



## **Assessing Rural Municipality Standardization: A Policy Position Paper**

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### **Abstract**

The Policy position paper aims to assess the standard of rural municipality as the grass root foundation of communities. This public policy position paper addresses the need to strengthen the service delivery of local government units in Nepal by developing the holistic structure as mentioned in the constitution of Nepal. It recognizes the significance of standard of mechanism of rural municipality for the smooth administration and development. The paper discusses the current challenges, including infrastructure deficits, digital divides, policy gaps, and presents the ways forward to overcome these hurdles and maximize the transformative potential of Rural Municipality.

The policy position paper also highlights best practices from Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, Germany and United States in utilizing standard framework for local government service delivery. The objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive assessment of the current standard of rural municipality in the Nepalese local government units, propose actionable ways forward, and emphasize the significance of smooth administration for achieving sustainable development. Methodologically, the study uses qualitative thematic analysis of constitutional texts, policy documents, and interviews from policy dialogues. The findings suggest the need for clear legal mandates, capacity building, and bottom-up governance models. This paper concludes with specific policy recommendations and implementation strategies to support sustainable and inclusive rural development.

**Keywords:** Rural Municipality, Standardization, legal system, policy

### **Introduction**

Rural municipalities play a crucial role in fostering the well-being and sustainable development of their communities. Through a comprehensive set of policies, these



municipalities address diverse aspects that range from land use planning and infrastructure development to economic growth and social services. Land use and zoning policies guide the orderly development of residential, commercial, and agricultural areas, emphasizing sustainable practices. Infrastructure policies ensure the creation and maintenance of essential facilities, fostering connectivity and public services (Modisha, 2013).

Economic development policies focus on stimulating local economies, supporting small businesses, and attracting industries that contribute to the community's prosperity. Social service policies underscore the importance of education, healthcare, and housing, striving to create an environment where residents can thrive. Environmental conservation policies highlight the commitment to preserving natural resources and mitigating the impact of human activities on the ecosystem. Emergency management policies prepare rural municipalities for unforeseen challenges, emphasizing community safety and resilience. Through engaging residents in decision-making processes, budgetary and financial policies ensure responsible fiscal management. Cultural and recreational policies contribute to community well-being, promoting cultural events and recreational activities. Technological advancements are addressed through policies aimed at enhancing connectivity and leveraging technology for community development. Agriculture and rural development policies recognize the significance of supporting local farming initiatives and ensuring the overall growth of rural areas. In essence, the policies of a rural municipality reflect its commitment to creating a sustainable, resilient, and vibrant community for its residents (Chaudhary, 2019).

The essence of local governance lies in a framework of institutions, mechanisms, and processes that enable citizens and their groups to express interests, mediate differences, and exercise rights at the local level. Successful local governance relies on partnerships among local government entities, civil society organizations, and the private sector to ensure participatory, transparent, accountable, and equitable service delivery and local development. This involves empowering local governments with authority and resources while enhancing their capacity to function as responsive and accountable institutions (Normann, & Vasström, 2012).

Simultaneously, local governance emphasizes the strengthening of grassroots democracy and the empowerment of citizens, communities, and organizations like Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). These entities are envisioned as equal partners in the local governance and development processes. Restructuring this system is seen as a potential avenue for positively contributing to the overall development of rural communities and environments, particularly in cases where rural local governments play a pivotal role in providing and maintaining a diverse array of services and facilities, including roads, tax collection, water and sewage infrastructure, and land-use regulation (UNDP, 2004).

Rural municipalities form the foundation of local governance in Nepal and play a pivotal role in delivering essential public services, ensuring participatory development, and fostering socio-economic growth. Since the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution and the adoption of



a federal structure, rural municipalities have been envisioned as autonomous administrative units with significant responsibilities. These responsibilities include land use planning, infrastructure development, social services delivery, and environmental management (Modisha, 2013; Chaudhary, 2019). Despite this transformative vision, challenges persist due to inadequate infrastructure, weak institutional capacity, and limited policy implementation. Moreover, inconsistencies in decentralization practices—particularly between the federal and local governments—have created operational ambiguities. The essence of this paper is to assess the standardization of rural municipalities in Nepal, identify gaps, and propose a structured and context-specific policy framework informed by global experiences.

