

# Inclusion and Exclusion: Dalit and Marginalized Participation in Local Government Planning in Nepal

**Govinda Adhikari**

Local Governance Affairs Professional (Freelancer)

M.A. Sociology, M.A. Rural Development, M.Phil. Education (Development Studies), TU  
adhikari2033@gmail.com, govindacres@yahoo.com

ORCHID record: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4141-3447>

DOI: 10.3126/hj.v16i1.76357

## **Abstract**

*This study examines the participation of Dalits and marginalized communities in local government planning and budgeting within Nepal's federal government framework. It explores the constitutional and legal frameworks, especially the Local Government Operational Act (LGOA) and the Constitution of Nepal, which support inclusion. Through literature reviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted in three municipalities in Koshi Province, the research evaluates both the provisions and their grassroots implementation. The key finding of the study is that while legal provisions for the participation of Dalits and marginalized communities in local government planning and budgeting exist, their actual implementation at the grassroots level is limited, with significant gaps in consultation, awareness, and capacity. The findings underscore the need for clearer mandatory provisions, consultation mechanisms, capacity-building, and monitoring frameworks to enhance inclusive governance. The study concludes with recommendations for targeted interventions to improve the practice of participatory planning and budgeting. These results have important implications for improving participatory governance, enhancing local government planning, and ensuring meaningful inclusion of marginalized groups.*

*Keywords:* dalit, marginalized, planning, local government, provision.

Nepal began integrating Local Development Planning (LDP) into its annual budgeting process in 1951 (Sapkota & Malakar, 2021). This initiative gained momentum in 1956 with the country's first five-year plan (1956-1961), which aimed to promote self-sufficiency and establish a 'welfare state' (Pant, 1966). The LDP prioritizes active community involvement in both planning and implementation, ensuring that local needs are addressed. Additionally, it focuses on effective mobilization and utilization of local resources to enhance overall community welfare (Nepal, 2008).

Since the 1960s, local government planning in Nepal has evolved through various approaches and initiatives (Sapkota & Malakar, 2021; Adhikari, 2024a). Initially, a top-down approach prevailed in many countries, including Nepal, fostering heavy reliance on the state. However, from the 1970s onward, Nepal, like many developing democratic economies, began embracing a bottom-up planning and development model (Sapkota & Malakar, 2021; Adhikari, 2024b). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, concerted efforts intensified to strengthen local development planning, with an emphasis on participatory methods.

Some scholars (e.g., Hachhethu, 2008; Tandon, 2023) argue that development planning in Nepal remained largely centralized, rendering the system ineffective and exclusionary. Factors such as inadequate funding, limited borrowing capacity of state institutions, centralized decision-making, and low public participation have further constrained its effectiveness (Khanal, 2016; Adhikari, 2024b). After 1990, a new legal and policy framework aimed to foster people-centered development. However, the shift was short-lived, as community participation, particularly among marginalized groups curtailed during the Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) and the period (2002-2016) when local governments operated without elected representatives (Acharya et al., 2022).

Furthermore, it is argued that since the adoption of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015, the Local Government Operations Act (LGOA) has created significant opportunities for local participation in decision-making and implementation. The LGOA allows citizens to take part in local planning, with oversight from elected representatives (Tandon, 2023; Adhikari, 2024c). However, despite these provisions, the execution of the new federalism framework has been lacking. Marginalized groups such as women, janajatis, and dalits continue to face exclusion from local planning and budgeting processes. Acharya and Zafarullah (2022) highlight that these groups are often left out of budgeting discussions, with their needs frequently overlooked. Additionally, the opportunities for elected representatives from Dalit, women, and ethnic communities have not been sufficiently expanded, limiting their capacity to engage meaningfully in decision-making (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020).

In this context, the study examines the legal provisions for participatory planning and their practical implementation within Nepal's existing federal system, with a specific focus on the involvement and role of Dalits and marginalized groups in local government decision-making during the annual planning and budgeting process. This study seeks to identify gaps in practice and offers recommendations for improving meaningful participation in local governance.

The rationale of this study is rooted in the persistent challenges faced by Dalits and marginalized communities in Nepal's local government planning and budgeting processes. Despite the presence of constitutional, legal, and policy frameworks such as the Constitution of Nepal (2015) and the Local Government Operation Act (2017), significant obstacles continue to hinder these communities from asserting themselves effectively and

participating in decision-making processes. This study critically examines the provisions for participatory planning and the reality of its practical implementation at the local level. By identifying gaps between policy intentions and actual practices, the research seeks to provide information on strategies that enhance effective inclusive governance, ensuring that the most marginalized groups can meaningfully contribute to the policies that shape their lives.

