

The Paradox of Participation: Social Diversity and Governance Accountability in Thasang Rural Municipality, Mustang, Nepal¹

Manita Hamal, Mohan K. Paudel, Ram C. Baral, Saroj R. Panta & Suveksha Panta

Abstract

This paper examines the efficacy of governance in Thasang Rural Municipality, a Kaligandaki river belt locality within the lower Mustang of Nepal. The prime issue that is examined relates to how caste and other identities shape participation in terms of accountability and social diversity. Primary data were collected from a total sample of 151 respondents, Thakali ethnic groups in the study area, in 5 different wards which seems a reasonable sample size. The findings show a limited and unequal participation of people within different groups, more specifically for the marginalized groups Dalits and Magars. The public hearings are set up officially but are not performed and very few are attended while most of the respondents have said to attend the public hearings sometimes. The manifest role of local authority regarding service delivery seems to be significant variation in ward-specific results indicating inconsistency in efficacy of governance. This implies a growing gap between Defacto and Dejure participation of citizens which calls into question inclusivity and accountability in local settings. In general, it calls for significant institutional reform and effort toward addressing social inequalities with real public participation to be ensured and services to be improved. It provides a basis for further study and has practical relevance to local governments' future planning and intervention.

Keywords: Accountability, Participatory governance, Public hearings, Social diversity

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Introduction

The elite capture occurs when the decision-making process is influenced by powerful locals, thereby excluding weaker sections (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2006). It has been observed that public forums such as public hearings are manipulated by the elite when there are no institutional safeguards; this therefore compromises their inclusivity (Platteau, 2004). Caste and social–informal power relations are often at play in defining who participates and which voices are considered legitimate in such Himalayan rural contexts (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). All of these considerations raise questions about the inclusivity and efficacy of participatory mechanisms in diverse local contexts to decentralization and federalization in Nepal.

By mandating citizen participation through public hearings, social audits and participatory approaches in the planning processes; the constitution provides for citizen participation. Factors like the strength of local institutions, public consciousness and socio-cultural aspects are determining factors for active citizen participation (Dhakal, 2019). Though measures are in place, marginalized social groups like Dalits and various ethnic communities lack representation in the decision-making processes. Thus, questioning the inclusiveness of participatory governance.

Aside from civic participation, the accountability of governance is expressed. Through people's lived experiences and enlarging civic choice and satisfaction with fairness, timeliness and transparency (Devarajan et al., 2014). While successful mechanisms of participation may increase citizens' trust in local governments and service satisfaction; unequal participation in the process can lead to unequal outcomes and disparate service experiences. While research on participatory governance and decentralization has provided much valuable insight; failing to consider the local context (Baiocchi et al., 2011). Therefore, micro level studies analyzing how social diversity in terms of caste and ethnic origin affects participation, representation and governance outcomes in rural municipalities are few. Studies analyzing the functioning of participatory mechanisms in practice, focusing on their inclusivity and accountability are minimal. Consequently, an important research gap on the link between social diversity, participatory mechanisms and citizens' perceptions of governance accountability at the local level, in socio-culturally diverse rural settings like Nepal remains.

This study is therefore significant and attempts to conduct a participatory governance accountability analysis with reference to Thasang Rural Municipality in

Mustang District, Nepal. It is characterized by both privileged and marginalized groups. Based on the principle of 'paradox of participation', the study attempts to investigate the relationship between social diversity, participatory governance and outcomes accountability. It aims to explore how caste and ethnicity shape citizen participation and representation in local governance. It is influenced by local traditions and culture and analyzes the effectiveness and inclusivity of the participatory mechanisms employed at the local level. It also explored citizens' perceptions about the fairness and timeliness of municipal services provision in different wards and investigated how caste and ethnic configuration affects citizen participation and representation in local governance. Further it will examine the functioning and inclusivity of public hearings as a mechanism for citizen participation in Thasang Rural Municipality, Nepal and compare citizen perceptions of municipal services in different wards based on fairness and timeliness.

Methods

In this research a quantitative method was used with descriptive and analytical design to assess the dilemma of participation in Thasang, Mustang. With regard to diversity, governance and accountability. The total population of Thasang is 2,856 (NSO 2021). Primary data were collected through a household survey of 151 respondents residing in five wards: Tukuche, Kobang, Lete, Ghasa and Kunjo. The selected ward represents diverse socio-demographics and forms of governance in Thasang and the samples were selected using probability based on simple random sampling design. The research questionnaire employed a Likert scale format for assessing dimensions of participation, representation and awareness of public hearings. Their effectiveness, inclusiveness and views of fairness and promptness of service delivery. The question contained socio-demographics which were based on caste, ethnicity and ward for comparisons. Secondary data including Municipal documents and policies were analyzed for background information.

