# 'People First' Policy from South Africa to South Asia: Acclimatizing the 'Batho Pele' Principles for Public Service Delivery in Nepal

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## Abstract

*This study examines the adaptability of 'Batho Pele' principles, also called 'People First,' of South Africa to the public service delivery in Nepal, which is experiencing a federal transition. As a developing nation, Nepal's public service delivery is often hindered by inefficiency, a lack of transparency, and low citizen engagement. While the Constitution of Nepal promised inclusive and accountable governance, the public service remains beset by bureaucratic inertia, political instability, and structural exclusion. Drawing on qualitative interpretative literature reviews, the paper examines the Batho Pele principles of consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness, redress, and value-for-money in a contextual setting to reflect on their suitability to Nepal's federal, culturally diverse governance landscape. According to the analysis, Batho Pele provides not only administrative mechanisms but also a normative framework for citizen-first governance, addressing Nepal's fragmented reforms as isomorphic mimicry. The study emphasizes the importance of adaptive policy translation over wholesale or ad hoc model adoption, drawing on comparative insights from South African experiences. Finally, this study contributes to the broader discourse on policy transfer and public service innovation, offering practical recommendations for integrating Batho Pele values into Nepal's evolving federal public administration and inclusive public service delivery framework.*

**Keywords:** *Batho Pele, People First Policy, public service delivery*

## A.  INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the transformation of public service delivery has emerged as a core challenge for developing nations seeking to bridge the governance gap between state institutions and citizens, and reimagining the delivery system to prioritize citizen needs has become imperative, especially in developing and transitional democracies. Nepal, as a post-conflict and federalized country, is grappling with longstanding challenges in service delivery ranging from bureaucratic inefficiency, political instability, weak institutional capacities, and systemic exclusion to limited citizen engagement and low public accountability (Asian

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Development Bank, 2010; World Bank, 2024). Despite transitioning into a federal democratic republic in 2015 and embracing constitutional commitments to inclusion, accountability, and decentralization, Nepal continues to struggle with deeply entrenched bureaucratic inertia, poor service responsiveness, and limited citizen engagement (Asian Development Bank, 2010; World Bank, 2024; Pokhrel, 2022). Service delivery in many regions, especially rural and historically marginalized communities, remains inefficient and exclusionary. The legacy of centralized governance structures, compounded by low institutional capacity at the provincial and local levels, has constrained efforts to deliver public services in transparent, accessible, and citizen-responsive ways (Kharel & Tharu, 2019; Bhul, 2022; UNDP, 2022).

Globally acclaimed governance models with a central theme of citizens' roles in public administration provide good lessons. The Batho Pele initiative in South Africa is one such model. It was introduced in 1997 as part of a post-Apartheid public service reform effort and enunciated eight core principles to reorient the bureaucracy towards sensitizing citizen needs, such as consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress, and value for money. The core principles represent a shift away from the bureaucratic command toward participation (Republic of South Africa, 1997; Cameron, 2009). Notably, the Batho Pele approach has attracted international attention for its attempt to operationalize inclusive governance through tangible, measurable principles (Van der Waldt, 2020; OECD, 2018). While South Africa's own implementation has had mixed results, the core philosophy of putting people first presents a compelling framework for Nepal as it works to realize the democratic aspirations enshrined in its constitution.

Yet, despite these parallels, there remains a critical gap in Nepal's public administration reform discourse: the absence of a contextualized, citizen-first governance model that draws on tested international frameworks. Current reforms in Nepal emphasize structural federalism, explicitly anchored in citizen empowerment, responsiveness, and ethical state behavior (Guragain & Pokharel, 2024; Bhul, 2024). Moreover, while public management literature has increasingly highlighted the value of transnational policy learning, Nepal has yet to systematically explore or adapt the Batho Pele framework to its context. This research addresses this gap by undertaking an interpretative literature review to explore the applicability of Batho Pele principles in Nepal's evolving governance landscape.

This study employs a qualitative interpretative methodology, using literature review as the primary method of inquiry. This approach allows for a deep, context-sensitive analysis of how Batho Pele principles have been conceptualized and operationalized in South Africa and how they might be meaningfully adapted to Nepal's federal administrative setting. Through this method, the study does not merely compare policy outcomes, but interrogates the underlying institutional logic, normative commitments, and socio-political structures that enable or constrain citizen-first reform in both contexts.

### a.   Research Objectives:
- To interpret and analyze the core principles and implementation experience of Batho Pele in South Africa through a citizen-first public service delivery lens.

- To explore the contextual relevance and potential adaptability of the Batho Pele framework to Nepal's federal system.

### b. Research Questions:

- How can the Batho Pele principles be adapted to Nepal's governance and service delivery environment?

- What institutional, political, and cultural factors would facilitate or constrain the effective application of a "People First" public service model in Nepal?

This study accumulates substantial value in policy and practice. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing field of comparative public administration and policy transfer by situating 'Batho Pele' from cross-broader discourse on South Africa–South Asia learning and governance innovation. It extends the discourse on governance innovation by evaluating not just whether but how transformative policies can travel across contexts with different administrative histories and development levels (Russell & Bvuma, 2001). Practically, the research has the potential to inform Nepal's ongoing public sector reform agenda by offering a structured, people-centered model of service delivery that can increase citizen trust, reduce inequalities, and make governance more accountable. Moreover, the findings can serve as a knowledge resource for policymakers, civil society organizations, and development partners engaged in governance reform and decentralization initiatives. By drawing on South Africa's Batho Pele model, Nepal can move toward a paradigm shift—from bureaucratic control to citizen empowerment, from institutional opacity to participatory accountability. As public administration worldwide increasingly prioritizes inclusive governance under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16), learning from established models such as Batho Pele could enable Nepal to align its reforms with global standards while grounding them in local realities (UNDP, 2022).