This study explores the provisions and practices concerning the participation of Dalits and marginalized communities in Nepal's local government annual planning and budgeting processes within the framework of federal governance.

### Methodology

A structured approach was adopted to achieve the objectives of the study, incorporating literature reviews, Key Informant Interview (KII), and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The literature review examined key legal texts, including the LGOA, the Constitution of Nepal, and relevant guidelines to assess provisions for Dalits and marginalized groups in the annual planning and budgeting process. Additionally, secondary sources such as reports, articles, dissertations, and books were analyzed to evaluate how these provisions are implemented in practice.

FGDs and KIIs were conducted across three rural/municipalities in Koshi Provinces - Birtamod, Gauradaha, and Kachankawal,<sup>1</sup> between April 2023 and May 2024. The FGDs included 36 representatives from nine ward committees (excluding ward chairs), three representatives from each local government, and 12 members from three Social Development Committees (one from each local government). Additionally, 21 members from three Municipal Executive Bodies, comprising women and marginalized representatives (one from each local government) along with six marginalized community leaders (one each from Birtamod and Kachankawal) participated as well. These discussions were aimed to assess how participatory provisions are implemented at the local level and identify areas of improvement to enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of planning and budgeting processes.

The KIIs included 12 Ward Chairs (four from each local government), nine Ward Secretaries (three from each local government), six Planning Officers/Chief Administrative Officers (two from each local government), and six Mayor/Deputy Mayors/Chairpersons/Vice-Chairpersons (two from each local government). Additionally, two experts from Jhapa District, who have been working on local governance as civil society members, were interviewed as well. These interviews aimed to assess how

---

<sup>1</sup>The sample rural/municipalities were randomly selected from Jhapa District in Koshi Province, ensuring convenience and accessibility for the researcher. The selection included municipalities located along the East-West Highway (Birtamod Municipality), bordering India to the south (Kachankawal Rural Municipality), and situated centrally within the region (Gauradaha Municipality). Additionally, at least one Rural Municipality was included in the sample.

participatory provisions are being implemented at the local level and identify areas for improvement to enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of planning and budgeting processes.

This study employs a qualitative research design to evaluate both the provisions for the participation of Dalits and marginalized groups in annual planning and budgeting and the extent to which these provisions are practiced. Additionally, a descriptive design is used to document the existing frameworks and practical implementation regarding involvement of Dalits and marginalized groups in planning and budgeting processes within local governments under Nepal's federal system.

This study is grounded in a phenomenological approach, adopting a constructivist ontology that views reality as socially constructed through interactions and experience (Ahmad, 2008). It seeks guidance from interpretivist epistemology, adopting a qualitative methodology through interviews and focus groups to understand how people perceive and interpret their experiences (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Additionally, the study acknowledges its value-laden nature of axiology by reflecting on potential researcher biases and ensuring transparency through member checking, thereby enhancing the credibility and authenticity of its findings (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

This article examines the provisions and practices related to the participation and inclusion of Dalits and other marginalized groups in the annual planning and budgeting processes of local government within Nepal's federal governance system. However, this study does not go into the program designs, budgeting, or implementations of specific programs targeting these communities. This study is limited to three rural/municipalities in Koshi Province, making it a micro-level analysis of participatory practice. Furthermore, it focuses on practices implemented after the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) and the enactment of the Local Government Operational Act (LGOA, 2017), ensuring that the analysis is coterminous with the current governance framework.

### **Trustworthiness**

Several measures were undertaken to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. To ensure content quality, questionnaires and interview techniques were developed based on a review of relevant literature and expert feedback. Pilot testing was conducted to assess the clarity and relevance. Additionally, data triangulation, through multiple sources and methods, strengthened the credibility of the findings, ensuring an accurate representation of participatory planning and budgeting in Nepalese local governments.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were integral to this study, ensuring participant welfare and research integrity. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants, outlining the study's objectives, voluntary participation, and rights to confidentiality and anonymity. Identities were disclosed only with explicit consent, while others remained confidential. Special attention was given to amplifying marginalized voices and minimizing potential risks. Cultural sensitivity was maintained to foster trust and cooperation. Additionally, any

conflicts of interest were transparently managed. Given the researcher's professional role in local governance, access to municipal data was facilitated but used strictly with informed consent.

### **Insights from Document Review**

A review of the literature highlights key provisions related to local planning, participation of marginalized groups in planning, and the practical implementation of these provisions, which is presented here.

### **Provisions for Local Government Planning**

The Constitution of Nepal (2015), Local Government Operation Act (LGOA, 2017), and Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act (IGFMA, 2017) serve as the primary legal frameworks guiding local government planning in federal Nepal. These are further supplemented by guidelines from the National Planning Commission and the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (MoFAGA) (Adhikari, 2024c). These legal frameworks mandate local governments to develop various planning documents, including Periodic Plans, Annual Plans, and Strategic Sectoral Mid-term Plans, all of which are aligned with the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) for a three-year public expenditure plan (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Aryal & Mishra, 2019; Adhikari, 2024c).