Three theories were brought together to shape this study. They are participatory governance theory, which stresses on institutionalized inclusion as essential for transparency and accountability. Social exclusion and inequality theory that is about old hierarchies limiting access to participation and resources. Public service delivery and accountability framework that views perceptions of service fairness, timeliness and responsiveness as indicators of good governance. The relationship of people allows for an understanding of the relationship between diversity and institutions in shaping

participatory, accountability and service-delivery experiences. It appears that this combination of theoretical frameworks provides a coherent foundation, though with some possibly overlapping sections.

Presentation, Findings and Result Analysis

Now for the results, this study covers what came out of the survey in Thasang Rural Municipality, Mustang, focusing on social structure links to participatory governance and services. Starts with the caste and ethnic breakdown of respondents to set the social context for local governance. Then it goes into how participatory mechanisms run, like how often and easy public hearings are practice and how much citizens actually join in over the last year. Also checks perceptions on fairness and timeliness of municipal services, looking at ward levels. Pulling these together shows social and spatial differences, giving a sense of how institutions and local dynamics affect participation, accountability, service outcomes. That is the part that stands out, the way differences play out unevenly.

Table 1

Caste/Ethnic Composition of Respondents

Ward No.	Ward Names	Composition of Respondents							Total
		Caste				Ethnic Identity			
		Brahmin	Chhetri	Dalit	Thakali	Magar	Gurung	Others	
1	Tukuhe	4	5	17	14	9	3	4	56
2	Kobang	2	0	4	9	3	1	0	19
3	Lete	3	0	6	12	6	0	0	27
4	Ghasa	1	2	3	11	9	0	1	27
5	Kunjo	0	0	6	10	6	0	0	22
	Total	10	7	36	56	33	4	5	151
	Percent	6.62	4.64	23.84	37.09	21.85	2.65	3.31	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Note: Data were collected from five wards of Thasang Rural Municipality, Mustang during the period between the major Hindu festivals of Dashain and Tihar (2082 B.S.).

Table 1 demonstrates the distribution of caste and ethnic groups among the survey respondents from Thasang Rural Municipality. Therefore it illustrates a mixed and hierarchically organized population within the 5 wards which can be critically important when looking at the trends of participation, representation and access to the system of local governance and its services. In total, out of 151 respondents, most belong to himalayan ethnic Thakali group, followed by 36 hills Dalits (23.84%), 33 Magars

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(21.85%), 6.62% Brahmin, 4.64% Chhetri, 2.65% Gurung and 3.31% others. Lawoti (2007) found in a similar study that the traditional political and institutional structures of Nepal have been shaped by practices of exclusion where ruling social group enjoys inherently unequal access to resources, information and decision-making processes. Thus, based on this argument the overwhelming numbers of Thakalis across many of the wards, could imply the overwhelming socio-political power they have, particularly in the matters relating to local governance, such as public consultations, services provision and representation. Similarly, the differences observed between varied (in terms of social diversity) and uniform communities were found in some ward too. In Thasang Rural Municipality, it looks like Tukuche had the most diversified group as it represented all caste/ethnic categories, in addition to the presence of 17 Dalit respondents; the majority Magars and Thakali also inhabit Tukuche ward. On the other hand, Kobang, Lete, Ghasa and Kunjo have similar distribution with large numbers of Thakalis. In each of these Wards, Thakali is again the dominant category, which means that numerically and socio-economically, it has power over others, compared to the case of Tukuche. The presence of Thakalis in most of the Wards, along with the dominance of Dalits and Magars. This indicates that the social stratification within a population could affect the local governance processes. It is including the participation of locals in public consultations, services access and representation. The discrepancies found between variety and proper representation at the ward level for both uniform and diverse communities of study area. Regarding this Bhusal (2023) argued that participatory governance in practice rarely achieves equality of participation due to uneven access to resources, information and socio-political capital. Despite the variety of groups within a society, marginal groups like the Dalits usually face challenges to effectively participate in the decision-making processes.

Table 2

The Regularity of Public Hearings in the Rural Municipality

Wards	Response Categories					Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Tukuche (1)	5	16	20	15	0	56
Kobang (2)	2	3	5	5	4	19
Lete (3)	2	12	13	0	0	27
Ghasa (4)	0	8	10	7	2	27
Kunjo (5)	1	11	9	1	0	22
Total	10	50	57	28	6	151
Percent (%)	6.62	33.11	37.75	18.55	3.97	100

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Source: Field Survey, 2025

Note: Data were collected from five wards of Thasang Rural Municipality, Mustang during the period between the major Hindu festivals of Dashain and Tihar (2082 B.S.).

