# Cutting Across the Conceptual Jungle of Participation:

## Learning from Participation-based development programs executed by Local Government Institutions and Agencies in Nepal

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| B S | Bikram Sambat |
| CAC | Community Awareness Center |
| CBO | Community Based Organization |
| CMC | Chairman -Manager Committee |
| CO | Community Organization |
| DAG | Disadvantaged Groups |
| DDC | District Development Committee |
| DFID | Department for International Development |
| FECOFUN | Federation of Community Forests Users in Nepal |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| IPC | Integrated Planning Committee |
| LGAF | Local Governance Accountability Facility |
| LGCDP | Local Governance and Community Development Program |
| LSGA | Local Self Governance Act |
| LSGR | Local Self Governance Regulation |
| NAVIN | National Association of Village Development Committee in Nepal |
| NGO | Non-Government Organizations |
| RCIW | Rural Community Infrastructure Works |
| SFCL | Small Farmers Cooperative Limited |
| UC | User Committee |
| UG | User Group |
| VDC | Village Development Committee |
| WATSUN-ASUC | Water and Sanitation- Accelerated and Sustainable Universal Coverage |
| WCF | Ward Citizen Forum |
| WUPAP | Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Fund |

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# ABSTRACT

Promoting people's participation in local development efforts has been accepted and hailed by governments in developing countries as the most effective approach towards empowering communities that exist at the periphery of the power centre. Participation-based approach to local development is seen as the ideal way to empowering communities and marginalized groups that are part of these communities. In the case of Nepal, government and non-government agencies have designed their development strategies based on the model of participation-based development. So far majority of the development project reports and academic research have mostly upheld the concept of participation-based development as the prescriptive solution to development challenges. Very rarely do we find a critical review of the participatory based development model that is so widely applied. Therefore, this paper aims to tackle the very concept of participation-based development at the local level in order to assess whether the claims behind this concept as being fitting to Nepal's development approach are actually true. It analyses three specific claims that are hailed as positive outcomes of the participation-based approach and compares it to the actual practices that exist in the grass root level to see whether these claims can be supported by the evidence found. The policy paper aims to highlight various factors that related agencies involved in local development must take into consideration when applying the concept of participation to development interventions. This paper also aims to provide insight into how communities are perceived by external agents and how this perception needs to be challenged in order to make local development strategies in the future more effective.

# 1. Introduction

Encouraging the participation of people in development projects in their local communities has not only been considered important but has also been seen as a panacea for any obstacles that may exist in generating cost-effective development solutions at a local level. From the 1970s onwards, the concept and practice of people's participation has been seen as attributing towards the empowerment of people and the increased ownership of the people over development processes. This concept has been widely embraced by governments and non-government agencies in developing countries. Large investments have been made in educating and training people at a local level to participate in development-led initiatives that have a direct impact on their communities.

One of the most cited authors in literatures on participatory democracy, Sherry Arnstein, has developed an influential typology in her essay, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation"[1] where she argues that participation is valuable to the extent that it "is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens …to be deliberately included in the future".[2] She uses the image of a "ladder" to describe the term empowerment and puts forth eight rungs which support this concept: manipulation, therapy, information, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control.

Participation is seen as resulting in several outcomes of which one of them is empowerment. Empowerment relates to possessing competence and the authority to exercise control over one's circumstances and in the context of participation is seen as one of the end results of the process. By accepting this understanding of the term and working towards it as an end result, people's participation has been adopted as a strategy for local development in Nepal as well. However, the definition of participation itself differs according to the context it is applied to. The meaning of participation can range from mere presence of the identified stakeholders, to facilitating an environment for the stakeholders to raise their opinions as well as allow active engagement in the decision making process.

This study sees participation as a process of negotiations and contestations among beneficiary groups who operate within certain social structures and cultural dispositions. However, this study also acknowledges the fact that existing social structures may not allow equal access and power to the people participating in the development process. Therefore, while tackling the concept and practice of participation in Nepal, the paper concentrates on set dynamics within groups that are endowed with the resources to design and implement development activities on a local level. Within this framework, the paper then aims to analyze three claims attached to the concept of participation; empowerment, ownership and sustainability and the practices which exist within the framework of these claims. It is important to realize that groups participate in social activities with differing levels of social power and hierarchy. The differences are likely to emanate from various determining factors like caste, religion, location, age, gender, etc. The participation of these groups is facilitated by different units or bodies that have different roles to play in local

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[1] Arnstein 1969
[2] Ibid

development. It is therefore important that the paper also provides a clear view of the legislative units and user-based organizations that exist locally in order to design, implement, monitor and evaluate the development initiatives.

While looking at the existing relationships and the nature of negotiations between local agencies, this paper aims to critically evaluate whether the positive claims associated with people-based participation in local development is supported by what is observed at the grass root level and whether a disparity or a gap exists between the conceptual benefits or claims of participation and participation in practice.

## 2. Problem Statement

The concept of people's participation has been applied as a tool for empowerment in development projects in Nepal by the government and non-government actors for a while. Lofty claims have been made about how participation leads the way to creating ownership, strengthening management and generating cost effective development solutions[3] but the evidence on the grass root level supporting these claims are rarely found. Academic research and many program reports point towards successful participation-based development projects specifically in the forestry and irrigation sectors in Nepal.[4] Most narratives about people's participation in Nepal are positive and free of any criticism. Looking at these reports and research papers and the various narratives they present, one can be led to believe that there are no problems in the way the concept of participation has been applied to the development sector in Nepal. However, scholars like Francis Cleaver and Daina McNeish maintain that there is little evidence of long-term effectiveness of participation in materially improving the conditions of the most vulnerable people or even as a strategy for social change.[5] Whilst the evidence for efficiency receives some support on a small scale, the evidence regarding empowerment and sustainability is more partial, tenuous and reliant on assertions of the rightness of the approach and process rather than convincing proof of positive outcomes.[6] Task forces, working committees or annual planning meetings which decide on important issues in participation-based programmes usually only consist of government officials and the project's staff. Citizen Representatives are generally not included in such task forces and are instead invited to workshops or other consultative events designed by these task forces and the committees.[7] While involvement of this nature provides citizens with an opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions, they are still excluded from participating in activities that define agendas and the framework of the consultations which invariably decide on the nature of development solutions.