## B. Literature Review:

The South African government developed the 'Batho Pele' initiative, which translates to "People First" from the Sotho-Tswana language, in 1997 to rectify the injustices of apartheid by transforming the public service into one that places higher priority on accountability, inclusivity, and responsiveness to the needs of citizens. The initiative was encapsulated in the White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery (Republic of South Africa, 1997), which introduced eight core principles: consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress, and value for money. Rather than mere operational goals, these principles serve as commitments grounded in values, aiming at democratizing public administration and improving trust between the government and its citizens (Van der Waldt, 2020). The Batho Pele framework is deeply rooted in post-apartheid democratic reform and is grounded in normative commitments to service quality, transparency, accountability, and citizen dignity (Republic of South Africa, 1997; Van der Waldt, 2020). It reflects a shift away from hierarchical, technocratic models of public administration towards participatory, inclusive

approaches that align with the principles of citizen-first governance. Citizen-first governance, more broadly, emphasizes empowerment, responsiveness, and ethical accountability in public institutions and has been adopted globally as a pillar of sustainable development and inclusive governance (OECD, 2021; UNDP, 2022). To assess whether such a framework can be effectively introduced in Nepal, the literature draws on policy transfer and policy translation theories. These frameworks distinguish between the mere adoption of foreign models (transfer) and the critical process of adapting and reinterpreting policies to fit local political, cultural, and institutional contexts (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Stone, 2012). Understanding Batho Pele as a transferable governance ethos rather than a rigid administrative model opens space for innovation and contextual adaptation in Nepal's evolving federal system.

Empirical studies on Batho Pele in South Africa offer a mixed but insightful view of the model's implementation, achievements, and limitations. While the principles have significantly shaped the language and intent of public service delivery reforms, their actual implementation has often fallen short due to bureaucratic inertia, uneven political support, and lack of enforceable mechanisms (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; 2015; Cameron, 2009; Ganesh & Rampersad, 2018; Govender et al., 2023). Nevertheless, where properly supported, such as in health and municipal sectors, Batho Pele has yielded improvements in transparency, service standards, and public engagement. The greatest success of Batho Pele, according to scholars, lies in its ability to create a shared public values framework that redefines how civil servants view their roles. Regardless of its emphasis on dignity, consultation, and redress, the Batho Pele assisted in reconstituting citizen-state relations in a post-authoritarian context, although the practical implications were different in regions and sectors (Van der Waldt, 2020).

In contrast, Nepal's public service delivery landscape is dominated by legacy bureaucratic systems, uneven decentralization, and low administrative capacity, particularly at the provincial and local levels (Pokhrel, 2022). Despite the 2015 Constitution's embrace of federalism and inclusive governance, reforms in Nepal have largely focused on structural change without embedding value-driven service norms (World Bank, 2020; Bhul, 2024). Although citizen engagement tools such as participatory planning, grievance redress mechanisms, and local service charters have been introduced, these efforts are inconsistent and often donor-dependent (Kharel & Tharu, 2019; Bhul, 2022; Centre for Social Change, 2022). Furthermore, comparative governance literature shows that while there is enthusiasm for local governance, the absence of a cohesive, nationally endorsed philosophy for public service, like Batho Pele, limits the institutionalization of trust-based, citizen-first service models in Nepal. Scholars like Andrews (2013) and McCourt (2013) stress that successful reform in developing contexts depends not on copying models, but on solving local problems through adaptable frameworks, an insight that directly supports the argument for translating Batho Pele into a Nepal-specific context.

When comparing the Batho Pele principles to the current state of governance reform in Nepal, key differences emerge not only in tools and institutional mechanisms but also in the values that guide service delivery. While South Africa's reforms were designed to realign public service with the principles of justice, equity, and participation following decades of exclusion,

Nepal's reforms have been driven largely by administrative restructuring and decentralization mandates (Guragain & Pokharel, 2024; Bhul, 2025). Batho Pele provides a structured ethical framework that can embed accountability and responsiveness in public administration. In contrast, Nepal's efforts have lacked a coherent, value-based service doctrine, resulting in fragmented reform initiatives. A potential adaptation of Batho Pele would involve translating its principles, such as consultation and redress, into actionable processes within Nepal's diverse governance structures, especially at the local government level, where citizen interaction is most direct. Conceptually, there is significant overlap between Nepal's federalism and the democratic intent of Batho Pele. Both envision governance that is closer to the people, more equitable, and participatory. However, the absence of a guiding values framework in Nepal marks a conceptual gap that Batho Pele could help address. While some tools (e.g., citizen charters, community scorecards) are already in place in Nepal, they lack the philosophical coherence and institutional anchoring that Batho Pele provides in South Africa. The principles outlined in Batho Pele provide not only a governance ideal but also a framework for evaluating and improving service quality. Therefore, adapting Batho Pele could help unify Nepal's fragmented service reforms under a single, citizen-oriented vision.