The annual planning and budgeting process, known as the Seven-Step Participatory Planning Process, is clearly outlined in the Guidelines for Local Level Planning and Formulation (GLLPF) and the Local Level Annual Planning and Budget Formulation Guidelines (LLAPBFG) (National Planning Commission, 2078; MoFAGA, 2074). These guidelines are rooted in the Constitution of Nepal (2015) and the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA, 2017), providing a legal foundation for citizen participation in decision-making through their representatives (Tandon, 2023; Adhikari, 2024c). The process begins with the Preparation phase (January-April), which involves data updates, MTEF preparation, revenue and expenditure projections, and setting thematic and ward ceilings. The Resource Estimation and Budget Ceiling Preparation phase (April) finalizes budget ceilings with inputs from federal and provincial governments. The Settlement-Level Planning phase (May) ensures broad community participation in project selection, followed by the Ward-Level Planning Phase (May), where projects are prioritized and submitted to the planning committee. In the Integrated Budget Formulation phase (June), stakeholder inputs are consolidated into a draft proposal, which undergoes review in the Executive Approval phase (June), and Assembly Approval phase (June-July) before the budget is published in the local gazette (percent).

Similarly, Section 5.1.3 of the Local Level Annual Plan and Budget Formation Guideline (MoFAGA, 2017) and Section 4.8 (1.2) of the Guideline for Local Level Plan Formulation (National Planning Commission, 2078) outline five thematic areas for local government annual plans: Economic Development, covering agriculture, tourism, and financial services; Social Development, focusing on education, health, and inclusion; Infrastructure Development, which includes roads, energy, and urban projects; Forest, Environment, and Disaster Management, emphasizing conservation, climate adaptation, and

disaster preparedness; and Good Governance and Institutional Development addressing human resources fiscal management and service delivery. For each of these sectors, legislation sets up committees responsible for overseeing implementation (Adhikari, 2024c).

Furthermore, in formulating their plans, local governments are required to align with the policies, goals, objectives, timelines, and procedures set by federal and provincial governments. As per LGOA, 2017, plans must incorporate critical cross-cutting issues, including good governance, environmental concerns, child-friendly initiatives, climate change adaptation, disaster management, and gender and social inclusion (Government of Nepal, 2017: a, Sec. 24 (2)).

### **Provisions for Participation of Marginalized**

Nepal's legal and constitutional frameworks mandate inclusion of marginalized communities in local government planning (Adhikari, 2024a). This inclusion is facilitated through various provisions, including committees, structured annual planning and budgeting processes, and broader community engagement initiatives. The Seven-Step Planning Process, designed to be inclusive and participatory, ensures the involvement of diverse societal groups, including marginalized communities, women, youth, and persons with disabilities (Adhikari, 2024c). It assures active participation and contribution from historically excluded groups to policy selection, strategy formulation, activity planning, and budget allocations (Mishra & Magar, 2017). A range of legislative and institutional frameworks rooted in Nepal's constitutional commitment to an inclusive society operate across federal, provincial, and local levels, embedding inclusiveness within their structures and processes at all tiers (Bhusal & Acharya, 2024).

Scholars such as Acharya and Zafarullah (2020), Tandon (2023), and Adhikari (2024c) highlight that the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015 and the enactment of the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) in 2017 have contributed to the implementation of local development projects and inclusive planning and budgeting processes, ultimately improving the socioeconomic status of disadvantaged groups. According to Tandon (2023), the LGOA empowers citizens to engage in local planning, with elected representatives overseeing the process. Additionally, the LGOA and its associated guidelines establish a seven-step annual planning and budgeting framework designed to be participatory, ensuring that all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups, play an active role in shaping policies, strategies, activities, and budget allocations (Tandon, 2023; Adhikari, 2024a).

Going into details on the provisions for the participation of marginalized communities in decision-making during local annual planning and budgeting, Adhikari (2024a) writes:

"Embedded within the inclusive framework of Nepal's local governance system are Rural/Municipal executives tasked with approving the annual budget and plan of the local government. Defined by Articles 215 and 216 of the Constitution of Nepal (2015), these executives represent diverse segments of society, comprising Women Members elected from the respective assembly and individuals elected by the Assembly from Dalit and marginalized

communities. This inclusive representation, alongside key officials such as the Mayor/Chairperson, Deputy Mayor/Vice Chairperson, and Ward Chairpersons, ensures comprehensive decision-making processes.