The Government of Nepal has formulated and issued many laws, regulations, directives and guidelines to facilitate participation-based local development in Nepal. The Local Self Governance Act, 1999/2000 and the Local Self Governance Regulations 2001 are considered as progressive laws which devolve power to local government institutions, providing space for local

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[3] Cleaver 1999

[4] Acharya 1998

[5] Cleaver 1999, McNeish 1996

[6] Ibid

[7] Ojha 2006

people's participation. The Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 and the Three Year Interim Plan (2007-2010) use people's participation as a strategy to strengthen democracy at the local level and generate cost-effective development solutions. There are other directives which directly or indirectly promote people-led-development at the local level. Some of the major directives and guidelines issued by the Ministry of Local Development and Federal Affairs are listed below:

- "*Janasahabhagita ma Adharit Bikas Karyakram Sanchalan Nirdesika 2068*" (People's Participation-based Development Program Execution Directives 2012)
- "*Isthaniya Nikaya Sarwajanik Daayitywo Rananiti 2068*" (Local Bodies Public Responsibility Strategy 2012)
- "*Upabhokta Samiti Ghatan tatha Sanchalan Nirdesika 2068*" (User Committee Formation and Management Directive 2012)
- "*Isthaniya Nikaya Sarwajanik Sunuwayi Karyabidhi 2067*" (Local Bodies Public Hearing Guidelines 2011)
- "*Isthaniya Nikaya Samajik Parikchan Karyabidhi 2067*" (Local Bodies Social Audit Guidelines 2011)
- "*Isthaniya Nikaya ko lagi Sarwajanik Niji Sajhedari Niti 2060*" (Public Private Partnership Policy for Local Bodies 2004)

Despite the fairly recent directives and guidelines issued by the ministry, one cannot overlook the fact that local elections have not taken place in Nepal for more than ten years. This challenges the very inception of these directives which are supposed to be acted upon by locally elected representatives. The guidelines clearly lay out the roles and the duties of the local bodies and how they should function covering the entire cycle of the development process. For example, according to the LSGA Act 1999, it is the duty of the local bodies to form Consumer Committees or User Committees (UC) and to build their capacities and monitor their development activities. According to the LSGR 2001, while formulating a plan by a Village Development Committee (VDC) pursuant to sub-section (4) of Section 43 of the Act, the participatory project formulation process should be followed. All projects have to be implemented by establishing contractual agreements with the Users/Consumers committees. The directives go into a lot of detail to explain the parameters within which the development projects need to function and the activities that need to be completed during the duration of the projects. They also describe the role and responsibility of user committees involved in the projects and lay out guidelines to avoid any malpractices.

But, in the absence of elected representatives, one can only question whether local governance in absence of elections is truly representative of the people and whether the agencies that are supposed to support local development projects are suitable to facilitate participation of the people for any development projects.

Participation-led development initiatives have been widely accepted as the right approach to local development but the results of these development initiatives do not portray a good picture.[8] Similarly, a dichotomy exists in literatures reviewed between the view of participation as an 'emancipatory project'[9] and one in which the operation of power inevitably leads to inequalities

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[8] Dahal and Mund 1994

[9] Brownill et al. 2007

of outcomes for groups within the community. This existing inequality raises issues about how to carefully plan for development interventions or more importantly how to achieve it in communities with historical-structural inequalities.

The concept of participation has been revisited by some to conclude that participation should be applied very cautiously in development. They observe that "participation processes are taken ritualistically and have turned out to be manipulative and harmful to those who were supposed to be empowered.[10] A report commissioned by the International Rescue Committee and DFID on the impact evaluations of Community Driven Development/ Reconstruction (CDD/R) which build participatory institutions, state that, " CDD/R approach has nearly no adverse effects, it is better at generating more tangible economic outcomes than it is at generating "softer" social changes."[11] This speaks of the difficulty of effecting social change through the CDD/R approach. It is broadly consistent with the findings of a recent review of CDD interventions by the World Bank, including non-conflict affected contexts.[12]

Differing perspectives present different scenarios. On one hand, they show an optimistic account of the community becoming an influential, empowered actor within the planning process and practices, but on the other hand, a pessimistic account is presented in which participation exercises are viewed as no more than the manipulation of the community by those in the thrall of the 'dark forces'.[13]

The intent of this paper is not to offer a different approach to participation-led development activities nor is it to provide a summary of critiques of projects which have used participatory approach to development. The paper is not an account of the weaknesses of the projects which have been studied. This paper intends to move beyond criticism to raise some cautioning points about the approaches towards participation as practiced in the development field in Nepal. Taking secondary data from academic papers, reports and government documents and primary data from interviews and focus group discussions, this paper tries to identify the gap that exists between expectations set out by policy documents of development projects and what exists in practice. The paper then focuses on inferences that can be drawn from this gap analysis. This research looks back at the policy documents to find out how people's participation was thought to have influenced development, and juxtaposes it with results portrayed in reports and academic papers.

## 3. Research Question

Participation-led development initiatives have been practiced for a long time in Nepal and have enjoyed increased attention in both academic literature and planning practices. It is a concept which has been politically attractive and upheld as being economically sound and socially rewarding as it promotes values such as empowerment, transformation, ownership and partnership. Scholars like Brownill and Carpenter see this as a reflection of a wider process initiated by governments to foster dialogue and deliberation among their citizens as a way of

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[10] Cooke et al. 2001
[11] King 2013
[12] Wong 2012
[13] Ibid

improving policy outcomes, promoting sustainable communities and overcoming perceived 'democratic deficits'.[14]  Local participation-based initiatives have  been attractive as they empower people and devolve power from the centre to  local communities. The number of developing countries making efforts to institutionalizing participatory-based development initiatives has increased[15] and with the current trend, developing countries are not likely to abandon the concept but instead apply it more vigorously in their development efforts.

The legal and institutional mechanism in Nepal has been promoting the concept of people's participation from as early as the fourth Five Year Development Plan (1970-1975). With the formulation of Decentralization Act 1982, local bodies at the district and village level were provided with more autonomy in order to enable them to plan for their own development.

It is evident that the concept of participation has continued to generate interest in academic and policy circles where the rhetoric involved in participation has been discussed extensively. Some critics have defined the concept of participation as "fuzzy"[16] but nonetheless it has provided a strong basis for development programs and will continue to do so in the near future. It is therefore important to analyze the shortcomings in the current practice of the concept so that lessons can be learnt for the future. In this regard, the study aims to find answers to the following research questions.

- What types of claims have come forward regarding participation as a concept and how are they affecting decision making in development programs?

  What is the gap between the conceptual understanding of participation and how it is practiced in development programs at the grass root level?
- What inferences can be drawn from the gap analysis?


## 4. Research Methodology

The study is primarily based on secondary documents. It first focuses on understanding the 'claims' related to the concept of people's participation. In the context of this study the claims are understood to be the benefits of the concept of participation as stated in directives, legislations, and project documents produced by government and non-governmental agencies. Similarly, international experiences have been taken into account as evidence supporting or reinforcing the claims. Within the remit of this study, three claims have been identified and analyzed which are empowerment, ownership and sustainability. Each claim has then been juxtaposed with the actual practices of people's participation in the field. The gap between the claims and practices has been analyzed and relevant issues have been pointed out which provide an insight into participation-based development efforts of the Government of Nepal.

The study draws its inferences by reviewing programmes endorsed by the government and executed by the local institutional agencies responsible for applying participatory processes in development projects. The District Development Committees are the implementing organizations of the programmes of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development. The participatory

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[14] Barnes et al. 2004
[15] Agrawal and Gibson 2001
[16] Puri 2004

process is applied in finalizing priorities of people at the ward level, village level, *illaka* level and district level. Despite the absence of locally elected bodies, it is still customary to conduct meetings of village councils and district councils. There are some programs like the Local Governance and Community Development Project (LGCDP), Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project (WUPAP) and Rural Community Infrastructure Works (RCIW) which have strong participatory methods of intervention. Thus, the study looks into participatory approaches as applied in these programs and the general experience of application of participatory interventions models by the local bodies like the Village Development Committees and District Development Committees. .