### **Problem Statement**

Rural municipalities in Nepal face a myriad of challenges that impede their holistic development. Fundamental infrastructure deficiencies, encompassing roads, electricity, water supply, and sanitation, hinder the economic growth and overall well-being of residents. The agricultural sector, a primary source of livelihood, grapples with outdated practices, insufficient technology, and susceptibility to climate change, impacting productivity. Education and healthcare services encounter obstacles, including limited access to schools and health facilities, exacerbating the struggle to nurture a skilled and healthy populace. (Shrestha, et al., 2023).

High levels of poverty and unemployment persist, prompting migration to urban centers in pursuit of better opportunities. The vulnerability to natural disasters, from earthquakes to floods, poses a continuous threat to rural municipalities, necessitating robust preparedness and recovery strategies. Governance challenges, including capacity-building, transparency, and accountability issues, hinder effective local administration. Limited access to financial resources further constrains rural municipalities from implementing crucial development projects. Social inequalities, rooted in caste-based discrimination and gender disparities, persist, demanding targeted efforts for inclusive growth. Tackling these interconnected challenges requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving local, regional, and national stakeholders, with ongoing efforts needed to adapt strategies to evolving conditions (Shrestha, et al., 2023).

Conflicts over power-sharing between local and federal governments in Nepal arise from historical centralization, competing interests in resource allocation, capacity and training challenges at the local level, interference and micromanagement by the central government, political instability, ethnic and regional identity considerations, and constitutional ambiguities. The transition to federalism and the need for equitable representation add complexity to power dynamics. Efforts to address these conflicts involve constitutional amendments, policy adjustments, and ongoing capacity-building initiatives, with the resolution requiring dialogue and collaboration between different levels of government. It's advisable to consult more recent sources for updates on the evolving political context in Nepal (Acharya, 2021).

### **Position Statement**

Decentralization of authority and resources ensures that decision-making processes are



inclusive and tailored to the unique needs of each community. The establishment and maintenance of robust infrastructure, including reliable road networks and access to essential services such as healthcare and education, form the cornerstone of our commitment to sustainable development. Furthermore, we endorse initiatives supporting sustainable agriculture, livelihood diversification, and environmental conservation to fortify local economies and preserve natural ecosystems. Striving for social inclusivity and gender equality, disaster preparedness, and the integration of technology in rural areas are crucial components of our vision. By collectively working towards these standards, we aspire to create resilient, inclusive, and prosperous rural municipalities that contribute significantly to the holistic development of Nepal.

Nepal's rural municipalities are constrained by underdeveloped infrastructure, poor access to health and education services, lack of fiscal autonomy, and limited technical capacity (Shrestha et al., 2023). Agricultural inefficiency, youth outmigration, and inadequate disaster preparedness further exacerbate vulnerabilities. Additionally, power struggles between federal and local governments—stemming from unclear constitutional mandates and entrenched centralization tendencies—have hindered effective decentralization (Acharya, 2021). These challenges highlight the need to reassess the governance frameworks, redefine roles, and ensure standardized mechanisms to enable rural municipalities to function efficiently.

#### **Infrastructure Investment:**

We advocate for substantial investment in rural infrastructure, including roads, bridges, utilities, and broadband connectivity. Adequate infrastructure is essential for fostering economic growth, attracting businesses, and improving the quality of life for residents.

#### **Economic Diversification:**

We support initiatives that promote economic diversification and specialized in rural municipalities. Encouraging entrepreneurship, supporting local industries, one local product from each community and creating a conducive business environment and market through development of cooperatives model are key to ensuring the long-term viability of rural economies.

#### **Education and Healthcare Access:**

We believe in equal access to quality education and healthcare for rural residents. Investments in schools, local education unit, High school at each ward of the rural municipality, provision of educational inspector should revitalize in rural municipalities for strong monitoring, vocational training programs, and primary healthcare facilities, health volunteer at ward level and hospital provision are crucial to empower rural communities and bridge the urban-rural divide.

