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Youth in Local Level Planning Processes: Review of Local Impressions



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Abstract

Federalisation is one of the leading political setups for the participatory involvement of all citizens in and accountability for governance; it generally offers numerous opportunities to engage in planning, policy-making, decision-making, and implementation in development initiatives and social movements. On the one hand, Nepal has a youth population, and youths are considered both products and producers of the settings in which they engage. These reciprocal processes provide a basis for self-development and others in the community. On the other hand, not much effort has been put into enhancing the youth's capacity for meaningful participation in the development process, especially in the new federal setup. Given the background, this paper presents a critical reflection of planners and decision-makers on policies and programmes related to youth, economic empowerment of young women and youth participation in the planning process at state and local levels. Data were collected from five local governments focusing on all planning levels, from Tole consultation to Ward Assembly to Rural Municipality/Municipality to State and Federal levels. Primary data were collected at the grassroots level, where the perspective of youths, especially those from marginalised groups, about their involvement in planning processes, was captured through eight focused group discussions. Also, eight key informants, at least two elected representatives, were interviewed from the same study area.

Keywords: *Planning process, Youth, Participation, Local government*

Introduction

Youths are powerful agents to create change in the country as they have enormous capacity and the willingness to empower communities and societies and contribute to the overall development of the country. The

definition of 'youth' is, however, not universal; The United Nations (UN) considers a person who is aged between 15 to 24 years as a youth, whereas the Nepal Government defines youth as a person aged between 16 to 40 years (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The definition and understanding of

youth labels vary according to society, but the issues and concerns of youths across the globe are almost homogeneous.

Youths are considered both products and producers of the settings in which they engage, and these reciprocal processes provide a basis for self-development as well as for others in the community (Zeldin et al., 2003). Youths are human resources of society, so it is necessary to enhance their capacity for meaningful participation in development. Youth participation, thus, is generally referred to as a process that includes the involvement of young people in planning, policies, or any decision-making that correlates with their lives. It involves a population that is distinguished by caste, class, race, gender, rural areas, and urban areas. It includes initiatives that mostly emphasise educational reform, environmental quality, employment issues, justice and many other issues (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006).

Federalisation is one of the leading political setups for the participatory involvement of all citizens in and accountability for governance; it generally offers numerous opportunities to engage in planning, policy-making,

decision making, and implementation in development initiatives and social movements. “The purpose of state restructuring is multi-faceted to create a more logical organisation in which the state can perform its mandate and fulfil its responsibilities more efficiently and effectively (Young, n.d). It is also considered a tool for democratising a country or making the state more inclusive, reconfiguring the relationship between the state, the society and its people or reconciling the changing dynamics between them. State restructuring may also be a tool for democratising a country or making the state more inclusive” (UNDP Nepal, 2014).

The importance of including youths and addressing their issues in the planning and decision-making started when the Children’s Right Movement began in 1923 with statements that were made by the International Save the Children Alliance (Francis & Lorenzo, 2002, as cited in Frank, 2006, p. 352). The UN Convention on Rights of Children, 1989, states that children and young people have civil, political and economic rights which are accepted by all UN member states, excluding the United States. The modern concept of federalism was applied at the end of the

18th century in the United States Constitution; however, the use of actual words like federal and federalism was not present. Global movements such as children's rights and sustainable development have also recognised that a powerful medium to serve the youths is to empower them to influence civic affairs, including in their community and environmental planning. Through these global movements, such as the rights of children and sustainable development, the plan makers are encouraged to identify and address the needs and capabilities of youths.

In the context of Nepal, the inclusion of youths in the governance process began recently even if the young populace covers a large proportion of the total population; the youths account for over 40.3 percent of the total population, out of which 54.5 percent are females, and 45.8 percent are males (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). As the ratio of the young population is being increased, the establishment of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2008, introducing of the Youth Council Act (2072), and bringing of the National Youth Policy-2072 is the positive steps of realisation to bringing youths on board for the development and mobilisation of the youth in Nepal.