To support arguments related to practices, a focus group was also conducted among people in the Dhumkibas VDC in Nawalparasi district. The focus group members were chosen based on their years of experiences in VDC development activities. These members had experiences of working in various user committees related to track opening, road construction, drinking water projects, forests and irrigation groups as well as Ward Citizen Forums (WCF). The following table gives an idea of the profile of the members in the FGD. Table 4.1: Respondent profile in the Focus Group Discussion

Note: The total number of people who participated in the focus group discussions was 15. The detailed list of participants is provided in the Annex.

| SN | Type of Respondent | Numbers |
|----|--------------------|---------|
| 1 | Persons who are involved in roads, irrigation, and drinking water user committees. | 10 |
| 2 | Members of recently dissolved political mechanisms | 3 |
| 3 | Members of various Ward Citizen Forum in the Dhumkibas VDC | 9 |

The government has issued directives such as "*Janasahabhagita ma Adharit Vikas Karyakram Sanchalan Nirdesika 2068*" and "*Isthaniya Nikaya Samajik Uttar-daayityo Rananiti 2068*" to streamline and enhance local people's participation in local level development. The following table shows the locus of participation and the sources of information to increase the credibility of the study.

In-depth Interviews were conducted with five individuals who have had years of experience in leading people's participation-based development efforts as researchers, bureaucrats, activists, and policy makers. The interview questions are included in the annex.

Table 4.2: Locus of Participation and Related Sources of Information

| Locus of Participation | Sources for Mapping Practices | Documents Referred |
|---|---|---|
| **Ward Citizen Forum** | • LGCDP resources<br>• Academic papers<br>• Research reports | • Programme Document, LGCDP-II (2013/14- 2016/17)<br>• Citizen Mobilization in Nepal (2009)<br>• LGCDP, Second Trimester Report (2010)<br>• LGCDP CCU Consultative meeting Report (2011)<br>• LGCDP Second Trimester Report (2010)<br>• A Study on Social Mobilisation in LGCDP Phase II (2013) |
| **VDC Councils Meetings** | • Ministry of Local Development,<br>• National Association of VDCs in Nepal,<br>• Academic papers<br>• Research reports | • Ministry Publication<br>• **Assessment of Village Development Committee Governance and the use of Block grants, Inlogos (2009)**<br>• Interviews with academics/researchers regarding wider local governance issues<br>• Annual Progress Report WUPAP (2012-2013)<br>• Implementation Guideline WUPAP (2005)<br>• Focus Group Discussion |
| **User Groups for Developments Works** | • The Ministry of Local Development and Federal Affairs - Academic papers/research reports | • Participatory Planning and Budgeting at the sub-national level, United Nations (2005)<br>• Annual Report, Nepal Government Citizen Partnership Project, USAID (2009-2010)<br>• Critical Review of Community Development Approaches in conflict-affected contexts (2010)<br>• Unpublished Report, NEWAH WATSUN-ASUC (2013)<br>• Rural Village Water Resources Management Project, District Completion Report (2010)<br>• Project Document, WUPAP 3rd phase<br>• Focus Group Discussion |

# 5. Spaces for Participation

As the study embarks on analyzing information regarding structures of participation at the village level it is important to get a clear understanding of the spaces that exist for participation and how they are inter-linked to one another. This paper does not try to evaluate the process and impact of these structures in achieving their project objectives but tries to explain the dynamics that exist within the avenues/locus of participation which need to be taken into consideration for any type of participation-based development projects.

The Government has provisioned for the creation of institutions where citizens can participate in local governance and development activities. Moreover, since the 1990s, Non-Government Organizations have also flourished and have provided additional avenues for citizens to raise their voices collectively. In addition to the NGOs, interests groups are being formed in sectors like public transportation, media and some private corporations, which are acting as collective entities that represent the interests of the individuals concerned.

Complying with the spirit of LSGA 1999, Consumer Groups, User Committees, Saving and Credit Groups, Women's Groups, etc, have been formed to carry out development activities at the VDC level. Successes in the community forestry and irrigation sectors have provided the government with the impetus to enact legislations that promote people's participation-based development activities. Recent innovations in spaces for people's participation are formations of Ward Citizen Forums (WCF), Citizen Awareness Centers (CAC), Integrated Planning Committees (IPC), Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and various other user groups/beneficiary groups of government funded programs.

The institution created at the grass root level for people's participation by the Local Governance and Community Development Program (LGCDP) is the Ward Citizen Forum. Ward Citizen Forums are formed at each ward of a VDC. It is mandatory to include individuals that represent a wide section of social, cultural and economic backgrounds in any Ward Citizen Forum. A typical WCF could have 7 to 25 members and is inclusive of people from all backgrounds, especially those from poor and excluded groups that can contribute to discussions regarding local priorities. These forums are supported by community facilitators and social mobilizers at each VDC who help in identifying needs, raising awareness and monitoring development activities at the ward level. Members of the WCF regularly hold meetings with social mobilizers to analyse and discuss various issues affecting the village. They execute important governance functions such as collecting demands, conducting discussions among community members and acting as a bridge linking the community to the VDC.

Realizing that some households can be left out from the above process of participatory target group identification, a Community Awareness Center (CAC) is formed in each VDC. CAC acts as a space for disadvantaged citizens who are normally left out. Generally a CAC includes members from the DAG community who are traditionally marginalized. Sessions are conducted by the social mobilizer of the VDC every fifteen days to identify, analyze and act upon issues that directly affect their lives. The social mobilizer and community facilitator hold REFLECT[17]

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[17]Regenerated Frierean Literacy through Empowering Community Technique

classes at the CAC where they inform DAG members of their rights and support them to act on identified issues and enhance their access to services in the community, the VDC and the DDC. The REFLECT process empowers DAG members to advocate and lobby for their own rights as well as those of the whole community including the well-off and powerful. This process helps the well-off and the poor to support and understand each other's problems and issues. The CAC is used to educate and inform citizens about issues affecting the village like available budget in local government, the planning process, etc.

Another structure for local people to participate in is the Integrated Planning Committee (IPC) at the VDC level. While membership to this committee is selective, comprising only of representatives from WCF, DAG, and government officer bearers, it still provides an opportunity for people to influence project priorities. The IPC assesses the availability of resources, guidelines and a directive forwarded by National Planning Commission, DDC, etc., for local development purposes and compares it with projects forwarded by different wards for consideration. It helps to prioritize projects that benefit women, children and other disadvantaged groups. It also selects and recommends projects for implementation based on local demands from WCFs.

Community Based Organizations (CBOs) occupy the political space between family/households and the VDC. All institutions created with membership of people living in a community are Community Based Organizations, generally known as NGOs. These CBOs may be registered but most are unregistered. They are known to be involved in a variety of political, economic, social and religious activities. Women Groups, Saving Groups, Mothers' Groups and Youth Clubs can also be grouped as CBOs in Nepal. While these groups are known to be active with respect to their specific interests, they do provide a floor for community members to gain skills related to conducting meetings, generating funds and partaking in small development activities.

