

# Participatory local governance in rural Nepal: The primacy of informality

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## ABSTRACT

**Motivation:** Nepal adopted a federal constitution in 2015 which created autonomous local governments across the country. A prime aim was to encourage more local participation in local government.

**Purpose:** To what extent do local governments in rural Nepal adopt sociological approaches — approaches that reflect local social needs and desires — to participation in decision-making?

**Methods and approach:** As part of interpretive case-studies, the author gathered qualitative evidence as participant observer of local government in five rural municipalities in Rasuwa District, a remote area on the northern border.

A framework to capture concepts of participatory governance and sociology was created to guide data collection and analysis.

**Findings:** In the five municipalities studied decisions were successively made in forums at village, ward and municipal levels. In the village, participation was considerable: all persons, all voices could be heard. But as proposals were aggregated upwards to ward and municipal levels, citizens participated less, replaced by elected representatives and civil servants.

Nepal has practically showcased successful participatory processes by incorporating diverse local groups in a range of policy areas such as community forests, or in the operation of public services such as water or schools. The present research acknowledges their success in widening and deepening citizen participation; and, further brings new knowledge on deeply rooted culturally accepted informal participatory methods in rural local governments.

**Policy implications:** Because each local government has its own circumstances in which to operationalize participatory governance, reforms should recognise the prevalence of informalities in rural municipalities and dominance of formalities in urban municipalities.

**Keywords:** local governance, Nepal, participatory governance

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## 1 Introduction

Nepal revitalized local governance in 2017. The new institutions and processes of local government are structured to adapt federalism, which was formalized with the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution. A total of 753 local governments were established encompassing 460 rural councils (36.81% of the population) and 293 urban municipalities (63.19% of the population). Although Nepal's local democracy is designed in accordance with the ideas of representative democracy, participatory aspects in local governance, local development, and local public service delivery have flourished (Bhusal & Pandeya, 2022; Pandeya, 2015). A feature of this evolving participatory local governance is that all formal structures of citizen participation programmes at the local level are uniformly dictated by the federal Local Government Act (2017), irrespective of the guarantee of autonomous local governments in the constitution.

This research assumes the Local Government Act (2017) does not adequately recognize the needs of rural municipalities, specifically in offering participatory opportunities to ordinary people in local decision-making. This hypothesis is of particular concern when it comes to studying local participatory mechanisms of a country with more than 120 local languages and over 100 ethnic communities. While most of the formal structures of municipal citizen participation programmes are uniformly devised by federal law (Bhusal, 2019), local sociological factors shape informal or semi-formal participatory mechanisms in both rural and urban municipalities (Acharya & Zafarullah, 2022).

A common pragmatic feature of sociology and participatory local governance is their objective: both aim to provide public space for ordinary citizens to have their say in the making of their society. Sociologists advocate for building social institutions that address the needs of ordinary people who inherit particular human, cultural, social and even political values (Du Bois & Wright, 2002). Participatory local governance aims to create and strengthen local social and political institutions through which citizens can influence decision-makers and combat elite interventions in decisions that affect them (Fischer, 2016). The analysis presented in this article is framed around these two seemingly distinct yet interrelated disciplines to understand how ordinary people in rural municipalities have been offered the opportunity to participate in decision-making machineries.

Following this introduction, section 2 offers a brief overview of the participatory governance and sociology literature to understand the conceptual division of participatory apparatus in societies (informal) and government (formal). The aim is to bring key common ideas from two distinct bodies of literature to understand sociological aspects of participatory governance. Section 3 highlights the methodological considerations of this research. Here, the explanation is focused on describing the local governance landscape of a rural district of Rasuwa in Nepal, along with methods to generate the necessary data. Key findings are presented section 4, followed by section 5 which discusses what these findings offer to the studies of sociology and participatory governance. Section 6 concludes with some final remarks.

## 2 Understanding participatory decision-making

The literature on participatory governance seems to focus on the formal structures of local democracy while the sociology literature concentrates on analysing informal and semi-formal mechanisms in communities. This conceptual distinction is fairly helpful in discerning participatory mechanisms in rural and urban settings because, as Albrecht (2022) also points out in the US context, rural needs are unique and differ from urban expectations. Several useful approaches to citizen participation programmes have been examined in the literature to understand and explore rural vs urban sociology (Choithani et al., 2021), politics (Bräutigam, 2004), and governance (Huntington et al., 1999).

The empirical literature on citizen participation programmes at the local level show two different sites, both of which are of interest to sociologists and participatory governance scholars. First, most of the participatory programmes are organized in communities where ordinary people are able to express their views about local government programmes or highlight their expectations of the municipal authorities (Mayka, 2019). Evidence claims that such events are driven by community values; and, in most cases community leaders shape the deliberation methods within such participatory forums (Saguin, 2018). True social values are explored and developed, and then refined in accordance with the municipal requirements to get funded or implemented (Bhusal & Breen, 2021). This site generally appears in informal settings.