However, successful translation requires recognition of the distinct political, cultural, and institutional realities in each country. South Africa's post-apartheid state had a centralized governance tradition with a strong executive, which streamlined top-down implementation of Batho Pele. Nepal's governance, by contrast, is more fragmented due to its coalition-based politics, administrative capacity gaps, and linguistic as well as cultural diversity (Kharel & Tharu, 2019; Bhul, 2022). Moreover, South Africa's public sector reform benefited from a narrative of liberation, which is absent in Nepal's bureaucratic culture. Therefore, a Nepal-specific application of Batho Pele must involve local adaptations, contextually tailored training programs, and decentralized accountability mechanisms (Mojapelo et al., 2021). Rather than direct transfer, this demands a policy translation process, whereas the principles of Batho Pele are internalized by Nepali institutions through iterative, participatory reform that reflects local values, administrative capacity, and political will.

## C. 'BATHO PELE' CORE PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

Table 1. General Description of 'Batho Pele' Core Principles of Public Service Delivery

| Principle | Description |
|---|---|
| 1. Consultation | Effective public service delivery begins with active engagement of citizens. Service providers should seek regular input from citizens regarding their needs, expectations, and experiences. This ensures services are designed and adapted in a way that reflects the priorities of those they aim to serve. Public consultations, surveys, community meetings, and feedback mechanisms are key tools in fostering participatory governance (Republic of South Africa, 1997). |

| | |
|---|---|
| **2.Service Standards** | Clear and measurable service standards must be established and communicated to the public. These standards define what level of service citizens can expect in terms of quality, timeliness, and accessibility. Publishing these standards fosters accountability and provides a benchmark against which performance can be evaluated (Republic of South Africa, 1997). |
| **3. Access** | Equitable access to public services is essential to achieving social justice. This includes removing barriers related to geography, income, disability, language, or digital divide. All citizens, regardless of their background or location, must be able to access services they are entitled to, through inclusive infrastructure, outreach, and digital service options (Republic of South Africa, 1997). |
| **4. Courtesy** | Service delivery must be underpinned by a commitment to respectful, dignified, and culturally sensitive treatment of all citizens. Frontline staff should be trained to interact professionally and empathetically, recognizing the public not as clients, but as rights-holders deserving of fairness and humanity. |
| **5. Information** | Transparent service delivery requires that citizens receive accurate, timely, and comprehensive information about services, procedures, rights, and obligations. Information must be accessible in various formats and languages to ensure inclusivity and empower citizens to make informed decisions (Republic of South Africa, 1997). |
| **6. Openness & Transparency** | Citizens have the right to understand and oversight how public resources are distributed and utilized and how decisions are made. Public institutions should regularly disclose information about budgets, performance, leadership, and decision-making processes. Transparency builds trust and deters corruption. Mechanisms such as open data portals, annual reports, and performance dashboards are essential (Republic of South Africa, 1997). |
| **7. Redress** | A responsive grievance redress mechanism ensures that when services fall short, corrective actions are taken quickly. Citizens should have access to easy, non-intimidating channels to lodge complaints, and should receive fair treatment, apologies where warranted, and timely resolution. This strengthens trust and helps organizations learn from service failures (Republic of South Africa, 1997). |
| **8. Value for Money** | Services should be delivered with optimal use of available resources to achieve the greatest possible impact. This involves streamlining processes, minimizing waste, and investing in innovations that increase efficiency without compromising service quality. Citizens deserve assurance that public funds are spent prudently and effectively (Republic of South Africa, 1997). |

**Figure 1. Batho Pele Principles Outlook; Source; Author (2025)**
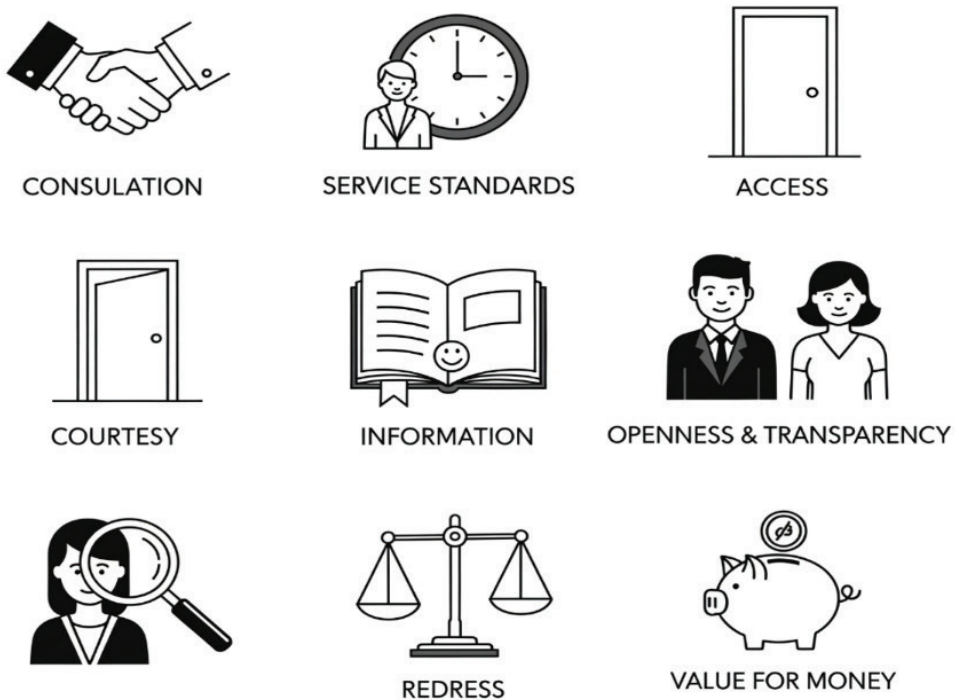


1. **Consultation**: The principle of consultation in the Batho Pele framework underscores the importance of actively involving citizens in shaping the services they receive. It mandates that public institutions must engage communities through structured dialogue to understand their expectations, priorities, and feedback (Republic of South Africa, 1997). This engagement ensures that service delivery is not top-down but reflective of real citizen needs. In practice, South Africa employed participatory tools such as izimbizo (public dialogues), service satisfaction surveys, and sectoral stakeholder forums to institutionalize consultation (Van der Waldt, 2020). However, several studies highlight that the effectiveness of these platforms varies due to insufficient follow-through and power asymmetries that exclude marginalized voices (Kgobe, Bayat, & Karriem, 2025). Consultation remains vital for building trust and legitimacy in public institutions, particularly in post-authoritarian or transitional governance contexts where historical exclusion has weakened state-citizen relationships.