The given Table 2 above shows civic views based on Thasang Rural Municipality (TRM) of Mustang district regarding the regularity of public hearings to their local level. Although public hearings are conducted to increase transparency, accountability and participation of people. The data above presents irregular public hearings. Taking an overview, the data clearly show a diverse perception. Among 151 respondents only 10 (6.62%) strongly agree and 50 (33.11%) agree that the public hearing are held regularly, totaling 39.73% of positive perception. Very few number of the strong agree and considerable numbers of the neutral (37.75%) perception for the regularity of the public hearings point to issues related with inadequate awareness and citizen participation. These data based on the table are equivalent with the study of Guragain (2023) who stated that information forward and lack of awareness can greatly impact the public participation for effective local governance. 28 respondents (18.55%) in the above table disagreed and 6 respondents (3.97%) strongly disagreed. Therefore, 22.52% of them disagreed regarding public hearings in terms of regular and active participation. It shows the mixed responses among the respondents with most of people agreeing with the statement and others remained impartial.

The variation in the regularity of public hearings in different wards of Thasang Rural Municipality may be compared to the empirical findings of the study by Shahi (2025). His study of considerable tasks of local government shows that despite of having official participatory mechanisms based on Nepal's federal system; their effectiveness differs according to local level's capacity, quality of leadership and willingness to take responsibility in an accountable way. This supports the variation seen in the performance across the wards in Thasang RM. Furthermore the finding of conducting the public hearings but not properly implemented or functioning is related to the study of Dahal (2021) who demonstrated that institutional weakness and lack of resources is common problem at local level governance of Nepal. Hence the greater proportion of respondents that have negative perception for regularity in public hearings that seem to have some reasons and justification based on TRM.

The difference between formal mechanisms and actual participation has also been presented by Bhusal and Pandeya (2021), showing that although public hearings are in

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practice at local level of Nepal. The actual engagement by average citizens seems fleeting because of its structure and procedures. Hence it is quite possible that even if public hearings are held they may not be adequate and inclusive. All these scholarly accounts clearly substantiate the similar observations made at the Thasang Rural Municipality where there appears to be formal participatory mechanisms but they are not regularly and effectively implemented or are characterized by low citizen engagement.

Table 3

Timeliness and Fairness in Municipal Service Delivery

Wards	Response Categories					Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Tukuche (1)	2	17	24	10	3	56
Kobang (2)	1	4	2	8	4	19
Lete (3)	0	16	7	4	0	27
Ghasa (4)	3	9	11	4	0	27
Kunjo (5)	1	12	5	4	0	22
Total	7	58	49	30	7	151
Percent (%)	4.64	38.41	32.45	19.86	4.64	100

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Note: Data were collected from five wards of Thasang Rural Municipality, Mustang during the period between the major Hindu festivals of Dashain and Tihar (2082 B.S.).

The perceived quickness and fairness of service delivery by citizens in Thasang rural municipality is presented in Table 4.3 which can serve as an indicator for gauging how well the local governance system is living up to the expectation of the citizens. Quick and fairness in service delivery is the aspect of local governance that influences citizen's confidence, satisfaction and perception in general. The civic perceptions shows a moderately positive and mixed situation (with 43.05% of citizens) rating the services of the municipality as quickly and a large majority (32.45%) remained neutral and 24.50% felt that the service was not fast. This shows that civic perceptions on service delivery of the municipality despite moderate satisfaction (43.05%) still largely showed less timeliness.

The general situation of moderately satisfactory expectations of citizen along with a larger number of neutral citizens along with dissatisfaction can be attributed to the findings from empirical studies conducted by Rajbanshi (2024) who observed citizens' satisfaction on service delivery to be positive in moderate and with many complaints on service efficiency. Though the all in all decentralization to federal government structure raised expectations and increased citizen access and interaction with the local