#### **Environmental Stewardship:**

We emphasize responsible environmental stewardship in rural areas. Water reserve policy should be there at every cluster of the community, Sustainable agriculture practices, conservation efforts, and measures to protect natural resources are vital for preserving the rural way of life and ensuring a healthy environment for future generations.



**Community Engagement:**

We encourage active community engagement and participation in decision-making processes. Inclusive governance, transparent communication, and partnerships between community based organization through sustainable model, local government and community members are essential for the success and resilience of rural municipalities.

**Preservation of Cultural Heritage:**

We recognize and value the unique cultural heritage of rural communities. Preservation of traditions, historical sites, and the promotion of local arts contribute to the identity and vitality of rural areas.

**Emergency Services and Public Safety:**

We advocate for adequate emergency services and public safety measures in rural municipalities. Access to emergency healthcare, fire services, and law enforcement is critical for the well-being and security of rural residents.

**Security System:**

We plan for having in place ward police and police station should be there at rural municipality level and develop the own security level by the local government.

In conclusion, we affirm our commitment to advocating for policies and initiatives that elevate the standard of rural municipalities. By addressing the specific needs of rural areas, we aim to create resilient, vibrant, and sustainable communities for the benefit of all citizens.

**Rationale and Evidence**

The federal structure was introduced with the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015. Prior to this, Nepal was a unitary state. The constitution of Nepal divides the country into seven provinces, each with its own government and legislative assembly. The federal structure was established to decentralize power, promote inclusivity, and address the diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural composition of the country.

Chudamani Poudel, Principal Secretary, Karnali Province opines that Politics and policies are interrelated so there should be coordination to implement through the bureaucrats. There is provision of bottom approach in constitution but the federal government is practicing trickledown approach for delegating the power to provincial and local government the statement of Singha Durbar in village is limited in slogan. The function of political representative to develop the policy through the parliament and implemented by bureaucracy. The present constitution is known as the ideal constitution but no implementation even in eight years of time . Federal government does not want to delegate the power which becoming obstacle for the development of local level so centralized psychology should be avoided. The frame work of rural municipality and power developed by the new constitution has not transferred in to local level till now.

The constitution has imagined for the post of mayor and vice mayor in municipality and rural municipality but females are representing only the post of deputy mayor except exceptional cases. The commissions including Women Commission, Inclusive Commission, and Janajati Commission should be in provincial government but they are still limited in





federal level. Puspa Badi, Chairperson of Rukum Rural Municipality opines that Education should be life skill based in local level to reduce the unemployment. as Govinda Pokhrel former vice chairperson of national planning commission opines that the size of the government should be small and active because federal system should not be burden itself for the nation rather it should be Chinese government. Summary of the (in Policy Dialogue, December 12, 2023).

### **Best Model practices in the global context**

Assessing the "best" model of local government structure is subjective and can vary based on specific criteria and perspectives. Different countries have different approaches to local governance, and what might be considered effective in one context may not be suitable for another. However, some countries are often cited as having successful or well-developed models for local government. Here are a few examples:

**Switzerland:** Switzerland is known for its decentralized federal system, where local government plays a crucial role. The country has a high degree of local autonomy, and citizens are actively involved in decision-making through direct democracy.

**Germany:** Germany has a federal system with strong local government structures. The principle of subsidiarity is emphasized, meaning that decisions are made at the lowest level of government possible. Local governments in Germany have significant responsibilities in areas such as education, social services, and urban planning.

**Canada:** Canada's system of local government varies by province, but in general, it is characterized by a strong tradition of local governance. Municipalities have elected councils with authority over local matters, and there is a push for citizen engagement in decision-making processes.

**Sweden:** Sweden has a decentralized system with a high degree of local autonomy. Local governments in Sweden have responsibility for areas such as education, social services, and local planning. There is also a tradition of citizen participation in decision-making.

