic shifts and socio-cultural hierarchies, highlights the enduring influence of informal power structures that undermine federalism’s promise of inclusion. These challenges mirror struggles observed in post-devolution contexts worldwide.

The study also illuminates Nepal’s unique socio-political landscape, where federalism’s success hinges on bridging formal institutions with informal traditions. For instance, the blended use of digital tools (e.g., social media) and traditional systems (e.g., *Bhanmansa* leaders in Tharu communities) demonstrates localized innovation but also exposes disparities in access and literacy. This mixed model is not merely a technological blend but a governance innovation that bridges formal and informal systems. Traditional leaders like Bhanmansa provide legitimacy and local trust, while digital platforms expand access and speed. Together, they create a culturally resonant and logistically efficient mechanism for citizen engagement. This duality reflects Escobar’s (1988) assertion that participatory models must adapt to cultural contexts to avoid becoming “anti-politics machines.” Furthermore, the lack of capacity-building initiatives for elected officials and citizens—evident in delayed training programs and knowledge gaps—reveals area for improvement in Nepal’s federal architecture.

To address these challenges, the study advocates for a multi-pronged approach. First, capacity-building programs must prioritize marginalized groups and elected officials. Second, legal reforms

should institutionalize inclusion through quotas for marginalized communities in decision-making bodies and third, collaborative governance with NGOs and civil society organizations could mitigate elite dominance, as seen in the success of Nepal's community forestry programs (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2024). Finally, innovative digital platforms tailored to Nepal's linguistic and literacy diversity—such as voice-based interfaces or community radio integrations—could democratize access to participatory spaces, addressing exclusion exacerbated by geographical and socio-economic barriers.

Nepal's federal experiment offers valuable lessons for Global South nations navigating similar transitions. While the road ahead is fraught with challenges—entrenched hierarchies, resource constraints, and political volatility—the study identifies pockets of progress, such as Sudur Paschim's ward-level mobilization, that signal the potential for transformative governance. By reimagining participation as a dynamic, inclusive process rather than a compliance, Nepal can advance toward its constitutional vision of equitable development. This requires not only policy reforms but also a cultural shift—one that recognizes marginalized voices as agents of change rather than passive beneficiaries. As Nepal moves into the next phase of federalism, the imperative lies in fostering genuine citizen agency, ensuring that decentralization becomes a tool for empowerment rather than a perpetuation of historical inequities.

5.3 Implications

The findings of this study on participatory decision-making in Nepal's local governments offer nuanced insights with implications for policy, practice, and academic discourse. Despite having limitations as observations not being made during actual meetings, restricting behavioral insights, it still highlights the opportunities for incremental yet meaningful reforms by documenting the

interplay between formal mechanisms like the Seven-Step Planning Process and socio-cultural realities.

Policy implications center on refining existing frameworks to better align with grassroots needs. While Nepal's constitutional commitment to federalism and participatory governance is commendable, the gap between policy intent and implementation suggests a need for clearer guidelines to ensure marginalized groups are not merely consulted but actively shape decisions. Additionally, policies could emphasize capacity-building programs for local officials to navigate participatory frameworks effectively, addressing knowledge gaps identified in Sudur Paschim Province.

Practical implications focus on adaptive strategies to enhance citizen engagement. The study underscores the potential of mixed communication tools—such as blending social media with community radio or local leaders—to reach non-literate and geographically isolated populations. Training programs for elected representatives, particularly in rural areas, could improve their ability to facilitate inclusive dialogues. Collaborative partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs might also amplify marginalized voices, where CSOs act as intermediaries between citizens and governments. Furthermore, addressing migration-related participation challenges could involve piloting digital platforms for remote engagement, ensuring absentee populations remain connected to local decision-making.

Theoretical implications emerge from the study's exploration of participatory governance in a federalizing context. The findings add to Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of participation" by demonstrating how traditional and modern systems coexist, suggesting that mixed models may better capture Nepal's socio-political reality. Similarly, the limited agency of marginalized groups despite formal inclusion challenges Fung's (2006) "Democracy Cube," urging scholars to consider

how power dynamics mediate deliberative spaces. This invites future research to develop frameworks that account for cultural and historical contexts, particularly in post-conflict societies transitioning to federalism.

Future research directions could explore comparative studies across Nepal's provinces to identify context-specific barriers and enablers of participation. Longitudinal analyses tracking the evolution of federalism's impact on local governance would provide deeper insights into systemic challenges like elite capture or migration. Ethnographic studies might also unpack cultural norms that deter marginalized groups from active engagement, offering strategies to foster inclusive dialogues.

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