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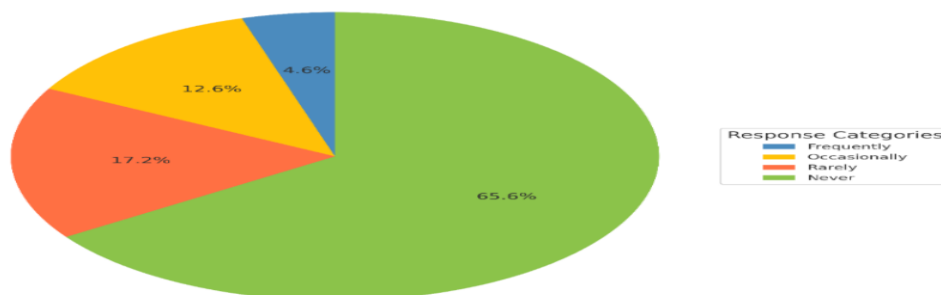
government needs to improve for citizens' trust. Citizen dissatisfaction with service delivery system is reflected in the percentage of dissatisfied citizens in general. Neutral citizens indicate that some citizens are still struggling to be satisfied and dissatisfied on service delivery, which are the mixed perceptions citizens have in Thasang; for example the citizen responses on Tukuche and Ghasa. The majority of citizens who are neutral can be tied to factors such as different service delivery mechanisms in the local governments. There are accountable and responsive to citizens' demands. Lamsal and Gupta (2022) stated that if local government services are not quick and accessible to the citizens. They may show neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction or neutral on their perceptions. It is observed in TRM concerning the timeliness and fairness of the services.

Acharya and Zafarullah (2019) stated that civic perceptions of local government performance are influenced from the existing structures and quality of government offices and capacity of service delivery organizations at the local level. When local governments don't have good systems in place and people aren't held accountable and services often perform poorly. The variation of civic perceptions among the wards of TRM are explainable with these arguments. Even though moving power to local government's decentralization can help improve public services as Adhikari (2023) pointed out that progress is often held back by slow implementation. This usually happens because the different government offices don't work together well and fail to communicate. People living in different wards of TRM have conflicting feelings about how well their local government works. Specifically they disagree on whether services are provided on time and if the process is fair.

Figure 1

Citizen Participation in Public Hearings over the past 12 Months

Citizen Participation in Public Hearings in the Past 12 Months



Source: Field Survey, 2025

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The pie-chart above in the Figure 1 highlights a major gap between the theory of local democracy and the reality on the ground. While public hearings are a powerful tool for people to speak up and hold leaders accountable they are barely being used in TRM. The finding shows a very low level of engagement where out of 151 people, only 7 (less than 5%) are actually involved on a regular basis. Most people either show up once in a while or not at all.

This part of the study shows a major disconnect. While the door is open for public hearings, almost nobody is walking through it. A massive 65.60% of the people surveyed didn't participate at all over the last year. As Bhusal and Pandeya (2021) noted that Nepal's laws encourage participation, but in reality only a small number of people are involved while everyone else is left out due to various barriers.

Adhikari (2022) explained that while the Constitution of Nepal officially gives citizens a seat at the table for planning and decision-making, most people are lagging behind in terms of actual local development projects. This shows exactly why participation in Thasang Rural Municipality is so low and people are skipping the meetings. Because they are less known about the meetings or the plans being discussed. The fact that participation is higher in some wards (like Lete) and much lower in others (like Tukuche and Ghasa) is not a coincidence. It confirms what Acharya (2018) found: the new federal system in Nepal still struggles with inconsistent planning and poor coordination between different areas. In addition, Adhikari (2023) pointed out that even though the constitution stated that everyone should be included, the government is failing at the basics such as communication and basic needs in some parts. If people (especially those in rural or marginalized groups) are not told about the meetings or find it too hard to get to them, then they simply cannot be present. Even though participation is officially written into the rules of government, it isn't actually working on the ground level. The fact that so few people participate and so many stay away proves that these public hearings are not yet accessible to all due to various reasons.

Discussion

The relationship between social diversity, engagement strategies and service delivery results in TRM was examined in this study. The outcome demonstrates that despite the official existence of participation and participation outcomes differ by population group and are constrained by institutions. Mansuri and Rao (2013) have extensively studied this claiming that in order for participatory procedures to be

successful they must be deeply ingrained inside operational institutions; their mere existence on paper is insufficient.

Public hearings are held in TRM although their infrequency and poor attendance indicate that they are more procedural than participatory. While 39.73% of respondents say they see it regularly, the same data reveals that a sizable portion of respondents are neutral (37.75%) and displeased (22.52%). Additionally, 65.56% of respondents stated that they had not attended any public hearings in the previous 12 months. This is one compelling evidence that demonstrates a significant discrepancy between the institution's offerings and public participation in the system. Systemic disparities are the root cause of the large discrepancies between institutional offer and public engagement. In South Asia the formal structures are not enough to promote genuine citizen participation because of socio-political and cultural inequalities (Bennett et al., 2006; World Bank, 2018). In TRM, lack of citizen awareness, communication strategies and institutional outreach indicate that formal institutions alone cannot ensure participation without addressing structural inequalities. Dhungana et al. (2020) also argued that poorly designed awareness raising initiatives and lack of monitoring mechanisms limit meaningful citizen participation at local level.