2. **Service Standards**: Service standards are a critical Batho Pele principle aimed at defining clear performance benchmarks for public service providers. These standards ensure that citizens are aware of what to expect in quality, timeliness, and delivery of services. Departments in South Africa are mandated to publish service charters and outline expected turnaround times for various services (Republic of South Africa, 1997). This transparency facilitates accountability and empowers citizens to demand the services they are entitled to. Recent literature shows that while most departments

comply by producing charters, challenges persist with implementation and public awareness (Zindi & Ndhlovu, 2023). Without enforcement and citizen monitoring, service standards risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative (Russell & Bvuma, 2001). Thus, operationalizing this principle requires not only documentation but also integration into staff performance contracts and feedback systems.

3.  **Access**: Access, within the Batho Pele framework, emphasizes the removal of physical, economic, social, and linguistic barriers that prevent citizens from receiving public services. It promotes equitable service delivery regardless of a person's location, disability status, or socio-economic background. In South Africa, this principle led to initiatives such as mobile service units, improved signage, and expanded service delivery points in rural areas (Van der Waldt, 2020). Access also requires infrastructural investment and institutional flexibility to reach underserved populations. Despite its importance, literature indicates that infrastructural disparities and digital divides continue to hinder access to services in rural and informal settlements (Kaisara & Pather, 2011; Chisango & Marongwe, 2021). Addressing this requires inclusive design strategies, multilingual services, and ICT-based solutions that can extend the reach of essential services.

4.  **Courtesy**: The principle of courtesy seeks to transform the attitudes and behaviour of public servants, requiring them to treat all citizens with respect, dignity, and empathy. It reflects the ethical commitment of a government to humanize its interactions with the public, especially in societies recovering from discriminatory legacies like apartheid. South African public servants are expected to embody professionalism and customer care in their every interaction with the citizens (Republic of South Africa, 1997). Despite its normative clarity, studies indicate a persistent culture of indifference and hostility in frontline service delivery, attributed to inadequate training and lack of accountability (Lues, 2007; Molobela, 2024). As such, embedding courtesy into service delivery requires sustained investment in human resource development, supervisory structures, and citizen feedback systems.

5.  **Information**: Information under Batho Pele refers to the obligation of public service providers to ensure that citizens are well-informed about their rights, available services, and procedures. Transparent communication is foundational to building trust and accountability in the public sector. In South Africa, efforts have been made to distribute information through government portals, radio, leaflets, and signage in all official languages (Van der Waldt, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these channels is limited by literacy barriers, the disparity in internet access, and institutional unwillingness to proactively share information (Kariuki & Tshandu, 2014). The principle of information calls not only for disseminating content but also to ensure that it is accessible, timely, and understandable to diverse audiences.

6.  **Openness and Transparency**: This principle mandates that public institutions operate in an open and transparent manner, allowing citizens to scrutinize decisions, budgets, and administrative processes. Transparency is not only a governance ideal but a critical anti-corruption tool. In South Africa, Batho Pele promoted open budgeting processes,

public release of departmental reports, and community participation in decision-making (Republic of South Africa, 1997). Nevertheless, challenges such as bureaucratic opacity, lack of digital tools, and elite capture often limit transparency in practice (UNDP, 2013; Jele, 2023). To uphold this principle, public entities must embrace open data, institutional audits, and real-time performance dashboards accessible to all stakeholders.

7.  **Redress**: Redress is the mechanism by which citizens can lodge complaints and expect remedies when services fail. It institutionalizes a feedback loop between service providers and recipients to correct injustices, inefficiencies, and system errors. South African departments established grievance desks, customer complaint lines, and ombudsman offices as part of redress efforts (Van der Waldt, 2020). However, the lack of capacity to follow up on complaints and citizen mistrust in government responsiveness have undermined these efforts (Public Service Commission, 2014; 2021). For redress to be effective, it must be accessible, responsive, and backed by administrative enforcement that rectifies service failures and penalizes non-compliance.

8.  **Value for Money**: The final principle, value for money, emphasizes efficiency, frugality, and effectiveness in the use of public resources. It challenges public institutions to deliver maximum benefits with the available resources while minimizing waste and corruption. In South Africa, this was operationalized through cost-benefit evaluations, performance-linked budgeting, and independent audits (Republic of South Africa, 1997). Nonetheless, issues such as procurement fraud, political interference, and weak performance tracking persist (OECD, 2018). Achieving value for money demands professional procurement systems, rigorous evaluation, and the alignment of service outcomes with fiscal planning.