Similarly, the rural/municipal assemblies, responsible for annual budget and program approvals, reflect the ethos of inclusivity outlined in Nepal's constitutional framework. Articles 222 and 223 of the Constitution specify the composition of these assemblies, which include Ward Members elected from the Rural/Municipality and additional members representing Dalit and marginalized communities. Such arrangements foster inclusive governance and decision-making at the grassroots level.

At the ward level, committees play a crucial role in formulating and approving annual budgets and plans. Article 222 (4) of the Constitution outlines the formation of ward committees, which comprise Ward Chairpersons and members elected by the people, with a deliberate inclusion of women members to ensure diverse perspectives in decision-making processes.

Furthermore, the Resource Estimation and Budget Ceiling Allocation Committee exemplifies the commitment to inclusivity within Nepal's local governance structure. This committee, mandated by the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA, 2017), consists of executive members appointed to reflect demographic diversity, including representation from women, Dalits, and marginalized communities.

Thematic/Sectoral Committees operating within rural/municipalities further reinforce the principles of inclusivity. As detailed in the Local Level Annual Plan and Budget Formation Guideline (LLAPBFG, 2074), these committees comprise executive members, including women representatives, underscoring the importance of gender balance and diversity in thematic development and planning processes.

Beyond formal structures, additional provisions ensure the active participation of marginalized groups in the planning and budgeting processes. Section 24 (5) of the LGOA (2017) mandates the involvement of various stakeholders, including marginalized communities, women, children, youth, and persons with disabilities, in decision-making processes. Moreover, the Guideline for Local Level Plan Formulation (GLLPF, 2078) and LLAPBFG (2074) emphasize inclusivity by encouraging the participation of all social classes and communities at settlement-level planning. These guidelines highlight the importance of engaging community organizations and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that the planning process reflects the needs and aspirations of all segments of society" (Adhikari, 2024a.).

Bhusal and Breen (2021) argue that participatory practices have gained momentum in recent years, as Nepal's federalist constitution has granted local governments significant authority and resources to foster citizen empowerment through participatory institutions, accommodating diverse identities, interests, and skills. Furthermore, recent initiatives in participatory governance have increasingly focused on empowering individuals with diverse backgrounds, capacities, and interests (Bhusal, 2023).

### **Participation of Marginalized**

Although scientific research on local government planning and budgeting with a focus on Dalit and marginalized involvement in the post-federalism era remains limited, some studies have explored these issues. Acharya and Zafarullah (2020) highlight progress in local development and improved conditions for disadvantaged groups following the enactment of the 2015 Constitution and the 2017 Local Government Operation Act (LGOA). Tandon (2023) underscores the Constitution's provision of significant autonomy to subnational governments and the LGOA's role in facilitating citizen participation in local planning, with elected representatives overseeing the process. Additionally, the LGOA and its related guidelines establish a seven-step annual planning and budgeting process designed to be participatory, ensuring that all stakeholders, particularly marginalized groups, have a role in shaping policies, strategies, activities, and budgetary allocations (Tandon, 2023; Adhikari, 2024a).

Despite these provisions and efforts, the implementation of the new federalism structure remains incomplete, with marginalized groups such as women, Janajatis, and Dalits from lower castes still facing exclusion from local planning and budgeting processes, thereby violating the country's constitutional guarantees of rights. Scholars such as Tandon (2023), Acharya and Zafarullah (2022), and Adhikari (2024a) share a similar view, noting that the involvement of marginalized communities in local government planning and decision-making processes shows mixed progress in promoting inclusivity and participation. Acharya and Zafarullah (2022) argue that these groups are often left out of budgeting activities, and their needs are frequently overlooked. Moreover, the shift toward 'pocket' projects have replaced comprehensive annual settlement and ward projects, further marginalizing these communities. Bhusal and Acharya (2024) further emphasize that none of the local governments in the study municipalities introduced new or innovative mechanisms to enhance citizen participation. Instead, almost all municipalities inherited previously tested- and perhaps trusted by ordinary people-public input mechanisms. As a result, Nepal's local level planning process remains dysfunctional, centralized, and tailored to specific interests (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2022).

Furthermore, Tandon (2023) argues that although deliberative discussions occur within municipal planning committees to allocate the unconditional budget, there is a lack of meaningful citizen participation. She adds that citizen engagement is largely restricted to the budget allocated for *tole Bhela*, which involves only a small fraction (10 to 13 percent) of the community. In 2022, the Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC) reported that 55



percent of local government respondents in Bagmati and Sudurpaschim (Far west province) stated that community consultations are conducted on a need basis during annual planning and budgeting. Meanwhile, approximately 30 percent of respondents in Madhesh (Madhesh Province) indicated that such consultations take place only once or twice a year (NASC, 2022).

