

Practice of Participatory Local Government Planning in Nepal: Promising Provisions, Limited Implementation

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ABSTRACT

It is often emphasized in discourse that Nepal's federal system mandates participatory local planning to promote inclusive governance; however, implementation of the provisions remains limited. This study explores how participatory planning is practiced in Nepal's local governments by analyzing legal provisions, their implementation status, and factors affecting practice. Employing qualitative methods—document analysis and literature review—the research identifies significant gaps between policy and practice. Findings reveal that although the legal framework supports inclusive planning, implementation is constrained by weak institutional capacity, limited stakeholder engagement, and entrenched power dynamics. Marginalized communities frequently lack confidence and opportunities to engage meaningfully in planning and budgeting. To address these challenges, the study recommends strengthening capacity-building initiatives for communities, institutionalizing transparent and accountable planning

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processes, and establishing accountability mechanisms that foster genuine participation. These measures are crucial for Nepal's federal local governments to realize constitutional mandates for social inclusion and equitable development.

Keywords: local government, planning provisions, participatory, practice, annual plan, federalism

Introduction

Background

Nepal adopted both local and national development planning with the introduction of its first annual budgeting system in 1951 (Sapkota & Malakar, 2021), followed by the launch of the first Five-Year Plan (1956–1961) in 1956. Local planning was incorporated in this framework to foster self-sufficiency and build a "welfare state" (Pant, 1966). Despite these early initiatives, development planning remained highly centralized (Hachhethu, 2008; Tandon, 2023).

Community-centered development and local planning became more prominent only after the People's Movement of 1990 (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Tandon, 2023; Bhusal, 2018). Although the 1990 Constitution and the Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) of 1999 provided legal provisions to promote community participation in local governance, their implementation faced significant institutional and structural challenges (Acharya et al., 2022; Tandon, 2023). Substantial progress was made with the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015, which established a federal system of governance. The subsequent enactment of the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) in 2017, along with associated guidelines, laid a robust foundation for participatory and inclusive local planning and budgeting (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Adhikari, 2024). However,

despite these provisions, local planning processes remain largely dysfunctional, centralized, and influenced by elite interests (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2022).

Although some studies have examined local government planning in federal Nepal, there is a lack of focused, scientific research specifically addressing the practice of participatory planning. Available literature suggests that limited understanding of planning provisions (REDEF, 2022; Adhikari, 2024), a lack of confidence among stakeholders, and weak commitment from local officials and communities have contributed to ineffective participation in planning processes (REDEF, 2022; Lamichhane & Paswan, 2023; Adhikari, 2025).

In this context, the present study aims to comprehensively assess the practice of participatory planning in the federal structure of Nepal. It focuses on critically examining how the legal and procedural provisions related to participation are implemented in decision-making processes at the local level. By exploring these practices, the study seeks to identify key gaps, challenges, and inefficiencies that hinder effective participatory planning. The findings are expected to provide practical insights and policy recommendations to strengthen local planning mechanisms, improve governance outcomes, and promote inclusive development.

Rationale

It is argued that despite Nepal's progressive constitutional and legal provisions for inclusive and participatory local governance—such as the Constitution of Nepal (2015) and the Local Government Operation Act (2017)—the actual practice of participatory planning remains limited and inconsistent (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Adhikari, 2024). Although local governments are mandated to ensure citizen engagement, transparency, and accountability, studies show

that planning processes are often dominated by a few actors, lack meaningful community involvement, and are influenced by political and interest-based considerations (REDEF, 2022; Lamichhane & Paswan, 2023). Furthermore, local officials frequently face challenges such as inadequate knowledge of participatory frameworks, weak institutional mechanisms, and insufficient facilitation skills, which restrict the operationalization of inclusive planning practices (Adhikari, 2025; Tandon, 2023). This study is therefore necessary to examine how participatory planning is actually being practiced in Federal Nepal, identify the existing gaps, and provide evidence-based recommendations to strengthen inclusive governance and community ownership in the planning process.

Significance of the Study

Although Nepal's federal legal framework emphasizes participatory local government planning, it is argued that its practical implementation remains weak and inconsistent. This study is important as it examines the actual practices of participation in local planning, identifying gaps and challenges at the grassroots level. The findings will benefit policymakers, local officials, development agencies, and civil society groups aiming to enhance inclusive governance and improve planning effectiveness. By highlighting barriers to meaningful participation, the study supports more accountable, transparent, and community-responsive planning, advancing Nepal's goals of decentralization and democratic governance.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to assess how participatory planning is practiced in local governments under Nepal's federal system. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To identify the provisions for participatory local planning in Nepal;
- To examine the implementation status of these provisions at the local level;
- To explore the underlying causes affecting the implementation of participatory planning provisions.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive research design to explore the provisions and actual practices of participatory planning in local governments under Nepal's federal system. It also examines the underlying factors that influence these practices.

Two key qualitative methodologies were used: document analysis and a comprehensive literature review, both serving as secondary data sources. Legal document analysis focused on key texts such as the Constitution of Nepal, the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA), and relevant planning and budgeting guidelines to understand the legal provisions for local government planning. The literature review involved analyzing reports, scholarly articles, dissertations, and books to assess current knowledge and practices concerning participatory planning at the local level.

This study is grounded in a phenomenological approach and follows a constructivist ontology, viewing reality as socially constructed through lived experiences. It adopts an interpretivist epistemology, seeking to understand participants' perceptions through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A value-laden axiology is acknowledged, with the researcher's positionality and potential biases addressed through techniques such as member checking to ensure credibility and authenticity of the findings.

Delimitations

This study is delimited to examining the provisions and practices of participatory annual planning and budgeting specifically within the context of local governments in federal Nepal. The scope is limited to secondary data sources, including legal documents and scholarly literature, and does not incorporate primary data collection. The focus is on developments following the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) and the enactment of the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA, 2017), which provide the legal and institutional framework for local governance under federalism.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were integral to this study to uphold participant welfare and research integrity. The researcher's professional involvement in local governance facilitated access to municipal data; however, all information was used strictly with informed consent and for research purposes only.

Provisions for Local Government Planning

Before assessing the practice of participatory planning provisions, it is essential to review Nepal's local government planning framework. Foundational legal documents such as the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) (2017), and the Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act (IGFMA) (2017) establish the core structures and processes for local planning. Complementing these are key procedural guidelines, including the Guideline for Local Level Plan Formulation (GLLPF) (2078), the Local Level Annual Plan and Budget Formation Guideline (LLAPBFG) (2074), and the Annual Plan and Budget Formulation Handbook of Local Level

(APBFHLL) (2077), which offer detailed directions for practical implementation.

Plans to be Prepared

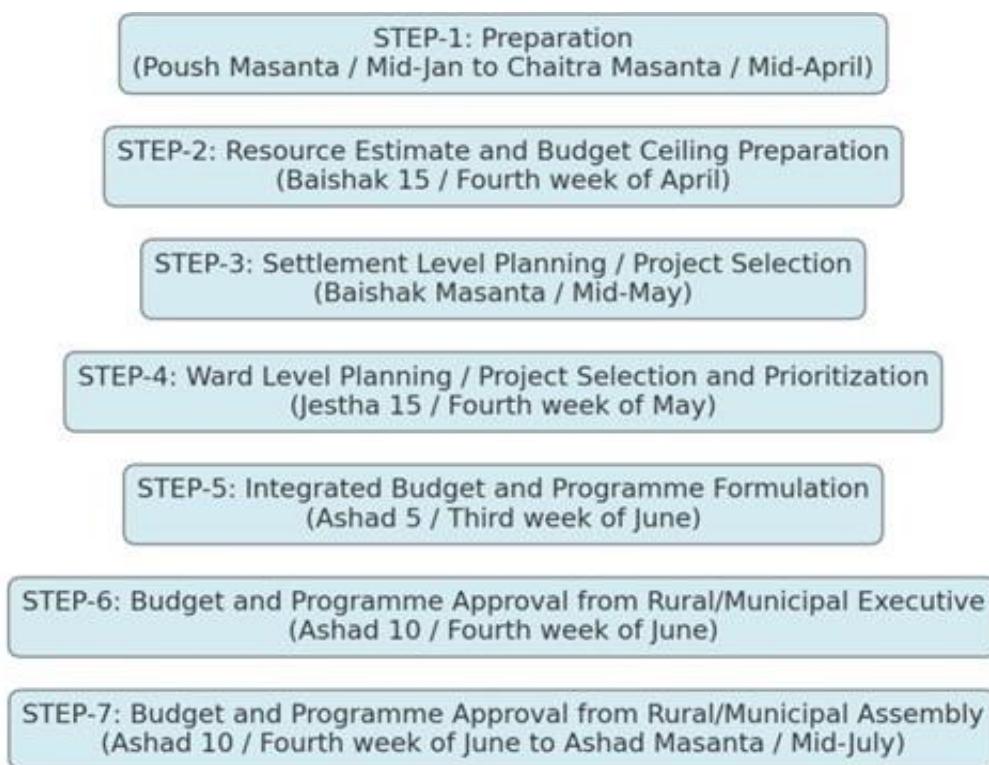
According to the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA), 2017, local governments in Nepal are required to prepare three types of development plans: Periodic Plans (typically spanning 5 to 7 years), Annual Plans (covering a single fiscal year), and Strategic Sectoral Plans (mid- to long-term plans focused on specific sectors) (Government of Nepal, 2017). The Periodic Plan serves as a comprehensive development roadmap across all sectors. In contrast, the Annual Plan outlines short-term priorities and activities within those sectors, while Strategic Sectoral Plans delve into targeted development initiatives within individual sectors.

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) identify five key thematic areas for local government annual planning: (1) Economic Development (e.g., agriculture, tourism, financial services), (2) Social Development (e.g., education, health, social inclusion), (3) Infrastructure Development (e.g., roads, energy, urban development), (4) Forest, Environment, and Disaster Management (e.g., conservation, climate adaptation, disaster preparedness), and (5) Good Governance and Institutional Development (e.g., human resources, fiscal management, service delivery). In addition, the Act mandates the formulation of a Medium-term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) every three years to align financial planning with development goals and to enhance fiscal discipline and predictability in public spending (Government of Nepal, 2017).

Seven-Step Participatory Planning Process

The seven-step participatory planning process for annual planning and budgeting, as outlined in the Guideline for Local Level Plan Formulation (GLLPF) and the Local Level Annual Plan and Budget Formation Guideline (LLAPBFG) (National Planning Commission, 2078; MOFAGA, 2074), is implemented prior to the start of each fiscal year. Under this approach, local governments formulate the next year's plans and budgets during the ongoing fiscal year. As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the process comprises several structured stages aimed at ensuring inclusive, transparent, and need-based planning and budgeting at the local level.

Figure 1. Seven-Step Planning Process



(Source: National Planning Commission, 2078; MOFAGA, 2074 cited in Adhikari (2024))

Figure 1 illustrates the Seven-step participatory planning process for local

government annual planning and budgeting. STEP-1: Preparation (Mid-January to Mid-April) involves updating data, preparing the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF), projecting revenue and expenditures, and setting ceilings for thematic areas and wards. STEP-2: Resource Estimate and Budget Ceiling Preparation (Fourth week of April) focuses on finalizing ceilings from federal and provincial governments, and establishing budget ceilings for thematic committees and wards. STEP-3: Settlement Level Planning / Project Selection (Mid-May) includes organizing meetings to select plans, ensuring broad community participation, and aligning projects with development goals. STEP-4: Ward Level Planning / Project Selection and Prioritization (Fourth week of May) involves

grouping and prioritizing projects, then presenting them to the municipality's budgeting and planning committee. STEP-5: Integrated Budget and Programme Formulation (Third week of June) covers integrating inputs from various stakeholders and drafting the

budget proposal. STEP-6: Budget and Programme Approval from Rural/Municipal Executive (Fourth week of June) requires obtaining approval from the rural/municipal executive for the budget statement and related documents. Finally, STEP-7: Budget and Programme Approval from Rural/Municipal Assembly (Fourth week of June to Mid-July) involves presenting the budget and program documents to the assembly for discussion and final approval, with the final budget published in the local gazette.

During the planning process, it is expected that local governments must align their policies, goals, objectives, timelines, and procedures with those of the federal and local governments. Additionally, according to section 24 (2) of the LGOA (2017), plans must address cross-cutting issues such as good governance, environmental concerns, child-friendly initiatives, climate change adaptation, disaster management, and gender and social inclusion (Government of Nepal, 2017).

Nepal's legal framework provides for inclusive participation in local planning through multiple governance levels. At the ward level, Article 222(4) of the Constitution ensures that ward committees are formed with elected members, including at least one woman. This structure is designed to reflect grassroots-level perspectives in annual planning and budgeting processes (Adhikari, 2024a). At the executive level, Articles 215 and 216 mandate that Rural/Municipal Executives include women members and individuals from Dalit and marginalized communities. These representatives, along with the Mayor/Chairperson, Deputy Mayor/Vice Chairperson, and Ward Chairpersons, collectively approve local plans and budgets, ensuring diversity in decision-making (Adhikari, 2024a). Similarly, Rural/Municipal Assemblies, as outlined in Articles 222 and 223, are composed of Ward Members and additional representatives from marginalized communities. Their involvement in approving

annual budgets and programs underscores the constitutional commitment to inclusive governance (Adhikari, 2024a).

Thematic and sectoral committees further promote inclusive planning. According to the Local Level Annual Plan and Budget Formation Guideline (LLAPBFG, 2074), these committees include women and marginalized members to strengthen participation across development themes (Adhikari, 2024a). The Resource Estimation and Budget Ceiling Allocation Committee, mandated by the Local Government Operation Act (2017), also reflects demographic diversity to ensure equity in budget allocation (Adhikari, 2024a).

Beyond formal bodies, informal mechanisms like settlement-level planning are equally significant. Section 24(5) of the LGOA (2017) mandates the inclusion of stakeholders such as women, Dalits, youth, children, and persons with disabilities. Supporting guidelines like the Guideline for Local Level Plan Formulation (GLLPF, 2078) emphasize engagement of diverse community organizations to ensure the planning process responds to the needs of all social groups (Adhikari, 2024a).

Recent scholarship affirms the strengthening of participatory practices in Nepal's federal governance. Local governments, empowered with greater resources and authority, are increasingly promoting inclusive and participatory institutions to address the needs of people with diverse identities, capacities, and interests (Bhusal & Breen, 2021; Bhusal, 2023).

Practice of Local Government Planning

Before Federalism

Before the adoption of federalism in 2015, Nepal's local planning system operated within a predominantly centralized framework despite the existence of legal provisions intended to promote local autonomy. The 1990

Constitution and the Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) of 1999 were landmark efforts to institutionalize participatory governance and devolve power to local bodies such as Village Development Committees (VDCs), Municipalities, and District Development Committees (DDCs). The LSGA mandated annual participatory planning processes and allowed for minimal block grants to local governments to undertake development initiatives (Tandon, 2023; Bhusal, 2018). However, earlier efforts from the 1970s, including the 1975 District Administrative Plan and the 1982 Decentralization Act, had already attempted to formalize local participation in planning. Despite these legislative frameworks, the actual implementation was sporadic and largely undermined by overarching centralized state control (Stiller, 1979; Hachhethu, 2008).

In practice, planning at the local level during this period was influenced by top-down directives, elite capture, and donor-driven development models. Even though reforms aimed to integrate community voices—particularly post-1990—the absence of elected representatives from 2002 to 2017 and the decade-long Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006 disrupted this process (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Tandon, 2023). During this time, centrally appointed bureaucrats and secretaries took charge of local planning, often bypassing participatory mechanisms mandated by the LSGA (Pandeya & Shrestha, 2016). Community-based organizations (CBOs) and international donor-funded initiatives filled the governance gap to some extent by promoting citizen engagement in development planning. However, these practices frequently reflected donor interests and international commitments more than local priorities (Tandon, 2023). Consequently, the participatory planning process remained more rhetorical than substantive.

The underlying causes behind these limitations were manifold. The centralized structure of governance, weak institutional

capacity at the local level, insufficient financial resources, and socio-political barriers such as elite dominance and geographic isolation all contributed to the exclusionary nature of local planning (Khanal, 2016). Furthermore, the lack of a stable political environment, compounded by prolonged conflict and governance vacuums, hindered the development of a robust participatory planning culture (Adhikari, 2006; Acharya et al., 2022). While legal reforms signaled a shift toward democratic decentralization, their implementation was marred by structural and contextual constraints. As a result, planning processes prior to federalism remained largely procedural, with limited scope for meaningful citizen involvement, especially among marginalized groups.

During Federalism (after 2015)

The transition to federalism in Nepal following the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015 marked a significant shift in local governance structures and planning processes. This transformation was institutionalized through the enactment of the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) in 2017, which aimed to enhance local autonomy, participatory governance, and inclusive development (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Tandon, 2023).

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) grants considerable autonomy to subnational governments, empowering them to formulate and implement local plans and budgets independently (Tandon, 2023). The LGOA operationalizes this autonomy by establishing a legally mandated seven-step annual planning and budgeting process intended to be participatory and inclusive, especially for marginalized groups such as women, Janajatis, and Dalits (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Tandon, 2023). These provisions emphasize the role of local elected representatives and citizens in decision-making, aiming to

institutionalize bottom-up approaches in local development planning.

Furthermore, the Act and its implementing guidelines mandate structured community consultations and multi-stakeholder engagement, allowing marginalized communities to influence policy priorities and resource allocation (NASC, 2022). The guidelines explicitly seek to integrate marginalized groups into planning forums and budget processes, reflecting Nepal's constitutional commitment to social inclusion and equity.

Despite these progressive provisions, the practical implementation of local government planning under federalism has been fraught with challenges, resulting in a gap between policy and practice. Several studies document that marginalized groups remain systematically excluded from meaningful participation in planning and budgeting activities (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2022). This exclusion contravenes constitutional guarantees and undermines the goal of inclusive governance.

Acharya and Zafarullah (2022) identify the persistence of "pocket projects"—small-scale, fragmented initiatives replacing comprehensive annual and ward-level planning—as symptomatic of dysfunctional local planning processes. These fragmented projects tend to overlook the systemic needs of marginalized communities, exacerbating their socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The planning process remains largely centralized, dominated by specific political interests, and constrained by bureaucratic control, contradicting the decentralization ethos (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2022).

The Nepal Administrative Staff College (NASC, 2022) reports that community consultations, while institutionalized, are infrequent and inconsistent across provinces, with only 55 percent of local governments in Bagmati and Sudurpaschim conducting consultations as needed, and even fewer in

Madhesh province holding them more than once or twice a year. Moreover, Tandon (2023) highlights that deliberative forums created to utilize unconditional grants seldom include genuine citizen participation, with local gatherings (tole Bhelas) influencing only a marginal portion (10–13%) of the budget. Budget priorities are often driven by national policies rather than local needs, with about one-third of respondents indicating national priorities guide budgeting, and a significant share perceiving influence by chiefs or deputies rather than community inputs (NASC, 2022).

Adhikari (2024) concludes the following about participatory planning provisions:

The study examined various aspects of local governance and planning processes in rural municipalities, focusing on inclusivity and participation. While both municipalities have shown efforts to comply with legal requirements, significant gaps exist. In resource allocation and budget ceiling allocation, lacks full inclusivity, and's situation remains unclear. Settlement-level planning relies on informal methods rather than inclusive practices. Ward-level planning meetings are comparatively inclusive but lack mandatory stakeholder consultations. Thematic planning in shows some inclusivity, while's practices lack clarity. Budget and programme formulation committees in both municipalities lack active participation and consultation with marginalized groups. exhibits inclusivity in executive-level planning, while faces accessibility challenges. Municipal assembly meetings in are relatively inclusive, but doubts persist about the active involvement of marginalized

groups in discussions, especially in (p. 141).

The failure to realize inclusive local governance in practice can be linked to several structural and socio-political factors. Despite legal guarantees, elite capture remains pervasive. Acharya et al. (2022) document that political power remains concentrated within traditional elites ("Pancha") and neo-elites linked to established political leaders, undermining participatory governance. This elite dominance distorts planning priorities and restricts the meaningful involvement of marginalized groups. Tandon (2023) situates this within the frameworks of elite theory, resource dependency theory, and participatory planning theory, highlighting the disjunction between formal decentralization and actual citizen engagement. She argues that municipal autonomy under federalism has not translated into increased citizen participation, as deliberative forums are dominated by political actors, and citizen inputs from local gatherings fail to influence municipal planning meaningfully. This indicates a gap between formal institutional arrangements and practice, driven by entrenched power relations and limited capacity at the local level.

Additionally, the lack of capacity, awareness, and commitment among both marginalized representatives and local officials (REDEF, 2022; Lamichhane & Paswan, 2023; Adhikari, 2025) hampers the translation of inclusive policies into effective plans and budgets. Marginalized groups' limited understanding of planning processes and their insufficient empowerment reduce their ability to negotiate or claim rights, while officials may lack the incentives or political will to prioritize marginalized concerns (REDEF Nepal, 2022; Acharya & Zafarullah, 2022, Adhikari, 2025). Moreover, the persistence of a predominantly top-down approach to planning, despite attempts at bottom-up methods, reflects institutional inertia and the continued influence of bureaucratic and party-political mechanisms

(Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020). This historical pattern constrains the evolution of genuinely participatory planning practices.

Discussion

This study aimed to assess how participatory planning is practiced in local governments under Nepal's federal system by (1) identifying the provisions for participatory local planning, (2) examining their implementation at the local level, and (3) exploring the underlying causes affecting implementation.

Regarding the first objective, the study confirmed that Nepal's Constitution (2015) and the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA, 2017) provide a solid legal framework for participatory local planning. These provisions explicitly emphasize inclusive planning processes that empower marginalized groups such as women, Janajatis, and Dalits (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2020; Tandon, 2023). The laws require local governments to conduct annual planning and budgeting through participatory, multi-stakeholder forums.

For the second objective, the findings revealed a significant gap between policy provisions and actual practice. Despite the legal requirements, implementation remains partial and uneven. Marginalized groups continue to face exclusion from meaningful participation in local planning and budgeting, consistent with Acharya and Zafarullah's (2022) assertion of ongoing elite dominance and centralized planning. Community consultations happen infrequently and often fail to include marginalized voices effectively (NASC, 2022). Furthermore, budget allocations for marginalized groups remain minimal and uneven, as highlighted by REDEF Nepal's (2022) survey, showing disparities in resource distribution and limited empowerment budgets.

In terms of the third objective, this study identified several underlying causes

affecting participatory planning implementation. Key factors include a lack of capacity and confidence among marginalized representatives, weak institutional commitment, and persistence of elite capture of local decision-making spaces (Acharya et al., 2022; Tandon, 2023). Resource dependency and political power dynamics continue to influence planning processes, undermining inclusive ideals. The prevailing top-down planning culture, despite federal decentralization efforts, restricts genuine citizen engagement and hinders equitable resource distribution.

These findings highlight that while federalism and related laws have created enabling conditions for participatory local governance, socio-political realities and institutional challenges limit their realization. Capacity building for marginalized groups and stronger accountability mechanisms is necessary to close the gap between provisions and practice.

Conclusion

This study examined participatory planning practices in Nepal's local governments following federalism, focusing on legal provisions, implementation status, and the underlying causes of existing challenges. Although the Constitution and the Local Government Operation Act (LGOA) provide clear mandates for inclusive and participatory planning, public participation—including that of marginalized groups—remains largely limited in planning and budgeting processes. The implementation of these provisions is constrained by elite dominance, weak institutional capacity, and a lack of political will at the local level. The underlying causes include limited understanding and confidence among community members—including marginalized representatives—insufficient stakeholder engagement, lack of commitment from officials, and entrenched power dynamics

that sustain centralized and non-inclusive planning.

These findings suggest that, despite formal participatory frameworks, meaningful practice has yet to be fully realized in many local governments. To improve participatory planning, this study recommends enhancing capacity-building efforts for communities, including marginalized groups; institutionalizing transparent and accountable planning processes; and promoting genuine community consultations beyond tokenistic or merely mandatory provisions. The introduction of accountability mechanisms, including rewards and penalties for local governments, can further support this goal. Strengthening these areas will enable Nepal's federal local governments to better fulfill their constitutional mandates to promote social inclusion and equity.

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