Localization of Sustainable Development Goals in Nepal

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Abstract

This study investigates Nepal's efforts to localize Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the framework of its governance system, emphasizing the role of local and regional governments in achieving global sustainability targets. The research employs mixed methods, combining secondary data from government reports, academic studies, and international organizations to analyze progress, challenges, and strategies. Key findings highlight Nepal's integration of SDGs into national policies and localized development plans, demonstrating progress in poverty reduction, gender equality, and infrastructure development. However, challenges such as financial constraints, research and data gaps, as well as coordination issues prevail, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study emphasizes the significance of inclusive governance, community participation, and targeted interventions to address disparities and ensure sustainable growth. By aligning local priorities with global goals, Nepal's experience offers understanding of effective SDG localization in developing countries.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, localization, Nepal, local governance, inclusive growth.

Introduction

Sustainable development is a development approach that focuses on the development at present in such a way that may not harm the existence and importance of resources related to development for future livelihood and development (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. The successful implementation of SDGs may require localization at the national and sub-national levels. In the context of Nepal, the localization of SDGs involves aligning the global goals with local development plans with priority by the local bodies. The localization is essential to reflect the unique challenges, priorities, and prospects of local areas and obtain goals starting from the grassroots level (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2017).

SDG localization is the targeted approach of implementing, monitoring, and devising strategies at the local level to achieve global and national sustainable development goals. With a focus on the active participation of subnational and local governments, it emphasizes their role in setting goals, implementing strategies, and utilizing indicators for progress measurement. For recognizing the crucial role of local authorities, the process consists of essential service areas like health, education, and sanitation. Despite its historical roots in initiatives such as Local Agenda 21 and the Millennium Development Goals, evidence-based research on SDG localization remains limited (Abidoye & Orlic, 2022).

This paper explores the local implementation of SDGs globally, with a specific emphasis on Nepal's integration of SDGs at both the national and local levels. The research aims to offer a

significant understanding of the effectiveness of SDG implementation. This study aims to provide meaningful perspectives on the global interaction about sustainable development and enrich the collective understanding of sustainable development with the participation of local bodies in development plans and practices.

Methods and Materials

The research design involves in-depth analysis and integration of existing literature related to the implementation of SDGs at the local level. Secondary sources of data like government reports, scholarly publications, and national and international organizations' datasets act as the primary data archive for this assessment. The research focuses on key indicators and progress parameters associated with SDGs, with a specific emphasis on how these goals are localized within the national context of Nepal. The analysis is generally done of data after 2015 till date.

The analysis utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research methods to identify practices, risks, and progress of the localization of SDGs. It might also be a contribution to the academic discourse and information source on sustainable development, the specified goals, and its practice at the local level of any country especially in developing countries like Nepal.

Results and Discussion

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations (UN) Member States in 2015, outlines a collective vision for global peace and prosperity, emphasizing the 17 SDGs as a universal call to action. The SDGs encompass a holistic approach, addressing poverty, health, education, inequality, economic growth, climate change, and environmental preservation. This framework builds upon historical milestones, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the outcomes of global summits, including Rio+20 in 2012. The negotiation process led to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in September 2015. Notable agreements like the Sendai Framework, Addis Ababa Action Agenda, and the Paris Agreement further complemented the global commitment to sustainable development by providing frameworks for disaster risk reduction, financing for development, and climate action, respectively. These agreements emphasize the need for resilience, resource mobilization, and environmental sustainability to achieve the SDGs in an integrated and inclusive manner. The annual High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development now, serves as the central platform for SDG follow-up and review. The Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) within the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) plays a crucial role in supporting the SDGs, providing substantive assistance, capacity-building, and the evaluation of the UN system-wide implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Broad ownership and strong commitment of all stakeholders are essential for realizing the 2030 Agenda, and DSDG actively facilitates this engagement (United Nations, n.d.).

Localization of the SDGs refers to the process of adapting, implementing, and monitoring the goals at the local and regional levels to align them with the unique socio-economic and environmental contexts of specific areas (Sarkar et al., 2022). It involves engaging local stakeholders, including governments, communities, and businesses, in the decision-making process to ensure ownership and accountability. Globally, countries have adopted various approaches to SDG localization, depending on their governance structures and capacities. For example, countries like Japan and Denmark have successfully integrated SDGs into their national and local development plans, emphasizing data-driven decision-making and multi-stakeholder collaboration (Masuda et al., 2021).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development underscores the crucial role of local and regional governments (LGs) in the implementation of the SDGs, as each goal contains targets directly or indirectly linked to these entities. LGs are deemed essential for delivering basic services and promoting integrated, inclusive, and sustainable territorial development, positioning them at the core of 2030. The interconnectedness of SDGs with local governance is evident in various development pathways, including technology, lifestyle changes, innovations, and decentralized governance, creating synergies and trade-offs crucial for achieving SDG targets. LGs are recognized as significant players in the implementation of the development agenda, acting as policymakers, catalysts of change, and key actors linking global goals with local communities. The discussion identifies specific SDGs where LGs play important roles, such as poverty alleviation (SDG 1), supporting agricultural production (SDG 2), and coordinating health and sanitation efforts (SDG 3 and SDG 6). The correlated nature of SDGs and LGs emphasizes the need for appropriate national, legal, and political frameworks for effective implementation (Sarkar et al., 2022).