### **Practices Outside Nepal**

Despite resource and time constraints in accessing extensive literature, some practices beyond Nepal have been examined. However, these practices are generally framed as public participation rather than specifically addressing the involvement of Dalits and marginalized groups. Indratini et al. (2023) highlight that public participation in Indonesia's local budget preparation is limited due to restricted opportunities and uncooperative community attitudes. In rural areas, people passively accept government proposals due to a lack of confidence, while in urban areas, inconvenient scheduling allows elites to control community representation. Their participation is often non-voluntary, resulting in 'ceremonial budgeting' (p.46), with no recommendations for improvement. Similarly, Sopanah et al. (2023) emphasize that leadership style and political dynamics significantly influence participation, and limited engagement in planning processes affects budget transparency and the overall effectiveness of local governance.

Anyebe (2016) examines local planning and budgeting in Nigeria, highlighting challenges such as weak executive capacity, budget indiscipline, and a lack of accountability and transparency despite a well-structured framework. He emphasizes the need for qualified professionals, including planners, accountants, and auditors, to strengthen local governance. Similarly, Afonughe et al. (2023) argue that elite control significantly influences decision-making and planning at the local level, limiting public participation. They explain that high-ranking officials and political leaders manipulate governance structures for personal gain, often disregarding the needs of local communities.

Studies from Indonesia and Nigeria highlight shared challenges in local governance, including limited public participation, elite dominance, and weak institutional capacity. In both contexts, local planning and budgeting are often controlled by political and bureaucratic elites, leaving little space for meaningful community engagement. The lack of clear recommendations in some studies underscores the need for further research on practical strategies to foster inclusive participation. These insights provide valuable comparative perspectives beyond Nepal, emphasizing the importance of addressing structural and procedural barriers in local governance.

### **Empirical Finding from Field Participation/involvement of Marginalized**

Table 1 provides a concise overview of Dalits and marginalized community participation in the annual planning and budgeting processes across the three rural municipalities studied. Drawing from insights gathered through Focus Group Discussions

(FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), it highlights the extent of their involvement and representation in local governance activities.

**Table 1.** Number of Respondents on Participation of Marginalized During Annual Planning

Interview or FGD	Total respondents	Yes, they are involved	No, they are not involved/consulted formally	Elected from marginalized are involved	No Idea	May be /at TLO level
FGD (ward committee)	36	0	25	9	2	0
FGD (Social Development committee)	12	0	5	3	4	0
FGD (Municipal/village executive members-marginalized & women)	21	0	13	3	5	0
FGD (Marginalized)	6	0	6	0	0	0
Interview (ward chair)	12	0	12	0	0	0
Interview (ward secretary)	9	0	5	0	0	4
Interview (Planning officer & CAO)	6	0	3	3	0	0
Interview (Mayor/Chair & Deputy Mayor/vice Chair)	6	0	4	2	0	0
Interview (expert & civil society)	2	0	2	1	0	0
Total	110	0	75	21	11	4
Percentage	100	0	68.18	19.09	10	3.63

**Source:** FGD, 2024 and Interview, 2024

The data in Table 1 reveals that a total of 110 respondents were surveyed, representing diverse stakeholder groups, including ward committees, municipal/village executive members, local government officials, marginalized community representatives, and experts.

Notably, 68.18 percent of respondents (75 out of 110) reported that marginalized communities are not formally involved or consulted in the planning process. This concern was particularly evident in the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with ward committee members (36 participants), where 69.4 percent highlighted the absence of formal involvement. Similarly, FGDs with municipal/village executive members (21 participants) indicated that 61.9 percent also faced non-involvement, underscoring the gap between policy intentions and the actual inclusion of marginalized groups in decision-making.

Only 19.09 percent (21 out of 110) of respondents acknowledged the participation of elected representatives from marginalized communities in planning and budgeting processes. In the ward committee FGDs (36 participants), 25 percent reported involvement, whereas interviews with ward chairs (12 participants) and ward secretaries (9 participants) indicated a complete absence (0 percent) of participation from elected marginalized representatives.

A small percentage of respondents (3.63 percent or 4 out 110) noted that marginalized communities might be engaged at the Tole Bhela level, a community-level consultation. This was indicated by interviews with ward secretaries (9 participants) and planning officers (6 participants), though such engagement appeared informal and inconsistent across municipalities.

The FGD with marginalized community members (6 participants) revealed total exclusion, highlighting the persistent challenges these communities face in participating in local-level decision-making.

The findings from the table highlight a significant gap between the intended inclusivity of local governance frameworks and the actual participation of marginalized communities in planning and budgeting. Despite existing provisions, groups such as women, Dalits, and Janajatis remain excluded from key decision-making discussions. The data underscores the need for robust efforts to ensure meaningful participation, both in formal decision-making bodies and informal consultations, to better address their needs and uphold their rights at the local level.