Furthermore, there are many User groups/Beneficiary groups formed for different government projects that are run by the local bodies. Users groups are formed by people who are identified for the participatory process based on certain ranking methods or are identified as those who are directly affected by the project. Generally, participatory tools such as wealth ranking, power analysis, Venn diagrams and survey forms are used to assess baseline information about the User Groups.[18] These groups elect an executive committee of 7 to 11 members for conducting daily business on behalf of the group. Likewise, local bodies form User Committees comprised of beneficiaries, to carry out development works. These User Committees enter into an agreement with the VDC and DDC to carry out development works especially related to infrastructure. Some of these groups are functional for project period only while others exist beyond the project life to take part in operation and maintenance of the infrastructure.

The Village Development Committee Council is the legislative arm of the VDC. It is the single largest platform for citizens to raise their voice, hold discussions and control the executive arm of the VDC. Detailed provisions for the nature of councils, the representation, and the modus operandi are detailed in the LSGA 1999, clause 8, 21 and 26. According to LSGA 1999, the VDC council is formed by members representing elected members from Ward Committees, VDC executives, journalists, political party members, teachers, office bearers of line agencies

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[18] WUPAP 2005, LGCDP 2013, RCIW 2002

and nominated members representing women and other disadvantaged groups. The total number of the VDC council members as pronounced in the Act is 53. However, since the term of elected members at local bodies expired in 2002, local bodies are currently headed by secretaries appointed by the Government of Nepal.

# 6. Claims of Participation

As mentioned earlier, the study aims to look into three specific claims that have been established as the positive outcomes of participation-based development. The study aims to see whether evidence exists in the practice of participatory processes that can support these universally established and accepted claims but before that it aims to elaborate on each of the claims.

## 6.1 Empowerment

A long term objective of participatory programmes is empowerment or "the exercise of voice and choice".[19] This is characterized by a situation in which "community members believe that they can affect change and can improve their own lives".[20] According to a research paper titled, *Voices of the Poor*, empowerment/voice is seen as having an intrinsic value because it breaks down non-material outcomes of poverty such as feelings of powerlessness, lack of voice, exclusion, breakdown of the social fabric, dependency and shame.[21]

All participatory development programs claim that empowerment of target communities is the result they seek. The Government of Nepal adopted the strategy of increasing people's participation to address issues related to their empowerment, through inclusion and representation. The preamble of the Local Self Governance Act 1999, mentions that participation should be promoted for social equality with the belief that by including citizens from all backgrounds in the development process, the fruits of development will be distributed equally.

Likewise the Three Year Interim Plan 2007-2010 and the LGCDP document 2008, claim that increased participation will bring about empowerment.[22] As the beneficiaries have the right to develop and prioritize their needs; design programs to address such needs and take part in their implementation; their knowledge about the programs increases resulting in empowerment. Structures like WCF and CAC aim to empower people by conducting activities that provide a voice to the local people and help them influence policies and institutions which can facilitate the participation of members from DAG. [23] LGCDP stresses on achieving gender equality in all of its projects/activities by empowering women and DAG members. Social mobilization is used to enhance the voice and active participation of citizens, local groups and communities to influence decision-making and the use of resources by local governments.

WUPAP also lays importance to the empowerment claims of participation. One of the core components of WUPAP is community empowerment and the strategy applied in creating structures like Community Organizations (COs) that promote monthly savings, creating

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[19] Mansuri and Rao 2004
[20] Haider 2009
[21] Patel, Rademacher and Koch-Schulte 2000
[22] LGCDP 2013/14
[23] Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development 2009

Chairman- Manager committees (CMC) among members of COs as well as creating User Groups. With strong social mobilization, it is expected that the target beneficiaries will be empowered enough to demand development activities related to forestry, agriculture and off-farm businesses and include these activities in the Village Development Plan.[24]

Members of user committees formed for carrying out development activities in the VDC also get the opportunity to know about the process of planning, prioritization, budget availability and their rights as citizens which empower them in the long run. The directives issued for enhancing participation-based development programmes accept that continued participation and flow of information to the citizens will eventually empower them.[25] For example, the Community Forestry User Groups in Nepal have come a long way. Their involvement with forest governance has empowered these groups to such an extent that most of the ward level representatives in the Ward Citizen Forums are members of the Community Forestry User Groups. During the course of interview for the study, the vice-president of FECOFUN claimed that if local elections were to be held, most people in the VDC and Ward forums would be from these user groups. True to this statement, while working for a government funded project during the course of the research in Bajhang district, it was evident that more than 70% of the members village level committee formed for the project were members of the Community Forestry User Groups or Leasehold Forestry User Groups.[26]

Participatory approaches help in the redistribution of power and in establishing more reciprocal relationships between the "insiders" or the locals and the "outsiders". These approaches build ordinary people's capacity to analyze and understand development interventions, transform their lives and provide them with the knowledge of practical means to facilitate empowerment.[27] Participation, therefore, helps neglected groups to voice their concerns about issues affecting their lives. In the long run, it increases their status from inactive recipients to active decision makers.


## 6.2 Ownership

The ownership claim of participation is also well established. Involvement in decision making results in an increased 'sense of belonging', paving the way for ownership. Participation of the people in development plans designed for them results in the creation of a new situation where the status of beneficiaries changes from passive recipients of decisions in either the designing of the plans or more often in determining rules of distribution.[28] A case study from Iran shows that participatory approaches used in livestock projects has not only increased the income level of rural households but has increased self-reliance as well. Due to the success of this approach, the activities and approach of the project were institutionalized in many aspects of service delivery of the government after the project was completed.[29] This goes to show that widening the remit of control in the range of activities by including beneficiaries make them more responsible and accountable.

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[24]Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project 2003
[25] Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development 2009
[26] Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project 2013
[27] Kothari 2001
[28] Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project 2012/13
[29] Aazami 2011

A review of the co-operative movement in Nepal, especially the Small Farmer Cooperative Ltd (SFCL) makes it evident that participation in the management level increases ownership. Small farmers, despite their limited knowledge of organization and management skills, have been setting good examples of participatory decision making, resulting in a successful model of financial services for small farm holders. The recovery rates of funds financed through their own sources is as high as 91% while recovery rates of funds financed through the Agriculture Development Bank Ltd (ADBN) is very low.[30] Because small farmers have more ownership over their own funds, their repayment rates are high whereas the funds received from ADBN does not generate a feeling of ownership among the small holders. Sense of ownership is stimulated when users are involved in key decisions related to the system, can contribute toward the costs of system and participate directly in planning and construction activities.[31]

The provisions in the Local Self Governance Act 1999, related to nominating members from under-represented and marginalized groups in local bodies aim to increase ownership of these groups over the decisions made by the local bodies. Moreover, providing space for consumer groups and NGOs for local development also results in the increased sense of ownership among citizens as major development and construction works are executed whilst addressing their concerns.[32] Numerous researches have been conducted, particularly in community water management system that see participatory planning play an essential role in engendering a sense of ownership over the water system among community members. This, in turn, ensures users' commitment to the system's long-term operation and maintenance.[33]