Nepal also came up with the “Youth Vision – 2025” And Ten-Year Strategic Plan after it was approved by the Nepal Government (Council of Ministers) on 6 October 2015. Participation and Collaboration section of the document states:

It is necessary to ensure the participation of the common youth in the areas of economic, political, social and cultural development. Youth leadership can be established by bringing about economic and social transformation through youth participation, collaboration and leadership. In a country like Nepal, having level-wise structures and diversities, it is necessary to promote a culture of youth participation and collaboration. In order to push Nepal forward on the multi-dimensional world stage emerging in the 20th century, active international participation and collaboration of the young generation are essential. It lays emphasis on youth's participation and collaboration through democratic values, norms and procedures.

The National Youth Council of Nepal considers the youth to be the agents of political, economic, and social change

in any country. The vision it has set is “making the Nepalese youth strong, competent, competitive and self-reliant, to build a modern, just and affluent Nepal through their meaningful participation and promotion of their leadership capacity” (for details, visit the official website of the Council <http://nyc.gov.np/en/about-us>). In fact, young people are considered a positive mobilising force for beneficial youth as well as community development globally.

As the youth population accounts for a good proportion, their participation in planning, policies and decision-making can manifest their circumstances and prosper their development as well as their community. The substance of including youths in the planning and decision-making process began way back in history and came from around the globe. However, until recently, Nepal has not been a progressive one in terms of youth issues. With the introduction of federalism in the country, the inclusion of youth in the governance process has been an agenda of the ‘new’ Nepal and youths widely support the federal system of governance. Though the federal practice is only three years old, it is now time to pose questions, i.e., whether the federal

state is able to meet the aspirations of youths, how participatory the local and provincial structures are to ensure youth engagement in the planning processes?

Sites and Participants

This study was conducted at five different Local Governments focusing on all levels of planning from *Tole* consultation to Ward Assembly to Rural Municipality (RM) / Municipality to Province and Federal levels. Primary data were collected at the grassroots level where the perspective of youths, especially the youths from marginalised groups, about their involvement in planning processes were captured through eight focused group discussions (FGDs), i.e. two in Hetauda Sub-metropolitan City (Makawanpur), one each in Koshi RM and Barah Kshetra Municipality (Sunsari), two in Aurahi RM (Dhanusha) and two in Jugal RM (Sindhupalchowk). Critical reflection by planners and decision-makers on policies and programmes related to youth, economic empowerment of young women and youth participation in the planning process at the Province and local levels were collected through eight key informant interviews from the same study areas. In other words, at least one elected representative from all

five municipalities was interviewed as Key Informants.

Perception of Youth on Federal Practices

With the recently restructured government, Nepali youths seem to have shared a sense of hope and expectations from all three levels of government. Though a small number of youths were still unfamiliar with the structure of the governments today, most of them described federalism as “*Gau gau ma Singha Darbar* with its grassroots level approach” and expressed that “there have been improvements and there are better managements now which is a merit of the federal structure.” They compared the previous and existing government and stated that “the secretary of Village Development Committee (VDC) used to use the development money for personal benefits before the federalisation and the elections of local governments. But now, the projects are discussed and prioritised in committees for budgeting. It is being changed from a ‘top to bottom approach’ to ‘the power of planning and decision-making is in the hands of local bodies which could help the community take ownership. The structure itself is a good

system for governing, but the challenge is the absence of practice of good governance” (a participant from Aurahi). The youths in this area could also observe a slight improvement in different service deliveries, such as better roads, educational infrastructure, training provisions, and convenience in acquiring legal and other necessary documents, but they were also equally critical of the structure due to its outlook on youths and their affairs. “After the federal structure, the local government has been focusing on service deliveries; the road has become better now, and it has made it more convenient to move. Also, It has become easier to work on recommendations like birth registration and citizenship. Now it is more decentralised.”