**Increasing Participation/Involvement of Marginalized**

The following Table 2 presents an overview of the measures to boost the participation of Dalits and marginalized communities in the annual planning and budgeting processes within the three rural municipalities examined. It encapsulates insights gathered from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), emphasizing the main recommendations for enhancing the involvement of marginalized communities in local governance.

*Table 2. Number of Respondents on How to increase the Participation of Marginalized During Annual Planning*

Interview or FGD	Total respondents	Consult during planning	Mandatory and clear provision /measures	Capacity development provisions	Don't know	Formation of coordination committees
FGD (ward committee)	36	23	5	7	2	0
FGD (Social Development committee)	12	8	6	2	2	0
FGD (Municipal/village executive	21	18	11	3	2	0

Interview or FGD	Total respondents	Consult during planning	Mandatory and clear provision /measures	Capacity development provisions	Don't know	Formation of coordination committees
members-marginalized & women)						
FGD (Marginalized)	6	5	5	2	0	0
Interview (ward chair)	12	5	9	3	0	0
Interview (ward secretary)	9	5	9	7	0	0
Interview (Planning officer & CAO)	6	2	3	2	0	0
Interview (Mayor/Chair & Deputy Mayor/vice Chair)	6	5	3	5	0	0
Interview (expert & civil society)	2	2	2	2	0	1

Source: FGD, 2024 and Interview, 2024

The data in Table 2 presents the perspectives of 112 participants from diverse stakeholder groups, including ward committees, municipal and village executive members, local government officials, representatives from marginalized communities, and experts.

A substantial majority (66.07 percent or 74 out of 112) highlighted the necessity of consulting marginalized communities in the planning process. This view was particularly prevalent in focus group discussions with ward committees (63.89 percent, or 23 out of 36 participants) and municipal/village executive members (85.71 percent, or 18 out of 21 participants), underscoring the crucial role of consultation in fostering inclusive planning.

Nearly half of the respondents (49.10 percent, or 55 participants) emphasized the need for clear and mandatory provisions to ensure inclusion of marginalized communities. Ward secretaries (100 percent, or 9 out of 9) and ward chairs (75 percent, or 9 out of 12) were particularly vocal in advocating for these measures, highlighting their awareness of policy-driven approaches to inclusion.

Additionally, 31.25 percent (35 respondents) identified capacity development as a crucial strategy for empowering marginalized communities to engage meaningfully. This was especially highlighted by ward secretaries (77.78 percent, or 7 out of 9) and municipal/village executive members (14.29 percent, or 3 out of 21), underscoring the recognition of its importance among administrative stakeholders.

A small fraction (5.35 percent, or 6 respondents) expressed uncertainty regarding measures to enhance participation. The uncertainty was evident in focus group discussions with ward committees (5.56 percent, or 2 participants) and Social Development Committee members (16.67 percent, or 2 participants), suggesting gaps in awareness or understanding.

The idea of forming coordination committees received minimal support, with only one respondent (0.89 percent) advocating for this approach, indicating limited recognition of its potential among the various groups.

These findings underscore the significance of consultation, mandatory provisions, and capacity development in fostering meaningful participation of marginalized communities. However, the data also reveals gaps in awareness and limited recognition of alternative strategies such as coordination committees, necessitating targeted awareness campaigns, robust policy frameworks, and capacity-building efforts to guarantee the meaningful inclusion of marginalized communities in local planning and budgeting processes.

### Discussion

This study reaffirms that, despite constitutional and legal provisions for inclusion, marginalized groups in Nepal still encounter significant barriers to meaningful participation in local government planning and decision-making. Tokenistic representation persists, as 68.18 percent of respondents report the exclusion of marginalized groups from formal planning mechanisms. These findings align with earlier critiques that Nepal's participatory frameworks often remain superficial. Moreover, the low participation rate of elected representatives from marginalized groups (19.09 percent) highlights the continued challenges in ensuring effective representation.

A key contribution of this study is its analysis of participation gaps, particularly in informal consultation spaces such as *Tole Bhela*. While previous research has broadly examined exclusion, this research presents concrete evidence showing that marginalized groups participated at a mere 3.63 percent in these informal mechanisms. This challenges the assumption that informal spaces inherently promote inclusivity and exposes their limitations for marginalized communities.

Additionally, this study offers new insights into stakeholders' perspectives on fostering inclusivity. While prior research has emphasized capacity-building, this study identifies practical recommendations for future interventions. Notably, 66.07 percent of respondents emphasized the importance of direct consultations, while 49.10 percent underscored the need for formalized participatory provisions. The limited awareness of alternative mechanisms, such as coordination committees (supported by only 0.89 percent of respondents), reveals a critical gap in governance practices. These findings highlight the need to strengthen existing structures and raise awareness of alternative participation mechanisms.

