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## Public Participation in Planning and Implementation of Local Government: Evidence from Karnali Province, Nepal

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### Abstract

Public participation refers to the participation in decisions on specific activities, concerning plans, programs and policies. In democratic system, people should have a right of access to information, participation and decision. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 establishes a federal government structure with three levels of government: Federal, Provincial and Local. Now all these levels of government have been functioning and providing service to public following the principles of 'public participation' in all activities. In this concern, the aim of this study was to identify the practice of public participation in planning and implementation of local government's program. The study was based on the qualitative design. It has used the Focus Group Discussion and Key Informants Interview with the Dalit communities of Kapurkot and Triveni Rural Municipality of Salyan district. The result shows that there was weak participation of women and Dalit community in policy, planning and implementation of program of local government. Only around one in four participants reported their participation in government's activities. Considering the three pillar principals of public participation, all women and Dalit people have right to participate in all three stages – i) right to information, ii) right to participate in decision making process, and iii) right to justice. Though majority (more than 90%) were still struggling for the 1<sup>st</sup> stage – right to information. So, the participants suggested to increase the participation of the women, Dalit and marginalized group members in such programs related to the planning, decision making and program implementation in the community level.

**Keywords:** Local government, Nepal, Participation, Planning, Public

### Introduction

Public participation is important approach used to develop the effective plan on the basis of needs and recommendation of targeted beneficiaries. Public participation is based on the 'Bottom up Approach' model which has replaced the traditional practice of 'Top-down Model'. In general understanding, public participation refers to the interaction between government and civil society through different mechanisms. The rationale for public engagement in policy-making can range from strengthening democratic practice to providing citizens with a voice in policy choices to building institutional bridges between government and citizens (Bishop & Davis, 2002; Head, 2007). In each instance, public engagement involves citizens in the activities of government whether this is agenda setting, decision-making, or policy-forming (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Planners and decision makers can be benefited from the public participation by getting the native ideas and knowledge in particular issues. On the other hand, it creates the environment for local government to work with citizens to design, evaluate, and implement development. Public participation is beneficial to all from the development perspective. It increases the work speed, ensure the quality of services and become cost effective and seriously address the need of public. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2009) views public engagement as a condition for effective governance as it enhances transparency and accountability and also

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builds civic capacity. Additionally, it can deliver improvements in policy outcomes and the quality of public services. There is need of equal eager and initiation from local government and public to make public participation effective success because either one party became inactive then it will not be success. Caroline J. Uittenbroek, Heleen L. P. Mees, Dries L. T. Hegger & Peter P. J. Driessen had done three case study on public participation in Netherlands stated that public participation is often limited in scope and that both local governments and citizens seem to struggle with the design and the objectives of participation processes. He found from the study that Rotterdam and Kockengen cases, citizens wanted more participation, while in the Tiel case participation had reached a point of saturation (Caroline, et al., 2019).

There are different approaches and motivation of public participation. The public only shows their interest in participation in planning, implementation and development activities if they would be benefited from that programs. A study conducted by Ayodele. I. Shittu & Abiodun M. Musbaudeen (2015, p. 20) in Lagos State of Nigeria, the findings show that "face-to face" relationship was a dominant strategy for promoting public participation.

In case of Nepal, a study was conducted covering the surrounding 8 villages Melamchi Water Supply Project (MWSP) to know the public participation in environmental management. The authors reported in conclusion that public participation approach had supported to strengthen the capacity of marginalized people and made the feeling of community ownership. It had reduced the gap between the project and community people. Around 16-20% people were involved in the identification and evaluation of environment management activities organize by the MWSP (Dahal & Timsina, 2015). The Constitution of Nepal 2015 (the 'Constitution') establishes a federal government structure with three levels of government: Federal, Provincial and Local. Now all these levels of government have been functioning and providing service to public. There are a lot of roles and responsibilities given to Rural Municipalities and Municipalities. They are directly connected with the public needs and rights. They are the autonomous body so they had many scope of working areas for the growth and development of nation and general public. So, in this concern, the study aims to identify the practice of public participation in planning and implementation of local government. The public participation was studied from the social inclusion perspective; basically from the perspective of inclusion of women and Dalit communities in program, policy of local government.

### Materials & Methods

The study was based on the qualitative design. The study had collected the data from primary and secondary sources. It has used the semi-structured checklist to conduct the Focus Group Discussion and Key Informants Interview with the women groups and Dalit communities of Kapurkot and Triveni Rural Municipality (RM) of Salyan district of Karnali Province of Nepal to collect the qualitative data. Purposive sampling techniques was used to select the respondents. Researcher had conducted two FGD in each RM and took interview of community leaders of targeted groups to know the public participation of women and Dalit communities in the policy and planning of their respective

local government. The findings of primary source were discussed with the findings of secondary sources.