**United States:** The United States has a federal system, and local government plays a significant role in delivering services and making decisions. However, the structure and responsibilities of local government can vary widely between states and municipalities.

**New Zealand (Community-Led Development):** New Zealand has embraced a community-led development approach, empowering local communities to actively participate in decision-making processes. This approach allows for more responsive and locally relevant policies.

**Norway (Collaborative Governance):** Norway emphasizes collaborative governance involving various stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and government agencies. This collaborative approach helps ensure that policies meet the diverse needs of rural areas.

**Switzerland (Federalism and Direct Democracy):** Switzerland's federal structure and emphasis on direct democracy allow local communities a high degree of autonomy. This decentralized approach contributes to the effectiveness of rural governance.

**Japan (Regional Autonomy):** Japan's system of regional autonomy provides local governments with significant decision-making power. This approach allows rural



municipalities to address local challenges and promote regional development.

**Finland (Smart Village Initiatives):** Finland has implemented "smart village" initiatives, leveraging technology and innovation to enhance the quality of life in rural areas. These initiatives focus on sustainable development and improving rural infrastructure.

It is important to note that the effectiveness of a model depends on various factors, and what works in one context may not be directly transferable to another. Successful models often involve a combination of factors such as decentralization, community engagement, sustainable development practices, and tailored policies that address the unique needs of rural areas.

It is equally important to note that what works well in one country may not be directly applicable to another due to differences in culture, history, and governance traditions. Additionally, the effectiveness of a local government structure depends on various factors, including the level of citizen engagement, the rule of law, transparency, and the overall political context. Evaluating the "best" model should consider these diverse elements.

We take five process criteria from Chambers (1983). These include sitting, asking and listening, learning from the poorest, learning from indigenous technical knowledge, joint R&D, and learning by working. Reacting to the perspectives and priorities of largely Euro-centric development practitioners and fair weather academics Chambers insisted not only on a respectful, dignified practice and behavior, but also on one that would actually get at the facts and not the superficialities or preconceptions. He insists we go beyond the rhetoric of participatory process and conduct our development practice among and truly with the rural stakeholders.

A review of relevant literature highlights the centrality of decentralization, local autonomy, and participatory governance in effective rural administration (Normann & Vasström, 2012). Chambers (1983) emphasizes the importance of working "with" and not just "for" rural stakeholders, underscoring principles of inclusiveness, dignity, and knowledge-sharing. International models such as the subsidiarity principle in Germany, community-led development in New Zealand, and smart village initiatives in Finland provide theoretical and practical lessons for Nepal. However, each model's contextual applicability requires a critical lens rooted in local socio-political realities.

The paper employs a governance standardization framework that includes legal clarity, institutional capacity, fiscal decentralization, and community engagement as the pillars for assessment.

### **Methodological Part**

This policy position paper takes a qualitative and comparative approach to assessing Nepal's present rural municipality criteria. It is based on an examination of constitutional laws, national policy texts, and relevant literature on municipal government. Thematic content analysis was applied to extract recurring challenges and best practices. The research also examines worldwide best practices from Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, Germany, and the United States to discover models that might be adapted for Nepal. Thematic content analysis was utilized to investigate issues including infrastructural shortages, digital disparities, and policy limitations.



This research yielded recommendations that were guided by Nepal's Constitution and targeted to improve the efficacy and sustainability of rural municipal governance.

## **Analysis and Interpretation**

### **Policy Recommendations**

In the so-called developed contexts (Europe, North America), local government is commonly cited as that level of government closest to our daily lives. It is, as often as not, depicted as accessible and relatively uncomplicated. Local governments, especially in rural and smaller communities, are generally seen to make our lives manageable, either as individuals, households, social organizations or as businesses. They may look after local schools, water and sewage infrastructure and services, parks and recreation facilities and programs, and often levy and collect taxes. They may provide some protection from fires and crime, fix the roads with varying degrees of alacrity, and administer a plethora of bylaws curtailing the vagaries of stray dogs and the diffusion of 'noxious' vegetation, amongst other things. And we, as citizens, periodically elect our school representatives and our Municipal Councils or equivalents. And we live with an array of appointed boards, committees and commissions to look after such things as libraries, heritage sites, sometimes economic development, and several other activities and facilities that cumulatively contribute to the functioning of our communities.