The activities funded by programs like LGCDP, WUPAP and RCIW, which promote people's participation, have an underlying rationale of involving consumer groups and NGOs in the planning and decision making process so that these groups own the development programs. These programs rely on three essential implementation features listed below that directly contribute to generating a sense of ownership over these programmes:
  (i)     All these programmes rely heavily on the bottom-up participatory planning process which starts at the cluster level and moves up to the village and district level.
  (ii)    The activities to be implemented are all demand driven, meaning beneficiaries prioritize the activities.
  (iii)   Most of these programmes seek contribution from beneficiaries either in cash or kind. All user group-based development projects must have at least 20% to 30% users' contribution.[34]

Likewise, WUPAP and RCIW only fund projects where users collect money for covering at least the operation and management cost of the infrastructures.[35]

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[30] Kayastha 2010

[31] Marks and Davis 2012

[32] Janashahabhagitama Adharit Bikas Karyakram Karyanwan Nirdesika 2068

[33] Whittington et al. 2009

[34] Janashahabhagitama Adharit Bikas Karyakram Karyanwan Nirdesika 2068

[35] Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project 2005, Rural Community Infrastructure Works 2002

## 6.3 Sustainability

Community forestry practices offer rich insights into participation of local people and the practice of sustainably managing the use of resources despite widespread historical and structural inequalities and cultural practices.[36] The Community Forestry User Groups are largely owned and sustained by the users themselves. The involvement of beneficiary groups decreases the costs of the project and increases sustainability. According to the directive, "*Janashahabhagitama Aadharit Bikas Karyakram 2068*", issued by MoFALD, local agencies need to implement development works with some contribution from the people in cash or kind. The provision requires that the user groups in the municipality deposit fixed amounts as a form of commitment equal to 30% of the project's budget before implementation of the development work. For user groups at the VDC level, they can supply labor equal to 20% of the total project budget or deposit 20% in cash. After careful evaluation of the infrastructures, they are handed over to the user groups who then manage the costs of the operation and maintenance. Theoretically, this provision increases sustainability of the development works. Sustainability is also enhanced when people get to choose projects according to their needs and also partake in the building of the projects. This way they are aware of the quality of projects that have been handed over to them. These provisions are well explained in Project documents of various organizations.[37]

The handing over of government schools to the community speaks volumes about the sustainability claim for participation. In 2002, the government passed a reform to hand over management of public schools to respective communities. As of 2009, 8092 public schools have been handed over. The involvement of parents in the School Management Committee has increased ownership and sustainability of these schools. An assessment of the Community School Support Program by the World Bank in 2007 states that there has been an increase in the sense of ownership and responsibility among parents after the handover of schools. However, sustainability does depend on factors such as resource generation and the decision making authority.[38] For the process to be meaningful, people should have access to resources generated through the process of participation which provide them with incentives to participate in the process.

Official documents of other local development programmes such as LGCDP and WUPAP also accept that promoting participation leads to the sustainability of projects where the impact of the projects prevail after the completion. The application of the transformation approach of social mobilization by LGCDP hints that peoples' participation is crucial for generating sustainable development solutions. The new focus for social mobilization is on empowering all citizens to engage with the state; to build their capacity to voice their views; to influence policy and development programmes according to their own priorities and to claim assets and services from the government and make local government and service providers accountable to them. This is called a transformational approach to social mobilization sometimes called citizen mobilization.[39] Special attention has been given to the potential role that elites or privileged

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36 Ojha 2006
[37] WUPAP 2005, LGCDP 2013 and RCIW 2002
[38] Asian Development Bank 2004
[39] Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development 2009

members of the community can play in affecting development outcomes for DAG members.[40] Besides, capacity building of DAG members has been given high priority as their participation is crucial for the success of any program. Similarly, WUPAP has instilled practices where the beneficiaries are included in all phases of the project cycle starting from identification to implementation as well as operation and management of the project. In order to ensure the sustainability of its projects, WUPAP has provisioned for the community to be responsible for setting up funds for the operation and management of the project prior to its implementation. The community is also in charge of the operation and management in the post-construction phase under the supervision of the District Technical Officer. [41]

## 7. Practices

So far, we have discussed the claims or the benefits of participation-based developed projects by outlining the various provisions and guidelines set out by the government and the NGOs. These provisions aim to establish local development solutions that are inclusive and cost-effective by applying participation as a key strategy that will eventually result in achieving empowerment, ownership and sustainability among many other positive outcomes. However, it is essential to analyze whether these provisions are being practiced on the local level and whether there is evidence to support the claims outlined above.

The government of Nepal has elaborate procedures to institutionalize people's participation in the local development process. Major legislative provisions are the Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007, the Local Self Governance Act 1999/2000, *Janasahabhagita ma Adharit Bikas Karyakram Sanchalan Nirdesika,* 2012*, Isthaniya Nikaya Sarwajanik Daayitywo Rananiti* 2012*, Upabhokta Samiti, Ghatan tatha Sanchalan Nirdesika* 2012. However, it is important to note that these provisions have certain limitations. The most crucial gap in these provisions is that they treat communities as homogenous units willing to readily accept interventions by an external agency. None of these directives focus on the power dynamics that exist within different communities. Often, development projects are hijacked by those who are privileged or hold a powerful position within the community, especially when it comes to project selection and benefit sharing. Project documents of projects like LGCDP, WUPAP and RCIW which are all executed by local bodies emphasize on people's participation in identifying needs and developing project activities.[42] However, these documents consider people in the community to be homogenous without any power difference among potential members of the committees. These project documents, expect that "all community members enter decision making sphere on an equal footing, and can agree on a common interest without intra-community conflicts"[43] but this is not feasible in practice

The participants in the Focus Group Discussion in Dhumkibas VDC shared their views in line with the above argument. Citing examples from a recent planning process, members of the Ward Citizen Forum in Dhumbikhas VDC shared that less than one-third of the activities they had prioritized received funding, whereas the rest have been pushed aside. Ward Citizen Members from Ward 6 and 7 mentioned that it took the VDC eight years to fund eleven culverts for these wards despite unanimous demands by the ward citizens. Some women members claimed that

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[40] Ibid
[41] WUPAP 2005
[42] RCIW 2005
[43] Vajja and White 2008

almost all projects in the last five years or so have been implemented in wards 1, 4, and 5 because these wards are inhabited by influential members of the community such as politicians, teachers, social workers and contractors. These comments reflect how the decision making process might be unfairly influenced by local elites. During the discussion, participants also pointed out that challenging the status quo and voicing different views generated conflict within the group, which was an obstacle to participation and furthermore it was threatening to the elites who were capable of influencing decisions in their favour. Brinda Gurung, a social worker, claimed that the elites become very reactive when the status quo in the community is challenged. Access for the citizens to the process of participatory decision-making becomes further complicated when the project personnel and government office bearers align themselves with the elites. Often, while prioritizing the needs of the community, the project staff becomes more influential than the people in the community in deciding on program choices and goals. Based on his years of experience in community mobilization and research, Kapil Neupane, a development consultant, highlights that rather than prioritizing the needs of the people, the staff focuses more on prioritizing the needs that the projects address. In his opinion, participation in its true sense is replaced by 'partici-pulation'[44] where the process is vulnerable to manipulation by the project personnel than real participation of beneficiaries.