The high number of neutral responses in TRM is a warning sign because it shows that citizens are unsure if the system even works. This uncertainty usually happens because the government doesn't communicate clearly or they do not care about it which stops these participation provisions from being effective. Furthermore, the fact that some wards do better than others is a common trend in Nepal. Research shows that results vary based on how active local leaders are, the strength of the local office and the specific social environment (Acharya, 2018; Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2020). The data from TRM confirms this as wards like Lete and Kunjo see much better participation and service delivery than Kobang or Tukuche. Because of these big differences it is necessary to study the government at the ward level rather than just looking at the municipality as a whole (Shrestha, 2020). Finally, the differences in participation based on a person's caste or ethnicity prove that inequality is still a major problem.

Thakali being the largest share of respondents followed by Dalits and Magars could not prove that social diversity would bring equal access. This relates with the arguments made by Sunam and McCarthy (2016) stating that marginalised communities in Nepal face structural barriers for access and information and other barriers. Similarly,

Nightingale (2017) emphasizes that identities such as caste and ethnicity matters for whose opinion counts in a participatory forum. The finding in Thasang corresponds to that argument. It indicates that people do not participate on a general basis regardless of caste/ethnicity but rather it might have different patterns depending upon how it impacts them. Furthermore, elite capture is evident and that explains disparities in participation. Participation mechanisms such as public hearings were captured by people in positions of power (Paudel & Adhikari, 2019), reducing access to genuine participation for disadvantaged citizens. Low participation from marginalized groups like Magar and Dalit in Thasang despite considerable size can be explained with the same argument, as Thakali are the powerful group across the ward. This implies that decentralization without safeguards for equitable outcomes does promote existing power dynamics in society.

It can be argued that structural factors and power relations in Mustang District affect participation at the local level given the historical, political and economic hegemony of the Thakali community (Subedi, 2019). This is to match with Gurung (2017) who noted that structural and cultural barriers prevent marginalized groups from having access to decision-making mechanisms at the local level.

This study highlights a clear mismatch between the official rules of participatory governance and the way they are actually carried out in TRM. Although the Constitution (2015) and various decentralization policies aim to empower citizens and involve them in decision-making, the survey data shows that these goals are not being put into practice in a systematic way. This evidence supports the broader argument that simply decentralizing power does not automatically guarantee social inclusion or better governance (Acharya, 2018; Shrestha & Bhattarai, 2020; Bennett et al., 2006; World Bank, 2018). Ultimately, for participatory governance to be meaningful, it requires strong institutional leadership and a constant effort to break down social inequalities, fix communication gaps and improve the government's administrative ability.

Although TRM has established a participatory governance system, they are largely ineffective due to a combination of a lack of administrative coordination, social barriers, and geographical isolation. While mechanisms such as public hearings exist, they suffer from low, uneven participation across different ward levels. Furthermore the quality of service delivery varies significantly between wards. These findings suggest

that achieving genuine good governance requires a dual focus which is strengthening the institutional framework and ensuring that the participatory process is truly inclusive.

Conclusion

The research concluded that, although the municipality is socially diverse, participation in the governance process is not evenly and consistently realized and depends on prevailing social hierarchies like caste and ethnicity. Public hearing has been institutionally created but is implemented very poorly and underutilized. Many respondents stated that they were never part of public hearings, pointing to a massive disconnect between ideal citizen participation and actual participation. This shows low awareness, communication problems and unequal participation in different wards. Governance outcomes are regarded moderately well but the survey clearly shows disparity in service delivery throughout the municipality. The higher satisfaction in wards such as Lete and Kunjo where there is better participation in local governance as against Kobang and Tukuhe. The respondents have indicated that they have low satisfaction/high uncertainty of governance outcomes. This fact shows how participation and governance outcomes are closely related. The study comes to the conclusion that despite the creation of legal frameworks, social inequality for institutional and regional variations. These impact the effective operation of participatory government which is operating as a ritual rather than providing effective service delivery. The key measures for improved performance in the municipality are the promotion of social inclusion and improvement in administrative performance and communication.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

We hereby wish to declare that we do not have any conflicts of interest to disclose. However, we declare that the manuscript has not been published before and is not being considered for publication elsewhere.

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