In contrast, the second site to exercise citizen participation is located at official platforms (Lowndes et al., 2006). Local governments around the world have increasingly implemented their participatory programmes through formal structures in which selected (sometimes randomly) individuals of different identities and capacities participate in decision-making mechanisms (Font & Motos, 2023). Such structures are appropriately recognized and aligned with the relevant municipal departments to ensure that each participatory activity is reported to the municipal authorities (Bobbio, 2018). Organized mostly by officials (unlike participatory methods in communities and neighbourhoods), formal mechanisms of citizen participation programmes offer varying roles to ordinary people: from exploring policy options to collaborating with a given municipality to implement small-scale developmental programmes (Heller & Rao, 2015).

These two streams of citizen participation programmes provide the basis to understand both the sociological dimension of participatory governance, and the participatory dimension of sociology. Both dimensions aim to increase the opportunities for ordinary people from different walks of life to participate in public forums, express their personal and community views, and thus help local authorities to make decisions that ultimately benefit societies. A striking fact to further dissect the sociological dimension of participatory governance is that rural communities express more attachment to participatory efforts than urban residents because, as Andrews (2009) attests, social capital in urban areas has been deteriorating alarmingly. The participatory dimension of sociology, however, has recently been transcending all types of society. The informality of the former and the formality of the latter have perhaps been instrumental in detaching communities from participating in informal settings and attracting citizens to participate in formal settings.

Who participates in participatory forums, how participants are selected, and the degree to which they freely deliberate the issues are some of the common questions asked by both participatory governance scholars and sociologists (Eisenstadt, 2013; Fung, 2006). Here, the distinction is simple. Sociologists' concern with collective decision-making is about the participants' "presence." In other words, sociologists care about whether appropriate social representation in participatory forums has been maintained. They would look at the faces of, among others, women (or marginalized gender), historically excluded community members such as Dalits in South Asian contexts, aboriginal people in Australia and first nations in Canada, differently abled people, those who are geographically remote, and also minority language groups.

The participatory governance scholars, however, tend to focus on the "voice" aspect of participation. Because most of the participatory activities are expected to take place in the formal spaces of government (Pateman, 2012), this stream of scholarship anticipates systematic citizen deliberation within the given participatory platforms (Elstub, 2018). A number of theoretical and methodological approaches to citizen deliberation have been developed in the literature, which are not only helpful in analysing the efficacy of participatory efforts but also

in implementing citizen participation programmes in a given context (Carpentier, 2016). What matters most in terms of providing participatory spaces or enabling democratic citizen deliberation within participatory platforms is not what theories of participatory governance claim nor how methodological prescriptions have been suggested. Rather, it is the political ideology, often the leftist wing, that determines the extent to which ordinary people are facilitated to participate in any social or political decision-making (Font & Motos, 2023; Wampler & Touchton, 2022).

### 3 Methodology

Designed as qualitative research, this research has greatly benefited from the data generated via indirect participant observation of several local governance processes in a remote district of Rasuwa over a two-year period (2018–2020). I had the privilege to work as a federal government employee in that district for two years to co-ordinate local government affairs, which offered me an extraordinary opportunity to understand Nepal's rural local governance, take fieldnotes, and conduct interviews with local people. This did not compromise my professional ethics in any way. All participants of this research are aware of my work, as I mentioned its aims and objectives prior to speaking with them.

Home to some 45,000 people of diverse social identities, Rasuwa district is located near the northern border of China in Bagmati province. There are five rural municipalities in Rasuwa, encompassing 27 ward committees (sub-municipal structures). Each municipality has its own "council" with 40 elected members on average. The number of members in the council is determined by population size. Table 1 summarizes these case-study municipalities with their relevant statistical information.

**Table 1: Statistical description of case study municipalities**

Rural municipality	Number of ward committees	Members in local council	Executive committee members	Main ethnic community
Amachhodingmo	5	27	13	Tamang, Gurung, Dalit
Gosaikunda	6	29	14	Tamang, Bramhin, Gurung
Naukunda	6	29	14	Tamang, Gurung, Bramhin
Kalika	5	26	13	Tamang, Bramhin, Dalit
Uttargaya	5	27	13	Tamang, Bramhin, Gurung

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics (2018)

The analytical framework is built on dominant themes of sociology and participatory governance. The review of sociology literature in section 2 provided crucial insights into the key elements (informal mechanisms) of social decision-making, which were then placed and contrasted with similar elements (formal mechanisms) found in the participatory governance literature. This exercise developed a unique theoretical lens to answer the principal research question: how ordinary people participate in the decision-making mechanisms in rural municipalities in Nepal. Table 2 summarizes these analytical elements.

**Table 2. The analytical framework**

Theoretical base	Analytical domain	Key focus	Expectation
Sociology	Informal mechanisms	Participants of diverse social identities	Making decisions by and for ordinary people
Participatory governance	Formal mechanisms	Recognition of voice expressed in participatory forums	

Source: Author's own construct.

The research recognized the comparative aspects of rural and urban municipal contexts but did not endeavour to design a comparative study. However, previous research on Nepal's

urban municipal contexts provided important insights on different aspects of local decision-making processes (Acharya, 2010; Bhusal, 2018; Pandeya & Shrestha, 2016). These insights were used to prepare fieldnotes, design questions for semi-structured interviews, and analysis of official publications. Key mechanisms for ordinary people to participate in local decision-making were identified on the basis of previous research in both rural and urban municipalities.

