



**USE OF MOTHER TONGUE AND LOCAL LANGUAGES IN
PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN NEPAL**

Bimala Kafle

Undersecretary, Language Commission

bimalakafle@gmail.com

(Received on February 9, 2026; Accepted on March 15, 2026)

ABSTRACT

The protection of linguistic diversity is a good strategy to promote unity in diversity in multilingual countries like Nepal. This includes adoption of multilingual policy, equal recognition to all languages, and official use of local languages in governmental works. Using customer's mother-tongue and local languages in service delivery can make them feel more comfortable, respected and valued. This makes the governance more inclusive, accessible and participatory and therefore improving the quality of service delivery and achieving good governance. In this context, this article analyses the linguistic diversity in Nepal, policies and institutional mechanisms and international context related to the use of mother tongues and local languages in service delivery. Further, it highlights the efforts made so far including problems and challenges for preservation, promotion and development of languages, including the endangered local languages and minority languages.

Keywords: *Language, multilingual policy, diversity, service delivery, governance*

Introduction

Linguistic diversity is an opportunity to achieve sustainable development and prosperity through "unity in diversity". Protecting linguistic diversity fosters identity, access and representation of all the groups and communities in the governance and thus enhances social inclusion and empowerment of minority communities. Language is not only a means of communication but also a cultural identity representing the evolution, history and culture of a particular community. By allowing or promoting local indigenous languages, people feel empowered, heard and more participated in the governance process. This helps to achieve the constitutional goals and objectives of multicultural countries like Nepal. Further, using local indigenous languages in service delivery can improve access of citizens and enhance their participation in the governance processes thus promoting trust and effectiveness of government institutions. Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual country. There are more than hundred ethnic groups speaking even more mother tongues and this reveals a high level of linguistic diversity in the country. The National Population Census 2021 has reported 124 mother tongues spoken in Nepal, however, the number of speakers vary significantly. Among the languages spoken as mother tongue, *Nepali* constitutes the largest language which constitutes about 44.9 percent of the total population. The languages such as *Nepali*, *Maithili* and *Bhojpuri* with a large number of speakers are prominent and well developed while others such as *Kusunda*, *Surel*, *Bankariya* etc. are gradually at risk of extinction. The constitution has established Nepal as a multilingual nation recognizing all languages equally, considering them as national languages.

Section Three: Linguistic Rights

Further, the multicultural and pluralistic nature of Nepal's governance is reflected in the three-tier federal governance system which enhances access and meaningful participation of all castes and ethnic groups. Nepal has aimed to achieve good governance by ensuring the equal and easy access of the people to the services and facilities delivered by the State and making public administration fair, competent, impartial, transparent, free from corruption, accountable and participatory. It aims to achieve prosperity and sustainable development through social inclusion, empowerment and good governance.

Therefore, adoption and implementation of multilingual policy is pivotal not only for promoting indigenous and endangered languages but also for achieving social inclusion of marginalized groups; and improving efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. In this context, this article examines how local indigenous languages function as a key enabler of effective service delivery and good governance thus supporting the federal governance system in countries like Nepal.

Linguistic diversity in Nepal

Nepal is one of the linguistically diverse countries in South Asia. This diversity not only shows multiculturalism, but has also made Nepal rich in traditional knowledge, literature and civilization and provided a huge opportunity for development. On the basis of the degree of endangerment, the national statistics office has classified the languages into five different categories. - safe, vulnerable, endangered, critically endangered and extinct. The Language Commission has considered languages such as *Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Tamang* and *Bajjika*, with more than 10 lakhs speakers as safe languages. These languages are more empowered but Nepali only represents in governance. While there are 23 local indigenous languages such as *Raute, Lunkhim, Lhomi, Bankariya* etc which are categorized as extinct languages as they have less than a thousand speakers. In this way, the languages with fewer speakers are at the risk of extinction. The communities speaking these languages often feel discriminated, unheard and marginalized in the process of governance and public service delivery.