However, while this level of government can be wholly or partially responsible for a considerable array of services and facilities that affect our daily lives and livelihoods, their powers and resources are often severely circumscribed by national and/or state or provincial governments. In the Canadian case a core component of this level of government, the Municipality, is constitutionally designated as the 'Creature of the Province'. It may be said that municipalities in Canada exist 'at the pleasure' of each of the 10 Provinces. This geopolitical relationship has for long been a source of some tension between these two levels of government. In times of restructuring the asymmetrical power relations engender more tension and conflict. This paper provides a critical assessment of the recent record of local government restructuring in rural Ontario, Canada, focusing on the restructuring of rural. Determining the "best" rules and regulations for local government can be subjective and dependent on the specific context and needs of each country or region. However, some principles and practices are often considered positive for effective and accountable local governance. Here are some features that are often associated with well-functioning local government systems:

- **Decentralization:** A system that decentralizes power and decision-making to local levels, allowing communities to address their specific needs and priorities.
- **Local Autonomy:** Granting local governments a degree of autonomy to make decisions on matters that affect their communities, including budgeting, planning, and service delivery.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Clear and transparent processes for decision-making, budgeting, and resource allocation, coupled with mechanisms for accountability to the public.





- **Community Participation:** Engaging citizens in the decision-making process and encouraging active participation in local governance through consultations, public hearings, and community involvement.
- **Rule of Law:** Ensuring that local governments operate within the framework of the law, with legal mechanisms in place to address grievances and disputes.
- **Effective Local Administration:** Establishing efficient and effective administrative structures within local governments, including qualified personnel and adequate resources.
- **Fiscal Responsibility:** Sound financial management practices, including transparent budgeting, responsible fiscal policies, and accountability for public funds.
- **Equal Representation:** Ensuring fair and inclusive representation of diverse community interests in local decision-making bodies.
- **Access to Information:** Providing the public with access to information about local government activities, decisions, and financial matters.
- **Sustainability:** Incorporating sustainable development principles into local governance practices, including environmental considerations, social equity, and economic viability.

It is important to note that the effectiveness of local government systems depends on the cultural, historical, and political context of each region. Different countries may adopt diverse models of local governance that suit their unique circumstances and values.

Countries with well-regarded local government systems often conduct regular evaluations and revisions of their legal frameworks to address emerging challenges and ensure that governance practices align with contemporary needs. When assessing the "best" rules and regulations for local government, it is essential to consider the specific goals, values, and circumstances of the community or country in question.

## **Discussion**

The introduction of federalism in Nepal through the 2015 Constitution was envisioned as a transformative step to decentralize power and foster inclusive governance across its diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural landscape (Government of Nepal, 2015). Despite these constitutional provisions, the practical implementation of federalism—especially at the rural municipality level—has remained inconsistent. Scholars and practitioners argue that the centralized mindset of the federal government has hindered meaningful delegation of power to local levels (Poudel, 2023). Although the constitution promotes a bottom-up approach, the actual practice reflects a top-down, trickle-down model of governance, limiting the scope for autonomous decision-making at the grassroots.

Chudamani Poudel, Principal Secretary of Karnali Province, highlights that although local governments were constitutionally guaranteed power, this has not translated into administrative autonomy. The promise of “Singha Durbar in every village”—a metaphor for decentralization—has largely remained a slogan rather than a reality (Policy Dialogue, 2023). Furthermore, bureaucratic inefficiency and a lack of coordination between politics and policy implementation further weaken the governance process.



Structural inequalities in representation also persist. Although the constitution envisions leadership roles such as mayor and vice mayor in local bodies, women are largely confined to the deputy mayor position, with few exceptions (Policy Dialogue, 2023). Commissions meant to support inclusivity—such as the Women, Janajati, and Inclusive Commissions—are still restricted to the federal level, contrary to the spirit of decentralized governance.