The Project Document of WUPAP-III explained the difficulty of process driven participatory projects.[45] WUPAP, in one of its projects organized people into small savings groups where members saved on average Nrs. 5-10 per month. But the associated costs of the project like time spent on travelling, organizing meetings, expenses for refreshments during meetings with project staff, etc., were far greater than the actual savings. Likewise, another report of the International Rescue Committee in 2008, maintained that it was difficult to envision any gains from collective action toward a public good when people have little free time or resources to spare.[46] This view was echoed by participants in the FGD as well who claimed that for a meeting lasting one hour, they needed to walk for an hour each way, increasing their real costs.

**Box 7.1: An account of Social Mobilizer**

The participants of the focus group discussions also pointed out that the measurement of success in the process of planning in the cluster level up to the VDC level is not in line with what is actually achieved. One of the members of the Ward Citizen Forum expressed his dissatisfaction saying, "If minutes are maintained, attendance is taken, political representatives are present and give their consent, the planning meetings are considered successful." At times, attendance of DAG members is recorded after the meetings are over. These planning meetings are conducted near the market place or center of the community far from where the DAG members are likely to live. Through the

Ishwori Rokaya said, "The district staff are interested in the number of people present; women, Dalits, people from ethnic groups rather than what people say. When people share their opinions on timing, coverage, strategy of the project, their opinions are just written down but not implemented because the projects activities and deadlines are set beforehand. So it becomes convenient for us as well to organize meetings, fill attendance sheets, distribute allowance if any and then implement activities which have already been set."

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[44] Kapil Neupane, Interview by Raju Sharma, Kathmandu, September 4, 2013
[45] WUPAP 2012-2016
[46] King 2013

researcher's personal experience, it is evident that people's participation has been used more as a strategy to legitimize project activities rather than prioritize people's needs.  The role of the staff/facilitator can be questioned when he/she is more interested in achieving immediate outputs like attendance number, signatures, record of ethnic diversity rather than the prioritization of the real needs of the community.[47]   In this regard, an opinion of a social mobilizer working in WUPAP for Bajhang district is presented in the Box 7.1., which reflects how even the social mobilizers have become used to a process which is convenient but not truly representative of the participatory process.

An assessment of citizen mobilization in 24 programmes/projects across a wide range of sectors like forestry, poverty, health, drinking water and sanitation was commissioned by World Bank, SDC and DFID in 2009. The assessment reached the following conclusions that have to be considered for projects that promote people's participation at the local development level:

1. Extreme poor are left out or self-excluded
2. Few programmes link citizens/ groups with local body processes
3. Lack of commonly held understanding of the role and mandate of the social mobilizer
4. Contradictory and conflicting indicators leading to mis-targeting, confusion and suspicion in the mapping of disadvantaged households

These weaknesses are internal to the way projects are executed. They affect the way people's participation is implemented by the staff of these projects. With mis-targeting and confusion regarding indicators and the poor being excluded or excluding themselves, it is difficult to convincingly argue that people's participation in local development is working as it should be. Some success has been achieved in programs where the council has played a strong role in controlling the executive arm of the program. Success in the irrigation and forestry sector is attributed to the fact that these arrangements have strong councils (user groups' assembly). This is absent in infrastructure development activities in local bodies. Although some infrastructure related projects have been implemented by user committees, the councils of these committees are not as strong as the councils in forestry and irrigation sectors.

The success of group-based approach is limited to models of participation where there is a strong functional council which has control over the executive arm. Many user committees which carry out development activities have a council with a very limited role. Major decisions are taken by the committee and the council takes shape towards the end of the project in time for the public hearing and the social audit. In the FGD, participants were not familiar with the concept of user groups functioning as the council and the user committee as the executive. Most were of the opinion that it is the VDC which selects the user committee, while the beneficiaries just have to be present at the end of the project for activities such as the audit and social hearing. Moreover, contrary to the provisions mentioned in the directives "*Upabhokta Samiti, Ghatan tatha Sanchalan Nirdesika* 2012", user committees were found to be headed by political representatives, government teachers and individuals with dual memberships in different user committees. Participants had no knowledge about the provisions related to not offering executive posts in user committee to persons who might have conflict of interests. Most participants said that most people who did not come from privileged background lacked the skills and the time, so often elite members were called upon to head these committees. Even political representatives

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[47] Nightingale 2013

and VDC representatives agreed to this fact. While conducting discussions about who would have the last say in project planning, all participants agreed that the elite members had the last say.

Dr. Krishna Bihari Shrestha who has a wealth of experience in research, governance and local development, attributes the success of participation-based projects to strong and functional council of users which demand accountability from the executives.[48] The WATSUN-ASUC pilot project draws on successful community forestry models and demonstrates clearly that given support, communities can lead the design and the  contracting and management of their schemes related to drinking water. The user groups and user committees retain substantive decision-making powers without compulsions for accountability.[49] While existing legislations, mainly the Local Self-governance Act 1999, outline mutually distinct roles for the DDC, the VDC and the user groups in the planning, implementation and on-going management of various development activities, the actual practice departs from the prescribed norms creating opportunities for foul play by the bureaucrats and local elites.[50] And the only  punishment for members of user committees in case of fraud is not allowing them to participate in the future projects.[51]

Even though most study reports and legislations have paid little attention to embedded hierarchies within a given community and its effect on participation, almost all evaluation reports of these projects have listed  'elite capture' to be the most pressing hindrance to promoting people's participation.[52] All persons who have been interviewed for this paper and participants of the FGD have accepted that 'elite capture' is the most critical issue faced by participation-based programs at local level in Nepal. The government has tried to address this issue by designing targeted programs for marginalized groups such as women, children, ethnic groups and DAGs. While evaluating success of this approach is beyond the purview of this paper, it is important to understand that participation in its true sense cannot be achieved when major decisions are made by elites in the committees. Thus, accepting 'elite capture' as a problem implies that a representative form of participation is limited to paper only.

**Box 7.2: The Wrong Approach to Social Mobilization: The views of an NGO**

**"**The wrong concept of social mobilization is being used; it is all about service delivery and not about empowerment…we need to first understand the social and political issues within a VDC and then recruit a social mobilizer with the skills to deal with these issues. Trying to address these issues with money will not work. First you need to deal with the structural causes of poverty**."**

In user groups formed by the local bodies for implementing small infrastructure works some 'shadow contractors'[53] exist, who are generally the elites of the villages. Participants in the FGD explained that often a user committee is formed on paper for a given community and the office bearers of the pseudo committee sign the "project agreement" with the concerned government

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[48] Dr. Bihari Krishna Shrestha, interview by Raju Sharma, Lalitpur, September 18, 2013

[49] Ibid

[50] NEWAH WATSUN-ASUC 2013

[51] Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development 2012

[52] Asian Development Bank 2004

[53] Ibid

agency. In reality, however, a local contractor from the community offers to cover the contribution people have to make in return for being rewarded the contract of the project. The contractor then undertakes the contract of the project, in collusion with the concerned government officials and the community leadership.[54] The people do not complain either, because the project can be completed without them having to contribute money or free labour.