Language is not merely a means of communication; it is a cultural identity and heritage of the particular community. Language consists of all the traditional knowledge gained by the community in the process of their civilization. Therefore, language can be considered as a significant instrument for 'unity in diversity'. Official recognition and use of languages in the government agencies gives a kind of honour, respect and identity to the particular language and the community. This, on one hand, helps to promote and protect the language from being extinct, on the other hand promotes social cohesion, inclusion and develops unity in multicultural societies like Nepal.

The federal governance system itself is a mechanism to accommodate different forms of diversities including linguistic diversity. Nepal, after implementing federalism, has shown more commitments to address the linguistic diversity by adopting a multilingual policy, constitutionally recognizing all the languages spoken within the country and sharing powers among the federal units allowing them to develop their own language policies and use the local languages in service delivery.

Policy context

The Constitution is the main policy for protecting, promoting and developing linguistic diversity in Nepal. Besides, there are several policies, laws and institutional arrangements dedicated for the development of local and indigenous languages in Nepal.

The constitution has recognized all languages spoken as mother tongue in Nepal as languages of nation (article 6) and stated that Nepali in Devanagari script is the official language of the government, but the provinces may choose one or more additional languages spoken by a majority of their population for official work. Further, the constitution has guaranteed the rights to language and culture ensuring that every

Section Three: Linguistic Rights

person and community shall have the right to use their languages, participate in the cultural life of their communities, and preserve and promote their language, script, culture, cultural civilization and heritage. Similarly, the constitution has also guaranteed the right to education in mother tongue, visually impaired citizens shall have the right to get education through braille script and the citizens with hearing or speaking impairment through sign language, in accordance with law. Moreover, the state has adopted the policies to protect and develop languages of various castes, tribes, and communities on the basis of equality and co-existence, while maintaining the cultural diversity of the country (Article 51).

In addition, National Education Policy, 2018 has also acknowledged the importance of mother tongue-based education, stating that education up to the basic level can be conducted in the mother tongue based on necessity.

Likewise, the Act relating to Compulsory and Free Education, 2018 mentions that every Nepali community residing in Nepal shall have the right to acquire education in their mother tongue. According to the Local Government Operation Act, 2017, the local governments are responsible for developing the local level policy, legislation, standard plan, implementation and regulation related to promotion and development of language and culture.

Institutional arrangement

There are several governmental and non-governmental organizations, at all the three levels of government, working in the sector of language especially for protecting and preserving the local indigenous languages including various mother-tongues.

Language commission is the apex government organization, established according to the article 287 of the constitution with the key responsibility for regulation, protection and promotion of different languages spoken in Nepal. It plays a major role in fostering linguistic diversity and ensuring equal recognition to all the languages including the minority languages. The constitutional and legal mandates of the Language Commission is to determine the criteria to be fulfilled for the recognition of the official language and to make recommendations on languages to the Government of Nepal. It is the major government agency responsible for making necessary policies, plans and programs for the protection, promotion and development of languages including the different mother-tongues.

Similarly, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology are also responsible for developing policies and laws related to protection, promotion and development of local indigenous languages of Nepal.

National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) is an autonomous body of Government of Nepal established for social, economic and cultural development and upliftment of various indigenous nationalities including the preservation and enhancement of their languages.

Nepal Academy, through its mother tongue literature department, is involved in the activities such as publishing magazines, conducting series and other programs promoting and protecting Nepal's linguistic heritage and promoting different mother tongues spoken in Nepal.

In addition, several non-governmental ethnic and linguistic organizations such as Nepal Tamang Ghedung, Newa Deya Dabu, etc collaborate and coordinate with the government agencies for promotion and development of their respective local languages.