A detailed analysis by the Global Task Force (GTF, 2021) highlights varying levels of involvement by Local and Regional Governments (LRGs) in national reporting processes across different countries, particularly in the context of Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), which are mechanisms for assessing progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The analysis divides countries into three groups based on the extent of LRG participation, and considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these processes.

Proactive Group (10 countries): This group includes Sweden, Germany, Finland, Canada, and Spain, where LRGs have played a pivotal role in national reporting processes. In these nations, LRGs have not only participated actively in consultations and discussions but have also independently contributed to national reports, ensuring their voices are heard. For example, Sweden and Germany have established platforms for LRGs to submit their own reports alongside national government submissions (GTF, 2021). These countries exemplify a strong commitment to decentralized governance and inclusive decision-making.

Consultative Group (16 countries): Countries such as India, South Africa, Brazil, and Mexico fall into this group. Here, LRGs have been involved in extensive consultation processes, though their contributions are generally integrated into national reports rather than being presented independently. For instance, India has facilitated ongoing consultations with LRGs through state-level meetings and workshops, while South Africa has regularly engaged local authorities in workshops and public forums to ensure that national reports reflect local and regional perspectives (GTF, 2021). This group shows a cooperative approach, where LRGs' inputs are valued but filtered through national government frameworks.

Limited Involvement Group (6 countries): Chad, Bolivia, and Nepal are among the countries where LRGs have had limited participation in the VNR process. In these cases, LRGs' involvement has been more constrained, typically through less direct means such as surveys, virtual meetings, or web platforms. For instance, Bolivia faced significant challenges due to the pandemic, making it difficult for LRGs to engage in physical consultations. Instead, some input was gathered through online surveys, although these opportunities were not as robust as in other countries (GTF, 2021). Despite these challenges, LRGs in these nations have still managed to contribute to national reporting processes, albeit in a limited manner.

Minimal or No Involvement Group (18 countries): In countries like Yemen, Somalia, and Syria, LRGs have had little to no involvement in the reporting process. These nations have faced substantial barriers to LRG participation, often due to political instability, lack of resources, or centralized government control. For example, in Syria, the ongoing conflict and lack of effective local governance structures have hindered any meaningful engagement from LRGs in national

SDG reporting (GTF, 2021). Similarly, Yemen has struggled with significant challenges in implementing inclusive governance structures, limiting LRG contributions.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on national reporting processes in many countries. While some nations, such as Canada and South Korea, successfully shifted to virtual meetings and online consultations, others, including Chad and Bolivia, faced significant hurdles due to limited internet access, logistical constraints, or public health restrictions. These challenges were particularly evident in the Limited Involvement Group, where the pandemic further exacerbated the difficulties in achieving meaningful LRG participation. In Chad, for instance, the government struggled to implement remote consultation methods, leading to a delay in the reporting process (GTF, 2021).

Overall, the analysis highlights the critical role that LRGs can play in national reporting on SDG progress, but also highlights the varying levels of capacity and opportunity across countries. The findings suggest that strengthening mechanisms for LRG participation, especially in countries with limited involvement, could enhance the inclusivity and transparency of national reporting processes.

Ensuring the realization of SDGs in Nepal search for collaborative efforts with the involvement of the government, private sector, civil society, and citizens, working together to align policies, mobilize resources, and implement innovative solutions. Such partnerships are crucial to addressing challenges related to poverty, inequality, environmental sustainability, and economic growth while ensuring inclusivity and leaving no one behind. The UN plays an essential role in this collective effort, partnering with the Nepalese government to integrate SDG targets, execute initiatives, mobilize resources, and monitor progress toward the 2030 goals. Noteworthy outcomes of this collaboration include the formulation of the "Sustainable Development Goals, Status, and Roadmap: 2016-2030" and the development of a "National Integrated Financing Framework" through comprehensive reviews of various development finance policies and strategies. UN engagement has also encouraged responsible business practices and SDG-focused investments in Nepal, resulting in adaptive business ventures addressing climate change and employing innovative technologies. Through collaboration with civil society and citizens, the UN has successfully raised awareness among both the public and policymakers regarding the imperative of SDG implementation for the well-being of future generations. Crucially, the UN in Nepal has advocated the SDG implementation principle of "leave no one behind," working across all sectors to uphold international norms and standards, particularly about the rights of women and vulnerable communities, and implementing targeted policy measures to address their essential needs (UN Nepal, n.d.).