Experiences beyond Nepal reinforce these findings, demonstrating that limited community participation in planning and budgeting is a widespread issue. In Indonesia, Indartini et al. (2023) highlight structural barriers and passive community involvement, often resulting in *ceremonial budgeting*. Sopanah et al. (2023) emphasize the influence of leadership style and political dynamics in limiting participation, thereby undermining transparency and governance. Similarly, in Nigeria, Anyebe (2016) identifies weak executive capacity and accountability as key challenges, while Afonughe et al. (2023) argue that elite dominance marginalizes public involvement. These cases illustrate the need for institutional reforms and more inclusive planning frameworks.

Overall, this study highlights the persistent challenges in ensuring meaningful participation for marginalized groups in local governance. Despite legal provisions, weak implementation continues to reinforce exclusion in both formal and informal spaces. Addressing these gaps requires robust institutional mechanisms, increased public awareness, and enhance accountability to ensure participatory governance system that benefits all communities especially those historically marginalized.

## Conclusion

This study highlights that, despite inclusive provisions, systemic barriers continue to impede the effective participation of marginalized groups in local governance, particularly in the planning process. The findings reinforce earlier critiques of tokenistic representation, with 68.18 percent of respondents reporting the exclusion of marginalized voices from formal planning. Furthermore, the 19.09 percent participation rate of elected representatives from marginalized communities' highlights that mere representation is insufficient to address these challenges.

The research also highlights the limitations of informal mechanisms like *Tole Bhela*, where marginalized groups had a participation rate of only 3.63 percent. This challenges the assumption that informal spaces inherently foster inclusivity. The study provides actionable recommendations: 66.07 percent of respondents advocated for direct consultations, and 49.10 percent emphasized the need for formalizing participatory provisions. Moreover, the low awareness of alternative mechanisms, such as coordination committees (0.89 percent), indicates the need for greater focus on these strategies in governance.

The implications of these findings are significant. To address the existing gaps, it is essential to institutionalize participatory mechanisms that go beyond tokenistic inclusion. Structural reforms must be complemented by capacity-building efforts to empower marginalized communities and ensure their active engagement in decision-making. These reforms could contribute to more equitable local governance in Nepal, fostering a more inclusive and effective decision-making process. This study contributes to the body of knowledge on participatory governance and offers practical solutions that can guide future policies and initiatives aimed at improving local governance practices.

## Recommendation

To address the gap between policy provisions and practice on the participation of marginalized groups in local planning, this section offers focused recommendations to enhance their involvement in local governance.

**Strengthen Consultation Processes:** Establish and maintain structured, regular consultations with marginalized communities during the planning stage. It is crucial to ensure compliance with legal and constitutional frameworks, ensuring that the engagement of these communities aligns with federal and provincial regulations.

**Implement Mandatory Inclusion Provisions:** Federal, provincial, and local governments should enforce mandatory inclusion provisions in budgeting and planning processes, ensuring the active participation and representation of marginalized and

disadvantaged groups in social, economic, and political processes. Additionally, establish performance evaluation systems linked to clear rewards and consequences for adherence or non-compliance with the set rules.

**Enhance Capacity Development:** Initiate targeted training programs aimed at strengthening the capacity of marginalized groups. These programs should focus on enhancing the effectiveness of their participation. Training should cover relevant legal provisions and equip participants with practical skills to improve their participation.

**Increase Awareness:** Conduct awareness campaigns to educate both government officials and communities on the importance of participation and inclusion in annual planning and budgeting. Emphasize the constitutional and legal provisions that require inclusive governance, fostering a deeper understanding of these principles and ensuring better adherence.

**Form Coordination Committees:** Pilot the coordination committees at the local level to encourage cross-sector collaboration. These committees should operate within a legally compliant framework, ensuring the participation and inclusion of marginalized communities in decision-making processes.