From the local leadership perspective, Puspa Badi, Chairperson of Rukum Rural Municipality, emphasizes the need for life-skill-based education at the local level to reduce youth unemployment and promote self-reliance. Similarly, Govinda Pokhrel, former Vice Chairperson of the National Planning Commission, asserts that the federal system should be efficient and not a bureaucratic burden on the nation, advocating for a lean and responsive government apparatus (Policy Dialogue, 2023).

International experiences offer valuable insights. For example, Switzerland's decentralized federal structure and usage of direct democracy provide substantial decision-making authority to municipalities (Ladner et al., 2019). Germany's emphasis on subsidiarity guarantees that governance choices are taken at the lowest possible level, giving local governments more authority (Benz and Zimmer, 2011). Finland's "smart village" efforts show how innovation and technology may boost rural development (OECD, 2020). New Zealand's community-led development model provides a realistic approach to participatory government by guaranteeing policy responsiveness at the local level (Sanders, 2015).

However, as Chambers (1983) argues, effective rural development involves more than policy borrowing; it necessitates participatory practice based on local realities. His emphasis on learning from the poorest, acknowledging indigenous wisdom, and opposing top-down techniques is still very important. Development initiatives must engage and work with rural people to provide dignity, agency, and empowerment.

Finally, Nepal's federalism is still in a transitional period. Bridging the gap between constitutional promise and practical reality necessitates political courage, administrative change, and a commitment to participatory local government. Standardizing rural municipal institutions and providing them with legal, budgetary, and administrative powers is critical to ensuring equitable and sustainable development.

The federal structure promises inclusivity, but its implementation lacks coordination and willpower. Leaders like Chudamani Poudel and Puspa Badi emphasize the need for practical delegation and grassroots education reform. Govinda Pokhrel warns against an oversized federal bureaucracy that burdens rather than empowers. Comparative models affirm that local governance thrives under legal clarity, resource autonomy, and citizen participation. However, Nepal must adopt these principles with cultural and institutional sensitivity. As Chambers (1983) warns, top-down impositions often fail in the absence of genuine rural engagement. Standardization thus requires a dual strategy: structural reforms from above and social accountability from below.



## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this policy position paper underscores the critical importance of standardizing rural municipality-level development in Nepal. The paper thoroughly examines the challenges faced by rural municipalities, ranging from infrastructure deficits to governance issues, and provides actionable recommendations for overcoming these obstacles. Drawing inspiration from successful international models, the paper advocates for a comprehensive assessment of current standards, emphasizing the significance of local government standards in shaping governance frameworks, electoral processes, and service delivery.

The document stresses the Multifaceted responsibilities of rural municipalities, from land use planning to environmental conservation, highlighting the interconnected nature of development. It delves into the complexities of power-sharing conflicts between local and federal governments, acknowledging historical centralization, capacity-building needs, and constitutional ambiguities as contributing factors. The position statement urges the empowerment of local governance structures through decentralization, emphasizing the tailored approach needed for each community's unique needs. Key priorities include infrastructure investment, economic diversification, education and healthcare access, environmental stewardship, community engagement, preservation of cultural heritage, and emergency services.

. The conclusion reinforces the importance of a respectful and dignified approach in line with Chambers' process criteria, advocating for genuine engagement with rural stakeholders. Ultimately, this policy position paper serves as a comprehensive guide for policymakers and stakeholders, urging them to consider and implement measures that elevate the standard of rural municipalities. By addressing the specific challenges faced by these communities and incorporating international best practices, the paper aims to contribute to the creation of resilient, vibrant, and sustainable rural municipalities that positively impact the overall development of Nepal. Standardizing rural municipalities is not merely an administrative exercise but a foundational element of Nepal's democratic deepening. This paper advocates a multi-dimensional approach that integrates legal clarity, institutional efficiency, and social inclusivity. International examples are useful guides but must be contextualized. By acting on these recommendations, Nepal can transform its rural governance landscape into a resilient, accountable, and citizen-responsive system that ensures balanced national development

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