Governed federally from Singha Durbar with 753 local and 7 provincial bodies, the nation's governance structure aligns with international practices and emphasizes SDG-focused service delivery at the grassroots level. Informed by global thinking and endorsements from figures like Ban Ki-moon, SALGA, and the Global Task Force Report 2018, the approach prioritizes the importance of elected officials and civil servants, promoting resident understanding, ownership, and participation in development initiatives with a central focus on SDGs. The SDG perspective in Nepal emphasizes safeguarding humanity, ensuring well-being, equality, justice, and responsible labor use while addressing environmental concerns and fostering a culture of teamwork. Gaps identified include the need for SDG simplification, addressing higher-level agendas, and improving communication to mitigate confusion about sustainability. The modality of localization involves orienting local decision-makers, developing a process map for goal-oriented development, profiling wards, fostering connectivity, and evaluating progress (Regmee et al., 2019).

The local level in Nepal, as empowered by the constitution and laws, serves as a linchpin in the nation's development landscape. Entrusted with vital rights and responsibilities, local authorities bear the significant burden of ensuring the seamless flow of essential public services at the grassroots level. This encompasses pivotal sectors like education, healthcare, water supply, sanitation, agriculture, and infrastructure, thereby addressing the fundamental needs of the local populace. The constitution, through its allocation of specific rights and duties, fosters a robust connection between local governance and overarching developmental objectives. To translate these objectives into actionable plans, localities establish various thematic committees and collaborative groups. The collaboration between different tiers of government – local, provincial, and federal – is essential to harmonize national policies, standards, and financial transfers with the focused efforts of local governments, ensuring a coordinated and effective approach to long-term development in Nepal (NPC, 2020).

Nepal has effectively SDGs into its national development frameworks, as outlined in the SDGs Status and Roadmap 2016-2030, Needs Assessment, Costing and Financing Strategy, and Localization Guidelines. The 15th Development Plan and the 25-Year Long-Term Vision 2100 align with SDGs, incorporating specific codes for national programs. Notable progress has been observed in poverty reduction, improvements in child health and education, gender representation, access to water and electricity, economic growth, and infrastructure. However, challenges persist in addressing income inequality, achieving housing targets, and mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on various sectors. Bridging the financing gap and addressing challenges in data availability, localization, and coordination are crucial for Nepal's successful SDGs' implementation, emphasizing the need for global partnerships and cooperation among stakeholders (United Nations, 2020).

Nepal's commitment to an equity-based approach and rapid development aligned with sustainable resource use, resonating strongly with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is detailed in the country's 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR). This report highlights Nepal's dedication to mainstreaming and localizing the SDGs across all tiers of government, aiming for a prosperous and inclusive future (National Planning Commission, 2020). The report emphasizes the importance of mainstreaming nature into decision-making for positive outcomes in social, economic, governance, and environmental domains. The WWF UK supports this, identifying 12 targets within five SDG goal areas that integrate elements of Aichi Biodiversity Targets; intended to guide international biodiversity conservation efforts through 2020, but with the adoption of the **Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework** at the **15th Conference of the Parties (COP15)** in 2022, the targets have been succeeded by new goals, reflecting updated strategies and a broader approach to biodiversity protection. The nature based solutions categorized under life and livelihoods, clean energy, water and watershed management, food security, and institutional development contribute synergistically to environmental sustainability. The report delves into aspects like life and livelihood, clean energy sources, water and watershed conservation, food security, and healthy environments, aligning with specific SDGs. It emphasizes inclusive governance, peace, and partnerships to achieve SDG objectives. The interconnectedness of nature-based solutions in Nepal's local context emerges as a critical driver for sustainable development, addressing poverty, health, education, and environmental conservation (NFN, 2021).

Nepal's federal structure, with 753 local governments and 7 provincial governments, provides an opportunity for decentralized governance and localized implementation of the SDGs. Local governments are empowered by the constitution to undertake planning and service delivery in key sectors such as education, health, water supply, and sanitation, which are directly linked to the

SDGs. Various initiatives, such as the National Integrated Financing Framework (NIFF), have been introduced to mobilize resources for SDG implementation at the local level (Acharya, 2022).