Provincial and local level initiatives

In line with the multilingual policy of the country, Bagmati and Gandaki provinces have adopted their major spoken mother-tongue languages besides Nepali, as their official language in their provinces. They have also formulated laws regarding the use of mother-tongues as official language. Bagmati province has recognized Tamang and Newar and the Gandaki province has recognized Gurung and Magar Languages as their

Section Three: Linguistic Rights

official languages for governmental work within their province. These provinces have granted the mother tongues the status of official language for governmental affairs. These mother tongues are now used while providing services to the citizens including application, documentation, evidence, and even citizen charter. This has contributed in breaking a significant linguistic barrier between governance and indigenous communities which is expected to contribute to a better, smoother and easier public service delivery.

Similarly, some local governments have also developed policies and laws in order to promote, preserve and develop the local indigenous language and use these languages for official purposes and providing public services. Some local governments have also developed curriculum in local indigenous languages and started basic education in mother-tongue.

Local language in service delivery: international context

The governance and public service delivery can be inclusive and accessible only when government services are provided in local language or their mother-tongue. Service recipients can communicate and interact comfortably with offices in their familiar languages without any linguistic barriers. This ensures smooth delivery of services and fosters “government- people” relationships, builds trust and increases people’s participation in governance.

Literature shows that there is a significant role of local languages in effective health service delivery. The use of a patient's local language while providing health services highly influences patient satisfaction, compliance and overall health outcomes. Similarly, the services such as training and other services, provided by the government, are impactful and effective in the local language. The communication in local and indigenous languages make a difference. All the Public services are effective in the local indigenous language. Working through the local language allows making information more accessible and makes the process more participatory.

Different research and studies have found that the children are able to interact and learn better, actively participate and engage in their lessons, develop a strong foundation for learning and achieve better in exams and assessments if they are allowed to learn in their mother-tongue or their familiar language.

Comparing the two multilingual countries- Canada and Switzerland, Kobelt (2013) has analysed how these countries have strategically dealt with the issues related to the participation of linguistic communities in federal public services. They have mentioned that both these countries have adopted strategies to promote multilingualism in public services. Canada treated both the languages equally while Switzerland has ensured adequate representation of linguistic communities in the public services.

Taking the examples of multilingual countries such as India, South Africa and Canada, Subba (2025) claims that these countries achieved positive results by adopting pluralistic language policy which ensures the protection, promotion and use of all languages as national assets. Such policies not only preserve the existence of languages, but also strengthen the knowledge, culture, and social cohesion in the society. He has suggested that implementation of pluralistic language policy will not only strengthen local indigenous languages, but also enhance social inclusion, ethnic respect and democratic culture in Nepal.

Multilingual countries like India have made it mandatory, in some States, to have proficiency in local language to be recruited in government jobs. States like Punjab, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have similar provisions where candidates need to be fluent in the regional language. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar already have a compulsory component of the Hindi language that candidates have to qualify at any cost.

Section Three: Linguistic Rights

Indigenous language is considered as a valuable resource for enhancing the efficiency of local government operations in South Africa (Maswanganyi, 2023). Mostly the marginalized indigenous language can be harnessed to improve governance, communication and community engagement at the local level.

Problems and challenges

Nepali is used as an official language in Nepal. Most of the ethnic groups and indigenous people who do not speak Nepali language as their mother tongue, face several problems while receiving services provided by the government. The use of only one language (Nepali) as an official language has made the rural indigenous people difficult to obtain health, education and other services from the government organizations. There is a problem in accessing information, making communication, understanding the notices and receiving services provided by the government.

Regarding the service delivery in rural Nepal, the Kantipur daily dated 25th November 2025 has highlighted the language as one of the problems faced by the people of Upper Dolpa, one of the remote districts of Nepal, for obtaining citizenship certificates. The people of upper Dolpa speak the local indigenous language (*Dolpali*) as their mother-tongue and are often confused when the staff make inquiries in the official Nepali language. This has created problems for receiving citizenship certificates.

It is not sufficient to depend on a single language for disseminating information, communication and service delivery in a linguistically diverse country like Nepal (Sunuwar, 2024). The use of only one language (Nepali) in official work and service delivery causes significant communication barriers for minority indigenous communities. They face challenges in accessing services provided by the government and struggle to access crucial information. The consequences of the information gap can be severe in the delivery of services in the situation of crisis such as that of covid pandemic period.

In spite of diversity in languages, in recent days the people especially the younger generations are more attracted towards the dominant languages such as Nepali and English thus neglecting the local indigenous languages. Therefore, the number of speakers is gradually decreasing and many local languages are at risk of extinction. This has resulted in a decrease in the number of speakers which has caused the local languages to disappear gradually.

The promotion and preservation of local indigenous languages have not been prioritized due to poor policies and legal infrastructures. In spite of adopting a multilingual policy, Nepal has no federal language act to regulate the use, protection and preservation of languages. The above problems and challenges are further aggravated due to poor research and development activities, limited financial resources, and inadequate programs targeting the promotion and development of local and indigenous languages. The minority linguistic community perceive discrimination and this can cause the conflicts in the society thus hampering unity in diversity concept.

Conclusion

Nepal is a linguistically diverse country and it has developed policies, legal and institutional mechanisms for addressing this diversity. The provincial and local governments have also made significant efforts to address the linguistic diversity of the country. However, the progress is not as per the expectations due to the above-mentioned problems and challenges. In this context, the country needs to have a clear language policy at the federal level to guide the provincial and local level as well. In addition, the government should prioritize the protection, promotion and development of local indigenous languages. The provinces and local governments who have initiated the policies related to language need to continue to implement them, while the other local and provincial governments should make initiatives to preserve local indigenous

Section Three: Linguistic Rights

languages. Further, the local and provincial governments need to make special arrangements for capacity building of their staff and make the bureaucracy more representative in terms of linguistic diversity. Therefore, it needs clear policies, plans and programs including sufficient allocation of budgets for the preservation, promotion and development of cultural heritage such as languages.

REFERENCES

- Accessed in National Foundation For Development of Indigenous Nationalities, Lalitpur.
Accessed in नागरिकता लिन उपल्लो डोल्पालीलाई कठिन, महँगो यात्रा र भाषाको समस्या, कर्णाली, कान्तिपुर समाचार
- Kharel, S., & Tharu, M. (2019). Service delivery practices of local government in federal Nepal. *Nepalese Journal of Development and Rural Studies*, 16, 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.3126/njdrs.v16i0.31575>
- Kobelt, É. (2013). Towards a Representative Bureaucracy: Promoting Linguistic Representation and Diversity in the Swiss and Canadian Federal Public Services. *World Political Science Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/WPSR-2012-0014>
- Language Commission. (2025). *Ninth annual Report*. Language Commission.
- Mandal, R. D. (2024). *Effectiveness of national language policy of Nepal*. *Orchid Academia Siraha*, 3(1), 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.3126/oas.v3i1.78141>
- National Statistics Office. (2021). *Languages in Nepal*. National Planning Commission.
- Poudel, P.P. & Costley, T. (2023). Understanding the Impact of Languages and Language Policies on Children's Learning Outcomes in Nepal, accessed on 25 November, 2025 in *Understanding the Impact of Languages and Language Policies on Children's Learning Outcomes in Nepal*. UNICEF Nepal
- Rijal, C. P. (2024). Promoting inclusive basic service delivery in the federal context of Nepal: A policy position paper from the experience of Karnali Province. *Prashasan: The Nepalese Journal of Public Administration*, 56(2), 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.3126/prashasan.v56i2.75333>
- Sunuwar, D. K. (2024). *Indigenous language journalism in Nepal: A vital but challenged landscape*. Cultural Survival.
- Weinberg, M., & Phyak, P. (2015, July 20). Found in translation. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/opinion/2015/07/20/found-in-translation>.