### Result & Discussion

Public participation in simple terms means to involve those who are affected by a decision in the decision making process. It is founded on the fundamental understanding that public participation can help make better decisions that reflect the interests and concerns of affected or interested people and entities. The concept of public participation is constructed of three pillar principles: the right to information, the right to participate in decision-making process and the right to justice. Effective participation is only possible if these three pillars are firmly in place:

1. **The Right to Information:** - The public must have easy access to all the relevant information they require so that they may participate in a meaningful way. This responsibility falls with the decision making authority.
2. **The Right to Participate in Decision Making Processes:** - Public participation is only possible if the appropriate mechanisms are in place to achieve this. The mere provision of information is insufficient in itself. The public must be informed at an early stage of their right to participate and the processes including the timeframe in which this is to occur.
3. **The Right to Justice:** - This principle provides that the public shall have a right of recourse to administrative or judicial procedures to dispute or discuss matters affecting them. This includes access to the appropriate courts of law or tribunals. Such a guarantee is important so those who are affected by a decision have a means of enforcing their rights. (The International Association for Public Participation, 2014)

The federal government of Nepal is established with the vision of establishing strong local governments (LGs), which are vested with greater authority. The Local Government Operational Act 2017 has very clearly mentioned the authorities, roles and responsibilities of local governments and process of formation of local plan and policies. There is provision of 'Planning and Implementation' in Article No. 24 (5) of Part 6 that the planning and implementation of any activities of local government should ensure inclusiveness and equity (Government of Nepal, 2017).

As per the discussion with women groups of Kalikot and Salyan, around 1 in 4 women had a little idea about the existing local governance mechanism and inclusive policy whereas majority said they had no idea because of the lack of public consultation and awareness form the local government. The women participation in planning and implementation of government program was very low. The women said that still society is dominated by male-headed family system so women are taken just as the supporting hand for male only. As the practice of division of labor, females were assigned the household activities whereas males were assigned for the outdoor activities: visiting the market and offices, participating in public program and taking leadership role in social development activities. These harmful practices have discouraged women participation in government activities. At the time of

discussion, women also shared that they were not informed about the activities of local government nor they were invited as a member in any committee so majority women members had not participated in the meetings and such decision making process of local government.

The key informants' interview with Women Network in Salyan district shared that the participation of woman and excluded groups (Dalit, People with disability) was reported to be improving. Similarly, from the FGD with Dalit community groups of four RMs of both districts shared that more than 90% had no idea about the existing local governance mechanism and inclusive policy. Thus, in this context, Palikas have to widely disseminate information about their program and policy to make more inclusive plan and its implementation.

In focus group discussion with Dalit groups, they said that while they were participating in the planning meeting of local government, they actively participated in meeting and also shared their ideas and concern, put their demands for the development of Dalit community but their concerns were not seriously addressed at the time of decision making and implementation. They sadly shared that their participation was just for the formality; not in real practice.

During the discussion with women and Dalit groups, they shared that besides the local government, other committees are also working in their areas to deliver the service to public. They named some committees like The Health Facility Operation and Management Committees (HFOMCs), WASH-CC, and SMCs. There are standard guidelines of each committee about their roles and responsibilities and process of formation of committee members. The Health Facility Operation and Management Committees (HFOMCs)- A reference guideline for local level – 2075 (2018 AD) has clearly mentioned the working areas and criteria for formation of HFOMCs. It has provision of 7 members in Executive committee where at least 3 should be female. Besides that, the guidelines have clearly mentioned that HFOMC should invite at least 1 representative from Dalit, 1 from PWD or senior citizen and 1 from youth in each meeting (Government of Nepal, 2018). But, as per the sharing of women and Dalit groups, the committees were not formed as the guidelines.

The low level of education, lack of employment opportunity, lack of exposure, economic crisis, no adequate opportunity in local level were some causative factors associated with the low level of public participation of women and Dalit community in government program.

### Conclusion

Considering the three pillar principals of public participation, all women and Dalit people have right to participate in all three stages – i) right to information, ii) right to participate in decision making process, and iii) right to justice. Though majority (more than 90%) were still struggling for the 1<sup>st</sup> stage – right to information. Very few people were receiving the regular information and invitation from local body for the participation in policy and planning. Mostly, community leaders and elite community had high access in service and information of government. So, the participants suggested to increase the participation of the women, Dalit and marginalized group members in such programs related to the planning, decision making and program implementation in the community level. Local government should aware the community

people about the scope of working areas of Local Government and its planning process so that local people increase their participation in planning and implementation. Public participation is key to success of program. Indigenous and cognitive knowledge should be included in the policy and planning because the local people had practical knowledge and experience of local needs, interest and infrastructure development.

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