# D.  METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, as the philosophical foundations of constructivism and interpretivism, which view knowledge as socially constructed, context-dependent, and shaped by human interactions. This worldview is particularly relevant for the current study, which seeks to explore how the Batho Pele principles, originating from post-apartheid South Africa, can be understood, reinterpreted, and possibly adapted to Nepal's post-monarchical, federal governance context. Rather than aiming for empirical generalization, the research focuses on deep contextual analysis and meaning making, aligning well with an interpretive literature review as the central research design. This design allows the synthesis and interpretation of diverse theoretical, empirical, and policy sources concerning citizen-first governance. The study may also be extended in scope to include expert interviews with governance specialists or civil servants, document analysis of national strategies, policy frameworks, and implementation reports to enrich and triangulate the insights. The primary data sources include academic journal articles, government white papers and legislation (e.g., South Africa's Batho Pele White Paper and Nepal's Good Governance Act 2008, Local Government Operation Act 2017), and reports from international organizations and think tanks, such as UNDP, OECD, World Bank, and governance research institutes.

The analytical strategy follows a thematic analysis framework, through which recurring themes, such as consultation, transparency, access, participation, and redress, are identified, coded, and interpreted across the literature and policy texts. These themes are then mapped against Nepal's public service delivery challenges to assess alignment with and potential integration of the Batho Pele principles. A comparative interpretive analysis is further used to analyze how the meanings and administrative values embedded in Batho Pele compare with Nepal's public sector culture, institutional structures, and political dynamics. This enables the study to identify both convergence and divergence in values, operational capacity, and reform readiness. To ensure trustworthiness, the research embraces reflexivity, with ongoing awareness of the researcher's positionality and interpretive influence. An audit trail is maintained to document the selection criteria for literature, coding decisions, and rationale for theme categorization, thereby enhancing transparency and replicability. Where feasible, peer review or expert validation is sought to further verify findings and interpretations. These strategies collectively ensure that the study remains rigorous, credible, and contextually grounded, producing meaningful insights for policy adaptation and citizen-first governance reform in Nepal.

# E.  FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

## a.  Interpretation of Relevance to Nepal's Citizen-first Public Service Delivery

As Nepal continues its post-2015 federal transition, the imperative to deliver inclusive, accountable, and citizen-responsive public services has never been more urgent. However, structural reforms alone have proven insufficient to bridge the persistent gap between state institutions and citizens, particularly in rural, marginalized, and low-capacity regions (Pokhrel, 2022; Kharel & Tharu, 2019; Bhul, 2022). Against this backdrop, South Africa's Batho Pele ("People First") policy offers not a one-size-fits-all solution, but a normative and operational framework that can guide Nepal's quest for resilient, citizen-first governance. Rooted in principles of consultation, access, transparency, redress, service quality, and accountability, Batho Pele emphasizes a value-based transformation of public administration, an approach increasingly recognized as essential for sustainable development and democratic legitimacy (Republic of South Africa, 1997; UNDP, 2022).

### i.  Reimagining Participation Through Co-creation and Digital Consultation

The Batho Pele principle of *consultation* has relevance to Nepal's constitutional promise of participatory governance. Traditionally, Nepal's local-level planning and budgeting processes have included community meetings and ward-level dialogues; however, these often lack inclusivity, consistency, and policy impact (Guragain & Pokharel, 2024; Bhul, 2025). According to Shin et al. (2024), the consultation process can be modernized by utilizing digital platforms for e-consultation, mobile-based citizen polling, and participatory budgeting apps. Municipalities in Nepal can learn from *Huduma Centres* in Kenya or *MyGov India*, platforms that crowdsource public inputs digitally for local and

national decisions (Firestone et al., 2017). These practices nurture trust between the public and local governments while improving accountability and inclusivity.

## ii.     Institutionalizing Standards and Performance Metrics

The focus on service standards in Batho Pele is consistent with Nepal's citizen charter (which, although present, is not being used) and minimum service delivery standards. To move from aspiration to action, Nepal needs to implement performance-linked service delivery, and this will involve fielding service delivery where municipalities define, publish and monitor Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for frontline services, e.g., health, civil registration, and education. Linking these standards to Performance-Based Budgeting (PBB) and annual staff evaluations will embed accountability within the administrative culture. The integration of real-time service dashboards, as seen in Rwanda's *Imihigo contracts*, could allow the public and oversight bodies to monitor service quality transparently (UNDP, 2022).

## iii.     Enhancing Equitable Access Through Mobile, Multi-channel Services

In Nepal's remote districts, geographic, linguistic, and infrastructural barriers prevent citizens, especially women, Dalits, and Indigenous groups, from accessing timely and qualitative services (Kharel & Tharu, 2019; Bhul, 2022). In Nepal, mobile service delivery units, multilingual IVR (interactive voice response) systems, and decentralized service stalls at the ward level can all help to reinvent Batho Pele's concept of access. The consultation process can be modernized by utilizing digital platforms for e-consultation, mobile-based citizen polling, and participatory budgeting apps (Shin et al., 2024). By fostering trust between the public and local governments, these strategies improve accountability and inclusivity. Nepal's increasing mobile penetration provides a foundation for launching *service-on-the-go* models, such as SMS-based information services and mobile clinics that respond to local needs without requiring citizens to travel to administrative centres. In addition to improving access, these efforts will build a **more flexible, inclusive, and robust service architecture**.