Effectively leveraging the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) for the achievement of SDGs is crucial for inclusive and sustainable growth in both developed and developing nations, including Nepal. The widespread adoption of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and innovative data-driven approaches has proven its contribution to cost savings, which can be reinvested into SDG implementation. There are four strategies to highlight the importance of expanding technology access, fostering sustainability and job creation, financing and scaling up technologies, and adapting regulatory frameworks to the evolving digital landscape (Ngubane & Pillay, 2023). In parallel, UN-Habitat (2014) outlined steps for municipalities in Nepal, such as conducting needs assessments, promoting cooperative governance, aligning local plans with SDGs, mobilizing local resources, building leadership capacities, fostering ownership of projects, and engaging in development cooperation, provide a comprehensive framework for effective and localized SDG implementation in the country.

The localization of sustainable development goals at the local level is essential, guided by constitutional provisions and legal frameworks. Local governments, mandated by the constitution, are responsible for critical public services like education, healthcare, water supply, sanitation, and social services, aligning with the indicators of sustainable development. Financial decentralization empowers local bodies to collect revenue and manage resources for development, ensuring tailored programs based on local needs. In economically limited regions, optimizing resource allocation becomes crucial for enhancing public productivity.

Local governments, attuned to the unique needs of their areas, can efficiently prioritize and adapt sustainable development goals. The focus on equitable and inclusive growth is vital, and citizen participation strengthens the bond between local governments and communities, ensuring active involvement. Inclusivity is achieved through targeted interventions in marginalized areas, aligning with the global principle of "leaving no one behind." The localization process, involving legal, financial, contextual, and participatory dimensions, positions local governments as key actors in translating global objectives into impactful local initiatives. Through collaborative efforts, all levels of government contribute to a balanced and inclusive development trajectory, ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future for all (NPC, 2020).

The localization process in Nepal involves aligning local development plans with SDG targets, mobilizing resources, and building the capacity of local authorities. The National Planning Commission (NPC) plays a crucial role in coordinating SDG-related activities across different levels of government. However, challenges such as inadequate financial resources, lack of technical expertise, and limited awareness among local stakeholders persist. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges by disrupting development activities and straining public resources (Sharma, 2020).

Despite these challenges, Nepal has achieved notable progress in areas such as poverty reduction, gender equality, and access to basic services. The integration of SDGs into Nepal's periodic plans and policies, such as the 15th Development Plan and the 25-Year Long-Term Vision, reflects the country's commitment to sustainable development (Koirala, 2018). Efforts are also being made to improve data collection and monitoring mechanisms to track progress at the local level.

Some Cases of SDG Localization in Nepal
Case 1: In an effort to advance the **SDGs** at the local level, the **Nepalgunj Sub-metropolis** has launched a comprehensive initiative to localize 17 key indicators within the SDG framework.

Acting Mayor **Uma Thapa Magar** communicated that a specialized team has been formed to carry out this important localization process, using the data that has been gathered. She emphasized the importance of this undertaking, describing the **localization of SDGs** as a critical institutional resource that will require broad cooperation to implement effectively over the next five years.

In partnership with **GIZ/CDSG** (the German development cooperation agency), the city is actively working on tailoring these SDG indicators to local contexts. Despite facing challenges, particularly due to limited data availability, **Acting Mayor Thapa Magar** highlighted the significant progress that has already been made. She underlined key priorities, including **gender equality, inclusive education**, and the development of a **sustainable and inclusive economy,** with a strong emphasis on indicators that foster growth and decent work opportunities.

Moreover, **Chief Administrative Officer Jagat Basnet** drew attention to the presentations made by thematic committees, outlining both the current state of SDG localization and the goals for the future. He acknowledged that achieving SDG localization is a lengthy process but affirmed that it is steadily progressing toward success. Support from local staff is anticipated to play a key role in ensuring the effective implementation of the localized SDG goals, aligning with both global and national development agendas.

Sigdel and Keitsch (2019) reviews indicators for localizing environmental goals at sub-national and local levels in Nepal and identifies site-specific indicators through literature reviews, stakeholder consultations, and workshops. Emphasizes the need for flexible indicators aligned with local environmental concerns and overcoming its challenges in sensitizing participants about SDGs and recommends enhanced capacity at the provincial level for effective coordination. Likewise, Uprety (2019) focuses on SDG-6, centering on water and sanitation. It argues for a comprehensive approach, including location-specific and project-specific indicators within the broader global framework. The emphasis is given to the importance of designated focal persons or units within organizations and advocates for collaborative efforts to inform decision-makers. It provides a clear understanding and need for systematic implementation of SDG-6, its targets, and indicators, encouraging the integration of water and sanitation-related activities into provincial policies and plans.