The group-based approach has remained relatively unchallenged as a development approach despite the abundance of international evidence and evidence from Nepal to indicate that groups are often highly exclusionary towards the extremely poor and socially marginalized.[55] These group processes often do not lead to social transformation but reinforce existing power structures. All participation-based programs use social mobilization[56] as an intrinsic strategy but social mobilization only focuses on service delivery and immediate outputs rather than empowerment (Box 7.2).

A similar observation was made by Dr. Prem Sharma, an academic, who has worked for LGCDP and LGAF. In his view, people's participation was sought in programs/projects by the state after having realized the limited reach and access of the state officials and bureaucrats to the people. However, while promoting people's participation, bureaucratic structures are inevitably created in the shape of committee or user groups. These user groups establish their own bureaucratic structures and rules. So the solution becomes the problem itself as these user groups become an extension of the state bureaucracy rather than a true representation of beneficiary groups.

**Box 7.3: Equating Participation with Attendance**

Furthermore, Hira Vishwakarma, a Dalit activist, sees a gap between the initial intent behind creation of user groups for enhancing participation and the actual results achieved. In his view, participation of Dalits in local development process is minimal. What is often achieved is only representation of the Dalits in the form of their attendance. The representation of Dalit groups has been set as a criterion for additional funding in local development.[57] The directive to promote people's participation 2068 has set a mandatory provision of including disadvantaged groups in user committees in order for them to be registered in the DDC. Some people from disadvantaged groups are included as representatives; however, their priorities are seldom reflected in the plans of the user groups.

According to the Dr Andrea J. Nightangle; **"**In most assessments, community forestry takes attendance and equates it with participation. A recent evaluation done for the Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project indicates that women are present at most user-group meetings and this was considered as evidence of their participation in the process. Yet, the results from my work in community forestry question whether presence at meetings, even speaking up at meetings can be equated with participation**."**

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[54] Ibid

[55] Guijt and Shah 1998, Hickey and Mohan 2004, Manor 2004, Hobley and Paudyal 2008

[56] LGCDP 2011, WUPAP 2012, RCIW 2005

[57] Hira Vishwakarma, interview by Raju Sharma, September 22, 2013

The capacity of state officials at local level is also limited and the processes are too cumbersome for them to follow.[58] The secretaries are over-burdened and most lack the facilities and staff to assist them.[59] A VDC secretary pointed out during the FGD, that he had to look after an affair of adjoining VDCs as well which has increased his work load. According to him, this is the principal reason for poor inspection and monitoring of development activities in the VDC. In such situations, the secretaries are likely to take the easier route where participation is represented through inclusion of DAG members in processes as opposed to meaningful engagement with these individuals. There is a dire need for capacity development of the state officials which remains critical for successfully implementing policies.[60] Parshuram Upadhaya, an activist from the National Association of VDCs in Nepal (NAVIN), believes that the limited capacity of state officials and unstructured monitoring indicators have contributed to a situation where it is very difficult to determine whether participation exists or not. Capacity of the state officials, as a problem, has been pointed out in reports of most of the programs related to local development in Nepal.[61]

The practices of participation described above, point out that evidence to support the empowerment and sustainability arguments is tenuous and disperse. A community is usually a space of hierarchies, power differentials and socio-economic disparities and if policies are formulated without understanding important characteristics of communities, it could lead to the exclusion of those who do not have power. However, using the Kenya Land Reform Program and India Joint Forestry Programs as case studies, Ellora Puri explicitly maintains that the development projects undertaken by the state are now accompanied by, at least in rhetoric, the belief of how involvement, inclusion and participation of the local community in their resource management are steps towards empowerment and equity.[62] On the other hand, many of the assessments systems of participation-based programs in Nepal have pointed out that these policies are pre-occupied with questions of formal representation, assuming that representation will result in participation.[63] It is assumed in most cases that once provisions for participation are made, people will participate. However, Mansuri and Rao in their book on "induced" participation identify a number of ways in which participation fails to live up to some of its promises, like building long-lasting cohesion. They maintain that the process of participatory development is still driven more by ideology and optimism than by systematic analysis, either theoretical or empirical.[64]

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[58] Dr. Dwarika Nath Dhungel, interview by Raju Sharma, September 17, 2013
[59] Inlogos 2009
[60] LGCDP 2010
[61] LGCDP 2011, LGCDP 2010, WUPAP 2012-13
[62] Puri 2004
[63] Ibid
[64] Mansuri and Rao 2012

# 8. Points for Further Discussion

In conclusion, two kinds of problems can be broadly identified in participation related practices which should guide future discourse related to people's participation in Nepal.

### a. Issues related to the execution of the project

The role of the village council remains critical in participation related programmes. The implementation design adopted in the WATSUN-ASUC project[65] and learning from the successes in community forestry and irrigation sectors in Nepal point out that the existing participation-based programmes neither have the institutional design of WATSUN-ASUC nor a strong and functional council common in the forestry and irrigation sectors. The VDC council is not functional as it has been reduced to a committee with a bureaucratic role only.[66] Moreover, the state has tried to govern local bodies through directives, circulars, and guidelines. The status and the scope of local bodies as local governing units are eroded[67] when the central government tries to rule remotely by issuing circulars and directives and not by acts and regulations.[68] Most of the directives, guidelines and circulars which are shaped around locally elected representatives have been issued in the last 3 years[69] even though local elections have not taken place in over a decade. The practice of trying to govern from the centre through directives and circulars is in itself against the very notion of participation-based development.

The councils of user groups formed for government projects related to infrastructure have limited functions during public hearings and public audit meetings. The indicators of participation in development projects focus more on physical attendance in meetings rather than the contribution made by the attendees during the meetings. The representation of disadvantaged groups in local governance has increased significantly but this is not a reflection of meaningful participation.[70] Whatever authority the councils may have is not being utilized during public hearings and meetings due to lack of knowledge and awareness.

The institutional design created at the local level neither demands accountability nor places strict sanctions on the user committee in cases of fraud and sub-standard work. Considering the amount of money that is being spent on participation-based development works, strict sanctions should be imposed. As mentioned earlier, the most severe form of punishment the government can impose on members of user groups' for any wrongdoing is prohibiting their involvement in future development activities.[71] However, no official records of members being punished for irregularities in any development related work were found during the course of this research, which again makes one question whether the existing sanctions are being used.