## iv.     Building Ethical and Empathetic Public Servants

The principle of *courtesy* goes beyond politeness; it requires civil servants to embody empathy, professionalism, and respect for citizen dignity. In Nepal, public perception of bureaucracy is often colored by indifference, procedural delays, or corruption (Centre for Social Change, 2022). To change this, the government must institutionalize values-based public service training, focusing on ethics, responsiveness, and emotional intelligence (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Embedding citizen feedback mechanisms such as "Rate My Service" tools, suggestion boxes, and exit surveys in public offices can encourage behavioural shifts and promote service excellence. Ethical leadership modules, modelled after Batho Pele, can be integrated into the Nepal Administrative Staff College curriculum to mainstream these values across the civil service.

### v. Transforming Grievance Redress into Rights-based Feedback Systems

In Nepal's administration , where grievance procedure is non-operational, infrequently used, or disregarded, Batho Pele's idea of redress strikes a deep chord. Nepal can adapt redress mechanisms by establishing digital complaint portals, local grievance redress units, and ombudsperson offices that are independent, timely, and citizen accessible. Drawing lessons from India's *CPGRAMS* and South Africa's *Public Protector* Office, Nepal can create a multi-tiered system where citizen complaints are not just logged but resolved and reported with consequences for non-action. A more proactive and responsive public administration may be possible by integrating AI-driven sentiment analysis into feedback systems, which can offer early warning signs for systemic service breakdowns.

### vi. Ensuring Transparency Through Open Data and Civic Technologies

Transparency in public service delivery is not just about publishing documents; it is about ensuring citizen agency through access to relevant, timely, and actionable information. Nepal's commitment to open government can be advanced by operationalizing Batho Pele's *information* and *openness* principles through open data portals, real-time budget dashboards, and citizen-readable formats of laws, entitlements, and service guidelines. Local governments can pilot Civic Tech platforms to allow citizens to track budgets, project status, and complaint resolutions (van der Waldt et al., 2021). For example, Nepal can replicate elements of Ghana's *Open Contracting Portal* or Kenya's *Budget Transparency Tool*, both of which have increased public scrutiny and reduced leakages.

### vii. Driving Efficiency and Accountability with Value for Money

Batho Pele's final principle, '*value for money,*' is especially relevant to Nepal, where budget underspending, project delays, and rent-seeking behaviour remain chronic challenges (Asian Development Bank, 2010; World Bank, 2024). The shift toward results-based management and citizen scorecards will allow service users to directly evaluate outcomes against expenditures. Institutionalizing social accountability tools, such as public hearings, participatory audits, and performance-based resource allocation, can reduce inefficiencies and ensure that limited public resources generate equitable outcomes. Public Procurement Monitoring Offices at the federal and provincial levels should align with Batho Pele's standards for fiscal integrity and transparency.

### viii. 'People/Citizen First and System/Process Second' Policy for Nepal

The core of Batho Pele principles, putting "People First", surpasses national boundaries or geographies. It's a principle of citizen-centered governance that applies to anyone, anywhere. For Nepal, a country characterized by deep cultural and ethnic diversity, challenging terrain, and a relatively young federal democratic structure, the application of this philosophy is both urgent and transformative. Historically, the provision of public services in Nepal has less focus on what people want and need or the experiences people face (Saito et al., 2023) but is often more determined by bureaucratic formality

and top-down hierarchical processes. Shifting this paradigm requires redefining the public administration model to prioritize empathy, responsiveness, and equity. By embracing the Batho Pele mindset, Nepal can begin to build a governance system that truly serves its people, especially those in rural, marginalized, or conflict-affected areas.

This shift involves more than just adopting new policies; it demands a cultural transformation within government institutions (Russell & Bvuma, 2001). Co-creating and co-designing service charters with communities can help ensure that service expectations are locally relevant and widely owned. Leveraging digital platforms can bridge geographic gaps, making services more accessible and transparent. Incentivizing performance and ethical behaviour within the civil service can encourage accountability and foster a results-oriented culture. Most importantly, cultivating an inclusive public service ethos, where all citizens are treated with dignity, regardless of caste, class, gender, or location, can restore trust in new public governance (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). While the path to "People First" governance will be uneven, especially in a context marked by institutional inertia and resource constraints, it is nonetheless achievable. With thoughtful piloting in select municipalities, cross-regional learning, and a commitment from political and administrative leadership, Nepal can set the foundation for a genuinely participatory, transparent, and citizen-owned public administration system.

## b.   Key Barriers to Batho Pele Implementation in Nepal

Despite growing alignment between Nepal's constitutional provisions and the normative ideals of citizen-first governance, implementing Batho Pele-like principles faces significant structural and institutional barriers. These constraints are multifaceted and operate across three interrelated domains, cultural, political, and bureaucratic, which together inhibit the transformation of public service delivery into a responsive and people-oriented system.

Culturally, Nepal's public governance still operates within the confines of longstanding social hierarchies. The influence of caste, ethnicity, gender norms, and patronage networks is deeply embedded in the delivery and design of public services, especially at the local level. While the Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees non-discrimination and proportional inclusion, the lived experiences of many groups, particularly Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis, Muslims, and women, reveal persistent exclusion from meaningful participation in planning, budgeting, and oversight processes. In rural municipalities, where administrative discretion is high and civil society oversight is limited, elite control over decision-making often results in services being designed in ways that reinforce existing inequalities (Kharel & Tharu, 2019; Bhul, 2022). The cultural perception of citizens as passive recipients rather than active rights-holders further undermines principles such as consultation, redress, and courtesy.