Youths from Sunsari and Makawanpur also expressed their positive notes about the structure of government, saying that it’s a good system. Countering the statements of those who believe that federalisation only increases the financial burden, the participants argued that “this system had increased political representation, strengthened efficient service delivery and protected people’s rights to speak and raise their voices.” On the issue of youths, Sunsari

participants stated, “for the first time the government realised the importance to be engaged with local youths, and they helped such youth clubs be formed”. “In the previous structure, there was nothing for youth. But now, there are opportunities for the youth. The government has been providing training for SEE and +2 passes students. There are also employment opportunities that are being generated. Before federalism, rarely any interest was given to youth issues, but now the government has made children and youth-friendly societies,” said an FGD participant from Sunsari. They expressed their feeling saying that “the change in service delivery has benefited the local people as the local government has been in place to uplift the lives of people. However, some youths, particularly in Jugal, were not optimistic about the structure and had no expectations from this government. For them, the new political structure only hurts people.”

Youth and Inclusive Planning Process

The youths hold every right to participate in planning and decision-making processes that has a relative impact on their life; youth participation does not only benefit the youth

particularly but also the society and the community they reside as a whole; young people benefit directly as a result of entertainment, educational, networking or any other aspects of the planning process and further the whole community that comprises of youth and adult get benefits as civic capacity is boosted up while considering youth act as the resources and both adults and youth gain understanding of each other’s values which further strengthens social learning (Frank 2006). Overall, this study exposed that the youths, regardless of gender, age, caste and ethnicity, were found to be enthusiastic about being involved in the planning process. However, the participation process is not indiscriminating even today. The discrimination can be seen in two ways; the first is the discrimination done against the youths in general by not counting their presence in the planning and other decision-making-related meetings and discussions. This tendency of others, especially local elites, has been expressed by youths in all five study areas. “Ward (elected) members do not consider our opinions. Even if we attend the meetings held at the local level, they treat us like a child and do not count our presence. They take decisions by themselves on the issues of youth and children without

considering our views. Sometimes, they even divert the budget allocated for youth to roads and other infrastructural works”, a participant from Hetauda stated.

It was also found that few youths were involved in wards or municipalities in campaigns, i.e., against child marriages, violence against women, etc. However, youths from Hetauda are not sure whether their suggestions on those issues were included in policies or not. “We get no information about the allocations of budgets due to lack of transparency”, they argued. A similar argument came from youths from Jugal, who said that despite having active youths in the locality, the local government does not really engage them for consultation and discussion. The government distributes the budget to the different sectors, including for youths, but as a whole, the focus is to build infrastructure ‘the sectorial budget will also be diverted and termed as youth-led programmes’. It was also found that the programmes and policies are made in the municipality at the top political level, and they will be shared with youths later. In Jugal, some sports programmes, i.e., inter-ward sports competitions, were facilitated by local governments for local youths

Mixed responses were accumulated from youths of Sunsari as they expressed that they were not informed about the selection process of plans and programmes, and when asked the local government to involve them in social clubs and organisations in Palika level processes, they were said, “We cannot involve everyone at a time. We have to do it turn by turn”. Others stated, “Local government brings in many programs for youths every year, but the active youth and women are hardly made to participate in it. Even while formulating policies, they hardly consult us. They had involved us in the planning process in the first year, but it has been close to none after that. They make their plans without involving us and send them to the government.” Dhakal (2021) also explored women’s participation in public institution governance and found that on many occasions, their participation is ‘negotiated.’ The youths stated that the youth’s effort to coordinate with the local government for planning and programmes does not help much due to the neglecting attitude of elected representatives. “Whenever youths try to participate, they get a readymade answer, i.e., you guys have already been represented, and the matters related to female youths have already been discussed”. When youths

confront the authority arguing the programmes be selected based on the needs of local youths, again, the reply would be, ‘most of the programmes have already been selected, next is your turn’ but that ‘next’ is rarely materialised. However, the youths of Aurahi stated that they were not much aware of the consultation meetings that happen during the planning process for the municipality as they aren’t informed or called for participation and the ones involved are only the leaders and representatives of certain groups. They said, “Not everyone gets notified about the toll consultation meeting that is done for the budget allocation. Only the leaders and representatives are familiar with it, and that is how they plan during budgeting. Only after the budget allocation were we able to know where and which roads were about to be constructed. I haven’t participated in any of the consultation meetings either.”

Youths of Aurahi shared an example of how local politicians disregard youth aspiration even today. The Youth Sports Club, Aurahi, which was functioning for years, had to be dissolved recently due to the lack of proper resources for sports and other programmes; despite the mounting pressure from youths, no fund was allocated. Hence the club was

dissolved. According to them, the programmes of their area are decided by higher authorities, whereas youths are only informed about them after the decisions are made. However, youths have started being involved in making policies and estimating budgets at the *Tole* level. The participants of Sunsari shared about the weakening youth-focused programme every year. They stated, “The situation has altered due to not only the lack of coordination between government and youths but also the lesser interest of the government on the issue of youth or women.”

The second type of discrimination is gendered, especially against female youths. With the deep-rooted patriarchy, there is minimal presence of young women in any sort of event organised at the local level. And they do not get equal space to put forward their demands and opinions, on the other. ‘There’s this habit of dominating women’, said an FGD participant from Jugal. They were aware of the overall discouraging environment for females as they cited the available existing data where only a few women (less than 2%) were leading local governments even if the law provisioned to increase women's participation there. According to Aurahi

participants, “Even the voices of women representatives are not given value by their male counterparts.” Such discrimination against female youths was seen more while addressing the need to incorporate their ideas/voices with the mentality of inferior groups. According to them, women, in most cases, were suggested by men, saying, “You can stand for the vice-chair (deputy mayor in other cases) position as I will be contesting for the chair or Mayor.” Such a deal has helped males to continue their superiority over females. As a result, the deputy mayor shared their helplessness on issues such as how to address increasing gender-based discrimination and argued that “the chair (or mayor) does not let her propose programmes that are pro-women.”

The female youths of Hetauda expressed that females have been left behind and are discriminated against in most of the sectors. “There are quota systems for young females, but that is just for the namesake. The youth clubs and groups are operating with some good initiatives but without incorporating issues and concerns of all youths, including females and poor ones”, FGD participants from Hetauda stated. The youths of Jugal said that

“different youth clubs are active, but neither females are in the panel of representatives of these clubs nor female related issues are taken into account.” In such instances, there are only a few such clubs or groups led by female youths. Even if there is provision to make clubs inclusive, taking every group on board, female women's representation is made only ritual by bringing some inactive females into the committees. Once there is male-dominant representation, predominately male youth-focused needs will be expressed by the representatives of clubs as well. “We try to coordinate with the local governments for plans and programmes, but they do not support youths fully. Even if they support youth-related issues, it will not meet the needs and requirements of female youths in Aurahi.” Youths of Sunsari expressed that those in power throw away the policies and programmes made by women, stating: “You’re right, but I won’t discard my plan for you women. I will speak for you.” In Sunsari, it was found that programmes focusing on young men are brought out while giving it a name of youth programmes; this way, clear discrimination towards females was seen. Further, programmes such as training in a beauty parlour, cutting,

sewing, and farming are brought out for women, but these programmes benefit older women, whereas young women are oppressed and ignored. According to them, the response of authorities could be like, “These programmes are not for you girls; you all will someday get married and go away, so these are for married women only. You can go to your husband’s village and participate there; you are still young and have a lot of time to learn; you should give this opportunity to the older women.” They could observe several quotas allocated for young women. However, the programmes are effective as ‘they are not designed as per the need of young women who are in real need of support from the government’. They suggest the government bring young females on board while planning is identified for youths and introduce ‘powerful training like computer training, vehicle maintenance and repair training specifically focusing on young females’. For female youths of Aurahi, address of issues, i.e., early marriage, rape, menstruation taboos, inequality, and male dominance culture in their society, are to be a priority, and easy access to ‘police stations’ may be a quick remedy for security.

The youths from marginalised communities, Janjatis, Dalits, and differently-abled are not adequately included in the policy-making processes even if they were found well participated in youth networks in places like Hetauda and Sunsari. Even if Janajati and Dalit youths are active and are in decision-making positions in the local clubs, ‘only a few could take part in the planning process at the local level’. These days, ‘most of the programmes’ target groups are Dalits and disabled. That is why the government bodies consulted us while policies were formulated. But the implementation part is always weak and non-transparent. They strongly feel that youths from every community need to be active to avoid discrimination. “No one could question or discriminate us if we are in influential and leading positions”, they shared.

The LGBTQI community seemed to be left behind in society, as they were not often seen in programmes and policies. FGD participants from Hetauda claimed that people from LGBTQI do not come forward openly here because of social stigmas. They argued, “LGBTIQ community has lots of challenges. They have been deprived of raising their issues. Usually, they don’t get positive

responses from people regarding their community. Programmes should be designed to support their community and develop respect among people for their community.”

As far as the expectation of youths is concerned, Aurahi youths focused on the need for life skills training for young women, men, and migrant workers to be capable of skillfully dealing with and coping with challenges and gaining better employment opportunities. Participants from Sunsari opined that the government should focus on capacity building while increasing employment opportunities for youth inside the country as well as those who have returned from abroad due to COVID-19. Priorities such as financial help to poor children, youth empowerment through sports, and motivating youths towards agriculture and livestock were also pointed out by youths to improve the status of youths. Female youths from Jugal recommended awareness and empowerment programmes to uplift females. Nonetheless, there have been initiatives by the government supporting youths, such as “*Beti padhau Beti Bachau*” campaign in Aurahi municipality, especially focusing on females, which are being done to

encourage young girls’ education while also discouraging child marriages; female students are also being provided with free sanitary pads facilities under this campaign. There are programs that run computer classes, public service exam preparation classes, training for SEE and +2 passes students, and vocational training like driving, tailoring, and electronics in Sunsari. However, it is accessible only to those youth with the skill and social capital to write proposals and get them through to government bodies.

Most participants referred to issues, i.e. ‘transparency’ and ‘informed and inclusive planning process’, to control corruption and abuse of authority. The term ‘favoritism’ was also pointed out as an issue by the youths of Aurahi and Jugal, referring to the fact that the government prioritises the issues of those who are close to them. “In the present scenario, women's rights have been ensured in the laws, in papers, and in documents. However, in many places, we can see that it hasn’t been put into practice. Not just women, but also even men have become the victims of violence”, said an FGD participant from Jugal.

Perceptions of Local Elective Representatives on Youths and Inclusive Planning Process

The study also involved interviews with at least two elected representatives as Key Informants from all five municipalities, asking about their perspectives on the youth population in their areas and the involvement of youth in planning processes. All of them acknowledged the importance of involving youths in community affairs planning and decision-making processes. One positive aspect is that all the elected representatives consulted have recognized youths as a pillar for development and, thus, claim constant interaction and consultation with them about the youth issues, needs, and suggestions and try to make the planning and decision-making process as inclusive as possible. The Ward Chair of Ward 2 of Aurahi expressed his effort to include all the problems and issues of youth while ensuring their participation. As he belonged to the youth category, he avowed to interact openly with youths about their problems and exchange ideas and advice. According to him, youths are his top priority whenever there are any developmental work. For the Ward

Chair of Barah Kshetra Municipality ward no. 6, Sunsari, every year, the number of youths in the consultation meetings is increasing, and the enthusiasm and participation of those youths helped him collect their concerns so that he presents them to the executive committee meeting of the municipality. The Deputy Mayor of the municipality described how she was involved in bringing the women, youth, and minorities for discussion before plans were to be incorporated into the annual plan and budget, and stated, “We take their advice and suggestions.” The Deputy Mayor of Hetauda stated, “We have youth clubs, child clubs, and women’s clubs. At ward level planning, they participate through their wards and at the executive level, we design programmes according to their recommendations.”

However, some elected representatives blamed youths for not being ‘as active as they should be’. For the Deputy Chair of Aurahi, youths are not as interested as they should be; youth were not really involved in budget planning, and youth participation was very low as they did not show interest, nor did the municipality show interest in their matter. She said, “Whenever we plan something for them, we expect at least

100 of them but not even 25 of them are present there. This is not the weakness of the local government. Rather, it is the weakness of the youth.” The Deputy Chair of Jugal saw many opportunities open for youths with federal setups. Still, she acknowledged the limitation, saying they were not able to include all the stakeholders and their suggestions in the planning process because the concerns and grievances of stakeholders were ever-increasing compared to the past. She even pointed out passive participation from the marginalised groups, including youths and women, despite many programmes that were tilted towards them. Even the youth participants were of a similar opinion to say that ‘youths outside of organisations are not very active and they do not participate usually. Level of negligence, i.e. less enthusiasm to volunteer in community-related works, could be seen from the side of youth to participate in the planning process. “In a way, I also see the problem in the mindset of the youth. They are not proactive in learning what programmes are being implemented to benefit youth. They are not bothered to inquire or ask their representative or hold them accountable for the promises made before elections.” Until and unless the youth take responsibility to become

more concerned about our own issues, local government will never listen to us”, said an FGD participant from Hetauda. The youths of Aurahi and Makwanpur were also seen as rather passive, as they were not inquisitive enough to ask questions about government policies and priorities.

To sum up, studies state that youth’s participation in planning processes has helped to provide new information and recommendations that not only satisfied youth’s interest but also covered community concerns, as youths tend to depend more on public services like public spaces, transportation which was also utilized by population other than youths. There are several approaches and suggestions for youth engagement in planning processes in their community. In order to strengthen the policy and practices, Zeldin et al. (2003), in their publication, have mentioned a few directions to strengthen policy and practices, which are listed below:

- Establishing a vision and maximising public awareness of youth engagement.
- Providing stable funding for places that engages youth.

- Building local capacity to engage youth.
- Identifying the competencies that youth bring to governance.
- Understanding how to sustain the innovative practice of youth engagement.

Frank (2006) presents five points to approach youth participation, which are aimed at adult and youth leaders, which include giving youths responsibility and voice, building youth capacity, encouraging youthful styles of working, involving adults throughout the process, and lastly, adapting the socio-political context. This way, he believes that youth participation will benefit the community and the youths themselves. Based on the data presented before, it can be concluded that there are some levels of overall changes seen in the society along with federalisation practices in Nepal; the changes are mostly related to infrastructures, service deliveries, and opportunities for the citizens. Though the concept of federalism is still a new idea for Nepalese, the youths appear to be quite pragmatic and hopeful toward the system due to its grassroots approach. Youths are solely concerned about the planning processes, and elected representatives have started accepting

youths as essential actors to take them on board in the process.

Conclusion

To conclude, even if making an inclusive society is the focus of the Nepali state. Still, there are gaps as far as the commitment to take youths on board in the planning process. The elected representatives consulted for this research have not only realised the limitation of today's structure but are also committed to creating a mechanism to addressing the grievances of most youths, that is, 'the youth voice and issues are yet to be taken into serious consideration in reality' is still an important task for Nepali state, especially local governments to work with. Likewise, discrimination among the youths, especially from marginalised groups, including female youths, is another concern. Acknowledging the youth's grievances by most of the elected representatives is a positive part of reviewing the weaknesses of the newly applied federal system. However, the often-stated comments by locals-- 'lesser interest of youth' to take part in the political and developmental activities' reminds Aristotle's saying that 'the masses may not greatly offend at being excluded

from office (they may even be glad to be given the leisure for attending to their own business)' (Barker, 1946, p. 228).

The perceptions of local representatives and youths discussed in the paper help conclude that there is a strong sense of having an inclusive governance structure in all three governments envisioned by the newly promulgated constitution of federal democratic Nepal. The only problem encountered today by the Nepali society is designing a comprehensive policy that encourages both youths and local communities to strengthen youth involvement as it is a significant basis for sustainable development. Local innovations in resource management and income-generating opportunities are the prerequisites to be worked out by stakeholders so that the 'career-oriented' youths could also find space in the policy. As Pyakurel (2021) suggests, the leadership should be smarter to reach the people, ensuring an 'inclusive structure and deliberative process to take more ownership of the masses'.

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