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[65] NEWAH WATSUN-ASUC 2013
[66] After repeated cases of corruption and mismanagement, the Government of Nepal decided to abolish local political mechanism operating at the local level in January 2012
[67] Dr. Prem Sharma, interview by Raju Sharma, October 2, 2013
[68] Bhim Prakash Khadka, interview by Raju Sharma, October 5, 2013
[69] http/mofald.gov.np/documents.php?id=48
[70] LGCDP 2012
[71] Upabhokta Samiti Ghatan tatha Sanchalan Nirdesika 2012

Even the reporting formats of participation- based programmes are limited to including numbers of participants or beneficiaries as opposed to their opinions or perception towards the programmes.[72] Most of the implementation monitoring reports entail a binary yes or no approach, rather than an assessment of quality. The reporting formats of major government programs inquire about the number of people attending meetings, number of meetings held, number of activities completed and the amount of money spent. Most of these reports are based on the minutes of the meetings of the beneficiary groups where conflicting arguments and disagreements are not noted. Oral compromises or agreements are sought to resolve conflicting points and disagreements. It would be highly recommended for these reporting formats to be designed in a way that documents both objective and subjective type of information to ensure a good record of perception/response, opinion and conflicts in addition to the information that is gathered at present.

### b. Understanding of a community

The legislations related to enhancing participation in local bodies consider community as a homogenous unit without any social and cultural differences. While project documents of LGCDP are more progressive as they have devised separate provisions for DAG members' participation and are also cautious of the role of elites in the local governance, other directives related with participation-based programs do not have such provisions. It is assumed that people in the community participate in the institutional process on an equal footing despite wielding different social power. The embedded hierarchies of social power, gender roles and existing discrimination are not taken into consideration.[73] The power relations among community members affect the way information is circulated and decisions are reached. It is very hard to imagine that people with power would not use it in their favor to influence decision-making process of the community programmes.

Many of the assessments systems of participation-based programs in Nepal have pointed out that these policies are preoccupied with questions of formal representation and as mentioned earlier, it is assumed in most cases, that once provisions for participation are made, people would participate. However, thought is not given to how a community is not a homogeneous unit but is made up of people whose roles and standing in the community are determined both socially and culturally. Citing a research on community forestry, Dr Andrea J. Nightingale states that the concerns of the lower-caste women were not considered important at all even in women-specific committees. Regarding women as a homogenous group conceals the differences between women and their interest.[74]

Development practitioners excel in perpetuating the myth that communities are capable of anything. With sufficient mobilization, the latent and unlimited capacities of the community can be unleashed in the interests of development. However, cases of non-participation and non-compliance exist, which may be explained by a 'rational' strategy; an unconscious practice embedded in routine, social norms or just the acceptance of the status quo. A fascinating study of irrigation management in Nepal shows how some women did not participate in the irrigation

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[72] Rural Community Infrastructure and Works: Monitoring and Evaluation Framework Revised 2002, Western Uplands Poverty Alleviation Project 2012
[73] NHSSP 2011
[74] Nightingale 2006

association but secured their access to water through male members of their own households, neighbour networks and even by stealing and cheating. Their absence from the formal user association made it far easier for them to achieve what they wanted without detection or censure.[75] The participation-based programs and projects in Nepal need to make provisions for implementing development programs suitable for  when the community itself may not show interest in participating in the process. The incentives for people to participate should be given paramount importance while designing participation related programmes.

The intent of this paper was to unravel potential claims of participation-based development programs and juxtapose these claims with existing practices in order to highlight issues which are relevant to the discourse on policies related to people's participation in Nepal. The paper observes that there are two kinds of issues which should guide future discourses; issues related with the execution of the project and issues related with perception of communities. Dysfunctional councils' inability to control the executive arm; the absence of sanctions for user committees; governance through circulars and directives; participation limited to formal representation or attendance and equating physical presence with participation are major issues that should be addressed by any policy promoting people's participation. Issues related with perception or understanding of a community is mostly related to considering communities as homogenous units and negating the existing power relations and differences due to caste, class, and political affiliations. It also does not consider the fact that not all communities will readily accept external development related policy interventions. The practices of local development invariably include people's participation both as the means and the end. With these issues affecting the dynamics of people's participation, it is high time to start a discourse on how these issues can be further addressed.

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[75] Zwarteveen and Neupane 1996

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**Annex 1: Profile of participants present at the Focus Group Discussion**

| Name | Years of involvement in VDC council | Years of involvement in UG/WCF/CAC |
|---|---|---|
| Krishna Aryal (secretary) | 9 | 1 |
| Guna Bdr Thapa | 1 | 7 |
| Devi Mahato | 6 | 4 |
| Shiva Prasad Pandey | 7 | 5 |
| Devi Lal Khanal | 9 | 5 |
| Ram Bdr Thapa | 11 | 3 |
| Purna Adhikari | 9 | 2 |
| Rishi Neupane | 8 | 4 |
| Ganesh Shrestha | 9 | 7 |
| Brinda Gurung | 7 | 4 |
| Bishnu Poudel | 10 | 3 |
| Top Lal Mahato | 4 | 5 |
| Ashok Gurung | 5 | 5 |
| Ganesh Man Shrestha | 8 | 8 |
| Krishna Pandey | 6 | 4 |

**Annex 2**: **Checklists of Focus Group Discussion**

| Particulars | Time (Approx) |
|---|---|
| Performances of VDC in promoting Participation | 10 mins |
| Institutions for peoples participation at the VDC level | 15 mins |
| Rational of User Group formation | 10 mins |
| Formation, role and responsibilities of User groups | 10 mins |
| Experiences of Involvement in User groups | 20 mins |
| Experiences of participation in annual Planning meetings of the VDC | 20 mins |
| Major problems in promoting participation | 15 mins |
| Benefits of participation | 10 mins |
| Experience of WCF/CAC | 10 mins |
| Conclusion and Closing | 5 mins |

**Annex 3: Lists of persons who were interviewed for the paper**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Dr. Bihari Krishna Shrestha | Academician and researcher |
| 2. | Dr. Dwarika Nath Dhungel | Civil Official and researcher |
| 3. | Dr. Prem Sharma | Academician |
| 4. | Hira Vishwakarma | Activists |
| 5. | Kapil Neupane | Researcher/Activists |
| 6. | Parshuram Upadhaya | Activists |
| 7. | Prof. Dr. Shree Krishna Shrestha | Academician |
| 8. | Mr. Bashu Babu Aryal | Practitioners |

**Annex 4: CHECKLISTS**

1.  What are the gaps that you have discovered in the policies regarding people's participation and its practices in Local Development Programs?

2.  Can you tell us difficulties that you have encountered while promoting people's participation in Local Development Programs in Nepal?

3.  Do you think the concept of people's participation has been adopted in Nepal without looking into the supply side of participation? Do people really demand participation or is it forced upon the people by bureaucrats?

4.  How has people's participation benefitted implementation of Local Development Programs? Can you give list some of your experiences?

5.  Where has government lacked in promoting people's participation in Local Development Programs?

6.  Are there any alternative to people's participation that could be implemented in Nepal?

7.  Major government run projects emphasize on promoting people's participation in Local Development in Nepal. In your experience, has these projects been able to promote real participation in Local Development Projects?