Politically, Nepal's reform landscape and history are shaped by an unstable and fragmented polity. Coalition governments at both the federal and provincial levels,

characterized by frequent leadership changes and shifting political allegiances, have brought weak policy continuity and poor reform ownership. Local governments, though empowered by law, are frequently caught between party interests, leading to politically motivated resource allocation and limited autonomy in implementing public service innovations (Guragain & Pokharel, 2024; Bhul, 2025). Moreover, patron-client relationships between elected officials and bureaucrats distort performance-based governance. Instead of citizen demand shaping service priorities, political calculations often take precedence, thereby weakening the institutionalization of Batho Pele principles such as value for money, transparency, and service standards.

Bureaucratically, Nepal's administration continues to work with a centralized mindset, even under a federal structure. Although local governments have legal mandates for service delivery, their administrative capacity remains highly uneven. Many municipalities lack trained staff, digital infrastructure, and procedural guidelines for implementing performance-linked management, grievance redress systems, or open data platforms (Pokhrel, 2022). In addition to this lack of skilled staff and digital systems, civil servants face a promotion system largely focused on seniority rather than merit or performance, which lacks incentive for innovation and performance. Institutional fragmentation across tiers of government further hampers coordination; ministries often retain budgetary control and standard-setting powers, creating ambiguity in service responsibilities. Fiscal transfers remain unpredictable and are not tied to performance metrics, which limit the implementation of value-for-money principles. Together, these administrative roadblocks make it harder for Batho Pele to put sweet words or rhetoric into action.

## c.  Comparative Insights from African Countries to South Asia: Lessons for Citizen-First Policy of Public Service Delivery in Nepal

### i.  Common Values across Countries:

A comparative review of Batho Pele-inspired reforms in African nations such as Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana, and Uganda reveals shared values of participation, equity, transparency, and citizen empowerment. Kenya's Huduma Centres, for example, operationalize access, information, and redress through one-stop digital-enabled service hubs (Firestone et al., 2017). Similarly, Rwanda's Imihigo performance contracts integrate citizen participation into service goal setting, mirroring Batho Pele's consultation and service standards principles. In India, the Sevottam Model combines service standards, redress, and continuous improvement, anchored in ISO standards and citizen feedback loops (Goel, 2014). These common values highlight that citizen-first governance frameworks are not confined to South Africa—they resonate across the Global South. People-first governance is a universal aspiration, rooted in democratic accountability and inclusive development.

### ii.     Differing Administrative Cultures:

While values may align, administrative cultures vary greatly. For instance, South Africa's relatively unionized and professional civil service allows for the structured implementation of public reform mandates. In contrast, Nigeria and Ethiopia face challenges due to politicized appointments and weak local autonomy, like Nepal (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016). Strong central authority, performance pressure, and leadership alignment, factors that are less common in Nepal's coalition-governed federalism, are the reasons behind Rwanda's success with *Imihigo*. Decentralization in Ghana has shown some technical advancement; however, the implementation of accountability and the gap in capacity have been problematic. Nepal's administrative culture is historically top-down, compliance-driven, and risk-averse, which hinders citizen-facing reforms. Without reforms in public service incentives, civil servant rotation, and autonomy, Batho Pele-style reforms may struggle to embed. Nepal would do well to find a way to adapt the delivery of reforms in accordance with its administrative culture, not just copy the tools used in other contexts.
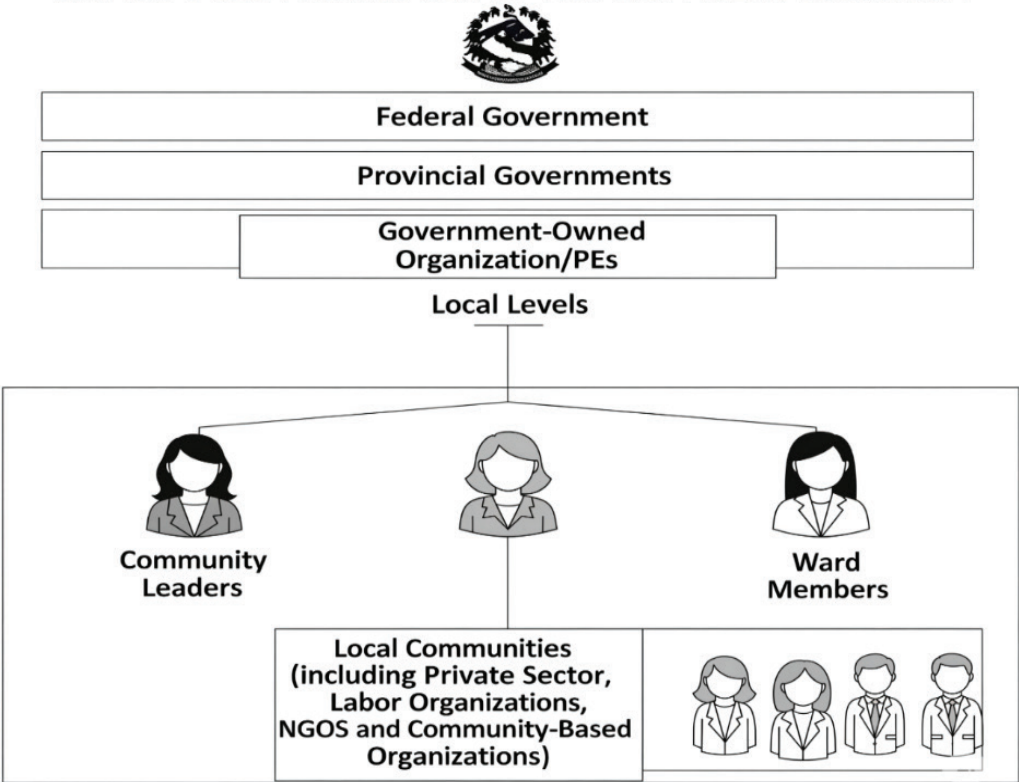


**Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Batho Pele Principles in Nepal; Source; Author (2025)**

Adapting the Batho Pele principles in Nepal requires more than a mechanical transplantation of South African policies. It requires careful re-contextualization based on Nepal's federal structure, social diversity, and political complexities. Several strategic modifications are necessary to move from symbolic adoption to systemic integration of citizen-first service principles.