### References

- Acharya, K. K., Dhungana, R. K., & Guragain, H. P. (2022). The position of marginalized groups in the elite captured local level planning process in Nepal. *Nepal Public Policy Review*, 1(1), 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.3126/nppr.v2i1.48394>
- Acharya, K. K., & Zafarullah, H. (2022). Whither demarginalization, inclusion, and effectiveness? *Challenges of local government planning in Nepal*. Association of Asia Scholars.
- Adhikari, G. (2024a). *Breaking the unbreakable glass wall: Practice of local government planning and marginalized people of Nepal* [Unpublished M.Phil. thesis]. Project Administration.
- (2024b). Local planning in Nepal: Understanding among local officials. *Historical Journal*, 15(2), 33. <https://doi.org/10.3126/hj.v15i2.70669>
- (2024c). Understanding the provisions for local government planning in Nepal. *Intellectual Journal of Academic Research (IJAR)*, 2(1), 11–22. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13499850>.
- Afonughe, I. O., Akpomuvire, M., & Christopher, S. G. (2023). Understanding the elite theory and rural underdevelopment in Nigeria local government. *Journal of Public Administration, Finance and Law*, 27, 528–545. <https://doi.org/10.47743/jopaf1-2023-27-42>
- Ahmed, A. (2008). *Ontological, Epistemological and Methodological Assumptions: Qualitative Versus Quantitative*. Unpublished manuscript, School of Education & Lifelong Learning, University of Exeter, UK.
- Anyebe, A. A. (2016). A reflection on planning and budgeting at the local government level in Nigeria. *International Journal Advances in Social Science and Humanities*, 4(1), 27-33. Retrieved from [www.ijassh.com](http://www.ijassh.com)
- Aryal, B., & Mishra, A. K. (2019). Perception-based assessment of the opportunities and challenges of DTMP of Rautahat District, Nepal. *Journal of Advanced Research in Business, Law and Technology Management*, 2(2), 27-40.
- Bhusal, T. (2023). Participatory local governance in rural Nepal: The primacy of informality. *Development Policy Review*, 41(6), e. 12724. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12724>
- Bhusal, T., & Acharya, K. K. (2024). Five years of local democracy in federal Nepal (2017–2022). *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.389>

- Bhusal, T., & Breen, M. (2021). Federalism and local governance: Exploring multilingualism in local decision-making in Nepal. *Regional & Federal Studies*, 33, 187–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2021.1940970>
- Government of Nepal. (2017). *Local Government Operation Act, 2074 (2017)*. Retrieved from <https://lawcommission.gov.np/np/documents/percente0percenta4percentb8percente0percenta5percent8dpercente0percenta4percenta5>
- (2017). *Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act 2074 (2017)*. Retrieved from <https://lawcommission.gov.np/np/documents/percente0percenta4percent85percente0percenta4percenta8percente0percenta5percent8d>
- Hachhethu, K. (2008). *Local democracy and political parties in Nepal: A case study of Dhanusha District*. In D. N. Gellner & K. Hachhethu (Eds.). *Local democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of democratization in Nepal and its neighbours*. SAGE Publications. xx-xx.
- Indartini, M., Herawati, N. R., Warnaningtyas, H., Wibisono, N., Imron, M., Istiqaroh, C. R., Wildaniyati, A., & Darmoko, H. W. (2023). Behind the low level of public participation in local budget management: A piece of the story of budgeting in Indonesia. *International Journal of Science and Management Studies (IJSMS)*, 6(1), 41–47. <https://doi.org/10.51386/25815946/ij sms-v6i1p103>.
- Khanal, G. (2016). Fiscal decentralization and municipal performance in Nepal. *Journal of Management and Development Studies*, 27, 59–87.
- Kivunja, C. & Kuyini, A. B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), Retrieved from <http://ijhe.sciedupress.com>
- Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration. (2017). *Local Level Annual Plan and Budget Formation Guideline, 2074 (Revised)*. Retrieved from <https://mofaga.gov.np/model-law/145>
- (2020). *Annual Plan and Budget Formulation Handbook of Local Level, 2077*. Retrieved from <https://www.mofaga.gov.np/news-notice/2122>
- Mishra, A. K., Magar, B. R. (2017). Implementability of municipal transport master plan of Bandipur Inner Ring Road, Tanahu, Nepal. *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 6(8), 306- 313.
- Nepal Administrative Staff College [NASC]. (2022). *Local Governance, Gender Responsive and Socially Inclusive Public Finance Management: Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices*. Nepal Administrative Staff College.
- Nepal G. (2008). *Development and planning in the era of globalization*. Himalaya Books Stall.
- Pant, Y. P. (1996). *Budgets in Nepal*. Retrieved from [https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/1956\\_8/16/budgets\\_in\\_nepal.pdf](https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/1956_8/16/budgets_in_nepal.pdf)
- Sapkota, B. D., & Malakar, I. M. (2021). Local development planning process: A policy level analysis in Nepal. *Journal of Population and Development*. Retrieved from <https://researchgate.net/>
- Sopannah, A., Harnovinsah, H., & Amyulianthy, R. (2023). Factors influencing budgeting: Case study in village government. *Innovation Business Management and Accounting Journal*. 2(2). 78–86. <https://doi.org/10.56070/ibmaj.v2i2.43>
- Tandon, V. K. (2023). *Participation and deliberation at the local level in the federal context of Nepal* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). L'École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHES).