Community Engagement in Local Governance

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Abstract

Community engagement in local governance is crucial for effective and inclusive decision-making. Lack of Awareness and Information has been found that limited knowledge can have its community members may not fully understand the governance processes or their rights and responsibilities. Information gaps have been found that the insufficient information about local issues and decision-making processes can hinder meaningful participation. Low Participation Rates have been found that apathy and disinterest is that some community members may be disengaged due to a lack of trust in the system or a perception that their participation will not make a difference. Barriers to access has been found that the physical, economic, or social barriers may prevent certain groups from participating, such as the elderly, disabled, or economically disadvantaged.

During the initial phase (2008-2013) of the Local Governance and Community Development Program (LGCDP) in Nepal, social mobilization emerged as one of its most effective components. Approximately 1 million citizens actively influenced local government decisions, leading many local bodies to develop annual plans that more accurately addressed the needs of citizens, particularly marginalized and disadvantaged groups. However, there remain several lessons to be learned in addressing the challenges of implementation. It is crucial to harmonize local social mobilization efforts and enhance the quality and support of social mobilization initiatives across Nepal. Addressing the challenges of community engagement in local governance involves a multifaceted approach that includes enhancing communication, building capacity, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring accountability. Public education campaigns have been found to Conduct outreach programs to educate community members about their rights, governance processes, and how they can participate. Workshops and training have been identified to offer workshops and training sessions to increase understanding of local governance and decision-making procedures. Diverse engagement channels have to utilize multiple platforms for engagement, including town hall meetings, online forums, surveys, and community events, to reach a broader audience. Inclusive scheduling has to schedule meetings and events at times that are convenient for different community groups, including evenings and weekends.

Keywords: community, disadvantaged, governance, marginalization, mobilization

Introduction

The Local Governance and Community Development Program (LGCDP) was established in 2008 and is administered by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD) in Nepal. The first phase of this national initiative ended in July 2013, and the second phase, which is currently ongoing, is scheduled to conclude in July 2017. The program is funded collaboratively by the Government of Nepal and 14 development partners (DPs) through various financial arrangements. The primary aim of LGCDP is to aid in poverty reduction by enhancing local governance and fostering community development. This objective aligns with national goals, aiming to directly or indirectly achieve these aims by empowering citizens, addressing their priority needs, and simultaneously strengthening decentralized local governance, community development, and integrated service delivery (Government of Nepal, 2008). The aim of the program is to enhance local governance to ensure effective service delivery and empower citizens. It establishes a comprehensive framework for: (i) reinforcing decentralization and devolution processes; (ii) refining the local governance system to guarantee the efficient delivery of essential services; and (iii) empowering citizens, with a particular focus on women, children, and disadvantaged groups (DAGs), along with their respective institutions (Government of Nepal, 2008).

The thesis article explores the demand-side interventions in the initial phase of the Local Governance and Community Development Program (LGCDP), which concluded in July 2013, focusing on social mobilization efforts aimed at empowering citizens and their organizations. By the end of this phase, nearly 1 million citizens were actively influencing local government decisions through 35,280 Ward Citizen Forums (WCFs) across all Village Development Committee (VDC) Wards and half of the Municipal Wards, comprising a total of 793,989 members. Additionally, 4,309 Community Action Committees (CACs) were established, with 117,245 members. These groups were designed to enhance the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, with women making up 45% of the WCF members and 69% of the CAC members (Government of Nepal, 2013).

In the fiscal year 2012/13, over 222,187 members of Ward Citizen Forums (WCFs), including 31% women, participated in meetings of local body councils. This active citizen engagement in the decision-making process led many local bodies to develop annual plans that more accurately addressed the needs of the populace, particularly those of poor and disadvantaged groups. During this period, WCFs proposed 102,352 community infrastructure projects to local bodies. Of these, 41,786 projects were incorporated into the annual plans, with a total allocation of NPR 3.45 billion to meet the demands put forward by the WCFs. This funding represented 39% of the total capital budget for Village Development Committees (VDCs) and Municipalities (Government of Nepal, 2013). The program has created employment for 4,318 Social Mobilizers, who have played a crucial role in supporting the most disadvantaged communities, such as the Community Action Committees (CACs). Their efforts have contributed to reducing social issues, including dowry practices, alcohol abuse, and early childhood marriages. Beyond the LGCDP's primary scope, these Social Mobilizers have significantly supported the Open Defecation Free (ODF) initiative. Additionally, the network was utilized by the Election Commission to spread information and prepare citizens for the constituent assembly elections in November 2013, with the high voter turnout partially attributed to the efforts of LGCDP Social Mobilizers. LGCDP

has employed a transformative approach to social mobilization, emphasizing the empowerment of citizens to effectively express their needs and influence government decisions, procedures, and policies through active participation in local governance. Ward Citizen Forums (WCFs) were established to enhance and institutionalize communication between citizens and local governments, serving as a platform to involve traditionally marginalized groups in the planning and oversight of local body activities (Government of Nepal, 2013). The LGCDP has also established Citizens' Awareness Centers (CACs) to serve as platforms for disadvantaged individuals who are often excluded from mainstream development efforts. These centers aim to educate these citizens about their rights, help identify and tackle issues impacting their daily lives, and improve their access to essential services provided by local bodies and development agencies. Addressing the challenges of community engagement in Nepal is as difficult as Adhikari et al. (2020) have argued regarding the balance between global ecology and environmental preservation. It is similarly complex to the global governance issues discussed by Adhikari et al. (2022), reflecting a situation that has become increasingly uncontrollable. According to Adhikari (2020), this complexity is due to the deteriorating state of global environmental systems, which is exacerbated by the influence of dominant foreign powers and the community engagement in the local governance in Nepal.

Research Questions

The researchers and the critics have discussed about the community engagement in local government and about the legal provisions but they have not analyzed regarding the challenges of and the ways of its solution. The research has the following research questions:

A). What are the challenges of community engagement in local governance?

B). How can the various ways be found in addressing the challenges of community engagement in local governance?

The Objectives of the Research

The objectives of the research have aimed to trance out the challenges of the community engagement and the ways of exploring its solution. The specific objectives of the research are:

A). To explore the challenges of community engagement in local governance.

B). To identify the various ways be found in addressing the challenges of community engagement in local governance.

Research Methodology

The research has been conducted through a critical and analytical examination of secondary data sourced from a range of reports, official documents, research papers, and journals. It employed descriptive analysis to address and achieve the objectives of the study.

Analysis

The analysis has been carried out on the basis of the different categories of engagement of the local governance and also in exploring the goals of the research with various subtopic wise in tracing out the condition of the challenges of the community engagement in the local governance.

Social Mobilization Objectives

Nepal has a longstanding tradition of social mobilization, which has been a key component in various development programs. This approach was acknowledged in the 10th Five-Year Plan and the Three-Year Interim Plan (2007/08–2009/10) as a crucial strategy for contributing to the national poverty reduction objectives. The primary goal of social mobilization is to empower individuals and drive social transformation by enhancing livelihoods and improving service delivery. It increases awareness among people about their rights and responsibilities, and works to dismantle social barriers, particularly for disadvantaged groups (DAGS). By fostering connections between DAGS and local bodies, as well as other service providers, social mobilization facilitates access to programs, services, and funding tailored to address their specific needs and rights across various sectors. The Social Mobilization Guidelines emphasize the necessity for citizens at the community and ward levels to understand the local body planning processes and resource allocation methods, enabling them to participate effectively and express their opinions appropriately. This is especially important given the absence of local elections since 1997. To address this gap, the introduction of a nationwide network of Ward Citizens' Forums (WCFs) in every Village Development Committee (VDC) and many municipal wards was designed to offer an alternative mechanism for citizens to impact local budget decisions and hold local officials and political party representatives accountable until elections can be conducted. Thus, social mobilization aligns with and supports the planning and implementation processes of local bodies.

Social Mobilization Achievements

The LGCDP has implemented a transformational approach to social mobilization aimed at empowering citizens to more effectively express their needs and impact governmental decisions, procedures, and policies through active engagement in local governance. To facilitate this, Ward Citizens' Forums (WCFs) were established to enhance and formalize the interaction between residents and local authorities. These forums serve as platforms for involving citizens, particularly marginalized and disadvantaged groups who have historically been excluded from such discussions, in the planning and oversight of local government activities.

The LGCDP also established Citizens' Awareness Centers (CACS) to support marginalized individuals who are often excluded from mainstream development initiatives. These centers aim to educate these citizens about their rights, address issues impacting their daily lives, and

improve their access to essential services provided by local bodies and development agencies. The engagement of citizens and communities in local governance planning and execution emerged as one of the most effective aspects of the LGCDP during its initial phase, especially following the mid-term review in 2010. By the end of this phase in July 2013, nearly 1 million citizens were actively influencing local government decisions through 35,280 Ward Citizens' Forums (WCFs) across all Village Development Committee (VDC) wards and half of the municipal wards. These forums had a total membership of 793,989, while 4,309 Citizens' Awareness Centers (CACS) with 117,245 members further supported these efforts. Both types of groups were designed to enhance the inclusion of disadvantaged populations, with WCFs and CACS comprising 45% and 69% women, respectively.

In the fiscal year 2012/13, over 222,187 members of Ward Citizens' Forums (WCFs), with 31% being women, took part in local council meetings. This active citizen engagement led many local bodies to develop annual plans that better addressed the needs of the community, particularly those of the poor and disadvantaged groups. During this period, WCFs proposed a total of 102,352 community infrastructure projects to local authorities. Of these proposals, 41,786 were incorporated into the annual plans, with NPR 3.45 billion allocated to meet the demands of these projects. This allocation represented 39% of the total capital budget for Village Development Committees (VDCs) and municipalities. The program has created employment opportunities for 4,318 Social Mobilizers, who have played a crucial role in assisting marginalized communities, including those supported by Citizens' Awareness Centers (CACs). Their efforts have been effective in addressing social issues such as dowry practices, alcohol abuse, and early marriage. Additionally, the national network established through this initiative has extended its benefits beyond the LGCDP's original scope. Social Mobilizers have significantly contributed to the success of the Open Defecation Free (ODF) campaign. Furthermore, the Election Commission utilized this network to spread information and prepare citizens for the constituent assembly elections in November 2013, with the high voter turnout partly attributed to the outreach efforts of LGCDP Social Mobilizers.

Implementation Modality and Challenges

The LGCDP was implemented uniformly across Nepal, without consideration for variations in geography, population density, or institutional capacities. Under this framework, each Village Development Committee (VDC) was allocated a single social mobilizer and one Citizens' Awareness Center (CAC), regardless of the VDC's poverty levels. The social mobilization efforts were supported by 755 Local Service Providers (LSPs), who were responsible for hiring, overseeing, and providing support to the Social Mobilizers. This approach was deliberately designed to ensure that social mobilization remained independent of local body officials and representatives of local political parties, who were part of the All-Party Mechanism (APM). The APM was discontinued in January 2012, and informal consultations with local political leaders have since taken its place in many local bodies.

Despite the accomplishments noted earlier, several challenges emerged with this approach, leading to uneven outcomes at the local level. Key issues with the quality of Social Mobilizers and Local Service Provider (LSP) support included:

Inadequate Compensation: The low salary offered to Social Mobilizers attracted individuals with limited experience, resulting in high staff turnover.

Ineffective Oversight by LSPs: Many LSPs struggled to fulfill their responsibilities of monitoring and mentoring Social Mobilizers effectively. Although LSPs were intended to provide part-time support, this support was often criticized as inadequate. In some cases, LSPs were perceived as politically appointed rather than selected based on merit after the completion of each District Development Committee (DDC) selection process. However, only a small number of Social Mobilizers hired by LSPs faced criticism for poor performance, and most were retained for the program's second phase.

Unintended Salary Deductions: A design flaw led to deductions from Social Mobilizers' salaries for operational costs, an issue that could not be rectified during the first phase of implementation.

To ensure uniformity in methodology and performance among the numerous Local Development Providers (LDPs) and front-line Social Mobilizers, a National Service Provider (NSP) was engaged. However, the NSP selected during the first phase of LGCDP was widely regarded as ineffective, leading to the termination of its contract after the second year. Regional cluster units of LGCDP served as local quality control mechanisms, organizing essential training for social mobilization institutions, including Ward Citizens' Forums (WCFs) and Social Mobilizers.

The District Municipality Social Mobilization Committees (D/MSMCs) were established to coordinate and integrate social mobilization efforts at the local level. Nonetheless, these committees often proved ineffective as they were perceived by local Development Officers (DOs) and Executive Officers (EOs) as an additional, non-essential workload. This perception resulted in the committees failing to consolidate existing social mobilization groups and contributing to an already extensive list of committees managed by local officials.

Citizens' Awareness Centers (CACs) were created to gather disadvantaged citizens weekly for two hours to address and act on issues impacting their lives and to assert their rights, thereby improving their access to local government services. Typically, there is one CAC per Village Development Committee (VDC) and one in each Municipality Ward. Evaluations of these centers have shown they successfully empowered citizens, leading to notable increases in vital registration, primary school enrollment, access to health services, and social protection benefits.

At the end of the first phase, Livelihood Improvement Plans (LIPs) for CACs were piloted, with an internal study confirming the pilot's success. The study recommended expanding the program to all graduated CACs with some adjustments, including improved training, better support, better integration with other local livelihood programs, and additional financial support. Additionally, two rounds of grants were allocated to Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to enhance accountability of local bodies, empower citizens to assert their rights and hold local governments accountable, and foster collaborative governance. The Governance and Accountability Facility (LGAF) mechanism reviewed a sample of local bodies (538 VDCs and 16 Municipalities) to monitor community-based public goods and services.

Lesson Learned and Conclusions

At the conclusion of the first phase of LGCDP, all contracts with Local Service Providers (LSPs) were terminated due to procurement regulations in Nepal, leading to Social Mobilizers being hired directly by local bodies. This change is acknowledged as potentially creating conflicts of interest and limiting the support available to Social Mobilizers. To address these issues in the second phase of LGCDP, it is recommended that LSPs be reintroduced as soon as possible to assist with social mobilization efforts, maintaining the approach used in the first phase but with improved performance contracts that are reviewed annually. These contracts should ensure that Social Mobilizers receive 100% of their agreed salaries. The number of service providers should be reduced, with selections based on merit and flexibility to meet local needs. For instance, the number of LSPs and Social Mobilizers could be consolidated in districts where the system is functioning well, while additional resources should be invested in districts facing challenges. This approach will be incorporated into the updated social mobilization guidelines expected to be released during the 2013/14 fiscal year.

In July 2013, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD) issued a directive to local bodies to dissolve the District/Municipality Social Mobilization Committees (D/MSMCs), which had proven to be an ineffective forum for stakeholder consultation and coordination. To enhance local ownership of social mobilization efforts, it is recommended that the District Development Committee (DDC) or Municipality Social Development Officers (or their equivalents) oversee compliance and that a social mobilization committee, preferably an existing one with a recognized mandate (such as from the Local Self-Governance Act [LSGA]), review this compliance. This committee could take over the functions of other parallel social mobilization committees, provided that it includes representation from all relevant stakeholders.

Stakeholders of the LGCDP have reached a consensus on re-establishing a National Service Provider (NSP) to ensure uniform methodology and quality control among Local Service Providers (LSPs). The plan is to institutionalize this role through the Local Development Training Academy (LDTA). However, the LDTA must first demonstrate to stakeholders that it

can develop the necessary capacity for the NSP within a reasonable timeframe. This includes effectively monitoring the performance of LSPs and delivering robust capacity development support to social mobilization institutions. Financing remains a major obstacle to the expansion of Citizens' Awareness Centers (CACs), and the uniform approach of establishing a CAC in every Village Development Committee (VDC) does not effectively prioritize the allocation of limited resources. Additionally, CACs would benefit from a defined exit strategy, such as a graduation plan, which would allow for the reallocation of funds to other high-priority communities once objectives are achieved.

To address this, specific graduation criteria should be established for CACs, such as completing the 52-week REFLECTS training program and reaching targets like 100% vital registration and primary school enrollment within the community.

The introduction of Livelihood Improvement Plans (LIPs) for CACs needs to be more closely aligned with existing practices and would benefit from external evaluation and recommendations. Integrating LIPs could be introduced at the CAC graduation stage, when citizens are empowered and a cooperative spirit has been cultivated, as a reward for their achievements and to mitigate potential dissatisfaction from the withdrawal of direct support to the CACs. In LGCDP II, the use of Civil Society Development Support (CSDS) will persist through Governance and Accountability Facility (LGAF) grants, with a focus on monitoring compliance within District Development Committees (DDCs). Social mobilization and Ward Citizens' Forums (WCFs) will be integrated into the monitoring and civil oversight processes for Village Development Committees (VDCs) and Municipalities. These forums will assume a more defined role in these activities once local elections are conducted and their involvement in integrated planning committees comes to an end. Developing this new capacity within social mobilization institutions is expected to be a crucial factor for the success of LGCDP II.

Conclusion

Community engagement in local governance is crucial for effective and inclusive decision-making. Lack of Awareness and Information has been found that limited knowledge can have its community members may not fully understand the governance processes or their rights and responsibilities. Information gaps have been found that the insufficient information about local issues and decision-making processes can hinder meaningful participation. Low Participation Rates have been found that apathy and disinterest is that some community members may be disengaged due to a lack of trust in the system or a perception that their participation will not make a difference. Barriers to access has been found that the physical, economic, or social barriers may prevent certain groups from participating, such as the elderly, disabled, or economically disadvantaged.

Ineffective communication has identified that language and literacy have got its language barriers and low literacy levels can impede effective communication between local governments and community members. Misinformation has been explored that misunderstandings and misinformation about the goals and processes of community engagement can lead to skepticism and reduced involvement. Power dynamics and exclusion has been known that dominance of elites that it has influential or dominant groups may overshadow marginalized voices, leading to unequal representation in decision-making. Exclusion of marginalized groups have been found that certain community members, including minorities and the poor, may be systematically excluded from engagement efforts.

Limited resources and capacity have been found that resource constraints have been known that local governments may lack the financial and human resources needed to effectively support and sustain community engagement initiatives. Capacity building has become essential that there may be a lack of training and capacity-building opportunities for both community members and local officials to engage effectively.

Coordination challenges have found out that fragmented efforts that it has got community engagement efforts may be fragmented or lack coordination, leading to inefficiencies and duplication of efforts. Conflicting interests have been found that different stakeholders may have conflicting interests or priorities, making it challenging to achieve consensus.

Lack of institutional support has been explored that weak institutional frameworks have become the main tasks that insufficient institutional support and commitment to community engagement can undermine efforts to involve citizens in governance inconsistent implementation has been identified that inconsistent application of engagement practices and policies can lead to varying levels of effectiveness across different areas. Feedback and accountability issues have k own that

 limited feedback mechanisms have become the issues that there may be inadequate mechanisms for providing feedback to the community on how their input has been used in decision-making. Lack of accountability has become the main issue that without clear accountability mechanisms, there may be little follow-up on community concerns or suggestions, diminishing trust and engagement. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from local governments, community leaders, and civil society to create inclusive, transparent, and effective processes for community engagement in governance.

Addressing the challenges of community engagement in local governance involves a multifaceted approach that includes enhancing communication, building capacity, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring accountability. Public education campaigns have been found to

Conduct outreach programs to educate community members about their rights, governance processes, and how they can participate.

Workshops and training have been identified to offer workshops and training sessions to increase understanding of local governance and decision-making procedures. Diverse engagement channels have to utilize multiple platforms for engagement, including town hall meetings, online forums, surveys, and community events, to reach a broader audience. Inclusive scheduling has to schedule meetings and events at times that are convenient for different community groups, including evenings and weekends.

Simplify information ha to provide information in clear, accessible language and formats, including translations and visual aids for those with low literacy or language barriers. Feedback mechanisms have to establish robust channels for community members to provide feedback and ask questions, ensuring that responses are timely and transparent. Promoting equity has to implement strategies to ensure that marginalized and disadvantaged groups are actively included in engagement efforts, such as targeted outreach and support.

Empower local leaders has to train and support local leaders from diverse backgrounds to represent the interests of their communities effectively. Resource allocation has to ensure that adequate resources, including funding and staff, are allocated to support community engagement initiatives. Capacity building has to invest in training and professional development for both community members and local officials to enhance their skills in engagement and governance. Integrated planning has to coordinate engagement efforts across different sectors and levels of government to avoid duplication and ensure a unified approach.

Partnerships foster partnerships with civil society organizations, NGOs, and community groups to leverage their expertise and networks has to do. Supportive frameworks have to develop and implement policies and frameworks that institutionalize community engagement practices and support their integration into local governance.

Consistent implementation has to ensure that engagement practices are consistently applied across different areas and that there is follow-through on community input. Transparent reporting has to regularly report back to the community on how their input has influenced decisions and outcomes, creating a feedback loop that builds trust. Accountability mechanisms have to establish clear accountability mechanisms to track the implementation of community suggestions and address any concerns about non-compliance.

Digital tools have to leverage technology, such as mobile apps and social media, to facilitate engagement, gather feedback, and disseminate information. Data analytics has to use data analytics to identify trends and issues in community engagement, helping to tailor strategies and improve effectiveness. Encouraging civic engagement has to promote a culture of active citizenship and encourage community members to take initiative and participate in local governance. Recognizing contributions have to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of engaged citizens and community leaders to reinforce positive behaviors and outcomes. By

implementing these strategies, local governments can address the challenges of community engagement more effectively, leading to more inclusive and responsive governance.

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