First**,** localization must be prioritized. Instead of introducing a national approach, individual municipalities should be given support to co-develop citizen charters and service standards in collaboration with their own citizens. This participatory process must deliberately include marginalized communities—especially women, Dalits, persons with disabilities, and indigenous groups—to ensure that public services reflect the needs and lived experiences of all citizens. Establishing the ward and community-level consultation principle will foster local ownership and trust, both of which are critical for long-term viability.

Second**,** Batho Pele principles should be integrated and internalized into performance-based public management systems. Nepal's move toward performance-linked budgeting and planning provides a foundation for institutionalizing service standards and value for money (Asian Development Bank, 2010; World Bank, 2024). Municipalities should be incentivized to define measurable service outcomes, such as turnaround times, user satisfaction, and access rates, and integrate these into officials' annual performance appraisals. Tools such as citizen scorecards, community audits, and output-based resource allocation can help track and reward responsive behaviour, shifting public administration from process-oriented to results-driven.

Third, effective implementation of courtesy, redress, and access depends heavily on the capacities and attitudes of frontline service providers. Many local governments struggle with untrained or overburdened staff who lack the skills and resources to deliver quality services. Targeted investments in public ethics training, empathy-based communication modules, and customer service skills must be institutionalized through entities such as the Nepal Administrative Staff College and provincial training centres. In-service mentoring and peer-learning across municipalities can further promote a culture of continuous improvement.

Fourth**,** Nepal must leverage digital technologies not just for efficiency but to democratize information and create resilient service platforms. Programs like Hello Sarkar, municipal grievance portals, and mobile-based notifications can be transformed into robust Batho Pele-style digital access and feedback hubs, particularly if localized, multilingual, and integrated with performance dashboards. These platforms should allow citizens to lodge complaints, track responses, and review service metrics in real time.

Fifth, Nepal needs to institutionalize grievance redress mechanisms at the municipal level. Despite constitutional commitments, most local units still lack formal complaint-handling systems. Establishing local ombudspersons, social accountability committees, or community mediation units can address this gap. These bodies should be granted procedural autonomy, citizen oversight, and the mandate to recommend corrective

action. Successful models can be drawn from India's Lokpal, Rwanda's Office of the Ombudsman, or Ghana's Public Complaints Committees.

Without reforming administrative incentive structures, building inclusive participatory frameworks, and investing in local institutional capacity, the adoption of Batho Pele principles in Nepal risks becoming a symbolic gesture rather than a substantive transformation of governance. The most transformative element of Batho Pele is not its operational tools but its moral compass, a "People First" philosophy that reorients governance around dignity, participation, and responsiveness. For Nepal, adopting this value system across all tiers of government is not merely an administrative improvement; it is a democratic necessity. Moving toward citizen-first public service delivery demands both behavioural transformation within institutions and structural innovation in how services are designed, delivered, and evaluated (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000).

# F.   CONCLUSION

This study has explored the relevance, adaptability, and transformative potential of South Africa's Batho Pele ("People First") principles within the evolving public service delivery landscape of federal Nepal. Based on a thematic interpretation of the eight Batho Pele principles - consultation, service standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress and value for money- the research has shown that these principles offer a consistent normative framework for embedding dignity, accountability, and responsiveness within public institutions, not only as tools for administrative reform. Through a qualitative, interpretative literature review and comparative analysis, the findings highlight that several Batho Pele principles are not only theoretically compatible but practically adaptable to Nepal's post-constitutional governance architecture. Principles such as consultation, redress, information, and access resonate with Nepal's decentralization agenda and can be operationalized through participatory, digital, and inclusive models of governance. However, meaningful application of these principles requires more than legal and policy alignment. Nepal faces significant cultural, political, and bureaucratic challenges—including entrenched hierarchies, politicized civil service structures, and institutional fragmentation—that must be overcome through a context-sensitive, adaptive approach to reform.

However, meaningful translation of these principles into the Nepali context requires more than legal alignment or administrative tools. The study has shown that Nepal faces profound institutional, political, and cultural barriers, ranging from hierarchical social norms and politicized bureaucracy to fragmented service delivery mandates and capacity asymmetries across municipalities. The potential model for Nepal includes: (1) localized co-creation of citizen charters; (2) performance-linked budgeting and service benchmarking at the municipal level; (3) establishment of independent redress mechanisms such as local ombuds offices; (4) integration of ethics and empathy training for frontline staff; and (5) use of digital platforms for access, feedback, and monitoring. For policymakers, the recommendation is to pilot these principles in high-capacity municipalities, embed them in national governance frameworks, and align them with fiscal decentralization and service delivery mandates. For researchers,

further empirical inquiry is needed to evaluate Batho Pele-inspired pilots in Nepal, measure citizen perceptions, and develop context-sensitive performance indicators. Ultimately, this study affirms that the value of Batho Pele lies not only in its operational tools but in its ethical foundation, the idea that governance is most effective when it places people first. For Nepal, adopting this ethos can catalyze the evolution of a resilient, participatory, inclusive, agile, anticipatory, and accountable public service system.

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