Case 2: The integration of **SDGs** into local-level planning in **Mahalaxmi Municipality l**ocated in **Saptari District**, **Province No. 2** encountered significant challenges, particularly due to the disruptions caused by the **COVID-19 pandemic**. However, an analysis of the municipality's collaborative approach to governance reveals a strong sense of resilience and adaptability in overcoming these obstacles. Despite the difficulties, the municipality employed effective strategies to make the SDGs more comprehensible and relevant to local communities, prioritizing **clear communication** and **active community involvement.** The municipality's commitment to sustainable development is evident in the notable successes of **SDG integration,** which underscore the importance of **stakeholder engagement.** While these achievements are commendable, the pandemic also posed substantial challenges, such as **resource limitations** and **shifting priorities,** which affected local planning processes. The need for **flexibility** and **innovative solutions** in adapting to these changes is highlighted throughout the discussion. Mahalaxmi Municipality's experience underscores the critical role of **community-oriented approaches** in ensuring the successful integration of SDGs, with the active participation of local residents being a key factor in achieving the broader goals of sustainable development within the context of local planning (Sharma, 2020).

Sarkar et al., (2022) strongly advocate for a decentralized approach, emphasizing the need for bolstered local capacity and resource allocation. Drawing ideas from the specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified in the research, Nepal can strategically address

challenges and leverage opportunities to advance SDG implementation. Paralleling their SWOT analysis, Nepal must assess and focus on the effectiveness and capabilities of its local governance structures. The study strongly advocates for a decentralized approach, emphasizing the need of increasing local capacity and resource allocation. From the specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified in the research, Nepal can strategically address challenges and leverage opportunities to advance SDG implementation. Aligning emphasis on empowering local governance, Nepal can enhance its prospects for successful SDG localization, fostering collaborative efforts between central and local authorities.

The baseline report from the Province Planning Commission in Lumbini Province, Nepal, emphasizes the importance of conducting budget audits, mainstreaming Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), and implementing periodic planning at both provincial and local levels to ensure effective localization of SDGs. The report highlights that gender equality is a critical component for sustainable development, as it ensures equitable access to health, education, and economic opportunities for women and girls. However, persistent disparities remain in areas such as literacy rates, poverty levels, and the challenges that women face across various sectors. The report also outlines several challenges to SDG localization, including issues with data management, financial constraints, and coordination difficulties between different stakeholders, limited human resources, and governance concerns. Overcoming these challenges will require collaborative efforts involving government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international NGOs (INGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), and other sectors. Successful SDG localization will depend on targeted policy development, resource mobilization, and gender-responsive planning. Additionally, the institutional frameworks at all levels of government need to be refined and strengthened to better guide and support SD SDG localization efforts (Yadav, 2021).

A comprehensive overview of Nepal's developmental activities, primarily focusing on the Policy Orientation outlined in the 15th Plan points out Nepal's unwavering dedication to sustainable development, resilience, and the robust implementation of a comprehensive SDGs agenda. The document particularly advocates for the adoption of a 'Build Back Better' approach to enhancing disaster resilience, a strategy crucially aligned with the nation's commitment to sustainable development. Moreover, it highlights the imperative of addressing challenges arising in the aftermath of the global pandemic and offers insightful perspectives on post-pandemic recovery and reconstruction efforts. Acharya's analysis thus, contributes valuable understanding in Nepal's developmental functions and the strategic initiatives adopted to navigate contemporary challenges, forming a critical reference point for ongoing discussions on sustainable development in the country (Acharya, 2022).

Conclusion

Nepal's efforts to localize SDGs reflect a strong commitment to global sustainability frameworks through a decentralized governance model and community-driven strategies. Significant progress has been achieved in areas such as poverty reduction, gender equality, and infrastructure development, demonstrating the country's alignment of national priorities with global goals. However, there are challenges, including financial constraints, inadequate data, and coordination gaps, which have been further deteriorated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Strengthening local governance capacity, prioritizing resources for marginalized communities, utilizing technology to address data and financial gaps, and fostering inclusive, community-focused development are critical for overcoming these challenges. Nepal's experience provides understanding and information about the localization of SDGs for other developing nations, emphasizing resilience, collaborative governance, and adaptability to global and local challenges. To suggest, future

research should focus on the long-term impacts of post-pandemic recovery strategies and the recent scalability of Nepal's localized approaches to sustainable development.

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