The qualitative data were gathered via indirect participant observation, involving the dominant participatory methods of all five local governments in the Rasuwa district of Nepal. The researcher was privileged to work at the District Coordination Committee as a permanent member of staff of the government of Nepal. This assignment was helpful for participating in many local government processes and thus it was possible to prepare fieldnotes, conduct interviews, and also access relevant but unpublished official materials. Although none of the participating municipal officials was informed about this research, the anonymity of the case-study municipality, interviewees, and members of several participatory forums has been respected. Ten individuals (two elected politicians, four local staffers, three ordinary people, and a local journalist) were contacted to conduct interviews for this research, all of whom had some form of connection with at least one of the participatory apparatuses in the case-study rural municipalities.

## 4 Key findings

While this research generated important first-hand insights only from the remote district of Rasuwa on the northern border, these provided solid references, albeit with caveats, for understanding the overall landscape of Nepal's local governance. The findings are clustered to explain how different institutions and process at the local level are linked to the studies and practices of sociology and participatory governance.

### 4.1. Participatory governance in Nepal has deep social roots

Providing public space to ordinary people in governance has been one among other contested political issues in Nepal; yet several societal values describe historically how liberal Nepali societies are in offering participation opportunities to ordinary people in making and implementing local decisions. From political science perspectives, offering participation to people with diverse identities and interests has generated contestation, conflicts, and ambiguities as the country suffered from a centuries-old, centralized, Hinduism-based closed atmosphere. Until the early 1990s, Nepali political leaders often ignored the values of meaningful citizen participation in decision-making, fearing their leadership would be challenged by enlightened citizens (Khadka, 1986). In contrast, they seemed to portray Nepal's political system as the most democratic, bottom-up and open to ordinary citizens with the hope that international community would continue to trust Nepali politicians, their political system, and the way they were incorporating citizens' voices in decisions (Gellner & Karki, 2008).

Historical analysis of Nepali society provides visual portrayals of ordinary people's participation in the country's politics, public administration, and governance (Messerchmidt et al., 1983; Pande, 1982). The notion of political participation emerged only after the



introduction of democracy in the early 1950s, and local and national elections were designed in a way that ordinary people of any caste, gender, and economic strata could cast their vote, though the fairness of such elections was critiqued (Gurung, 1984). Public administrative institutions were opened up to ordinary people so that educated individuals could compete in merit-based examinations for securing public-sector jobs (Panday, 1989). And, some local-level decision-making apparatus were redesigned such that ordinary people (or stakeholders) could participate in raising their views in public spaces, implementing local decisions (often mandatorily) and leading local infrastructure projects in rural areas (Khadka, 1986). The efficacy of these initiatives, however, is unclear, particularly due to their institutional and procedural limitations in terms of providing democratic, meaningful, and adequate public space for these citizens (Hachethu, 2006).

In recent times, the proliferation of civil society and activist groups have both contributed in exploring and advancing public spaces for ordinary people to participate in the making of decisions that affect their social and individual lives (Maharjan et al., 2020). Moreover, reforms in different spheres of government have brought significant scale, amount, and depth of participatory platforms for ordinary citizens in decision-making at the federal, provincial, and local level (Acharya, 2021). It is anticipated that these new domains of participation will increase, widen, and deepen the chances of ordinary people in deciding the type of society they want to build through collective actions (Government of Nepal, 2015).

#### **4.2. Local decision-making apparatus in rural Nepal are diverse**

As many as five diverse yet interrelated institutions and processes of local decision-making are distinguished for the analytical purposes (Table 3). These apparatus offer spaces for ordinary people to participate, and explore their preferences in informal, semi-formal, and formal settings, and thus influence decision-makers to prefer certain choices with the aim of improving their societies. Informal forums feature unrestricted public spaces in neighbourhoods; semi-formal forums provide relatively limited official avenues; and, formal forums stipulate spaces for selected representatives of ordinary people—which altogether create a participatory atmosphere at the local level (Bhusal, 2019). The question of whether each forum alone or a group of these forums collectively generate insights into the studies and practices of sociology remains less scrutinized. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that participatory local governance in Nepal is shaped by the presence and views of ordinary people insofar as (a) local circumstances in each local government permit; (b) community-based organizations are used meaningfully; and (c) public deliberations in local communities bring positive outcomes in local decisions (Pandeya et al., 2020). The question of differences across rural and urban municipalities in offering participatory opportunities to ordinary citizens has not been adequately tested either in the academic literature or in any official publications.

**Table 3. Local decision-making apparatuses in Nepal**

<b>Local government entity</b>	<b>Who participates</b>	<b>How decisions are made</b>	<b>Implications to sociology</b>	<b>Significance to participatory governance</b>
Local council	Elected politicians	Majority-basis with some discretionary power of mayor	Social values and norms are discussed but not necessarily taken as criteria to make decisions	Ordinary people have less access to this entity
Participatory planning process	Elected politicians, local staff, leaders of community-based organizations, ordinary people	Consensus-basis with technocratic analysis of proposals developed by informal, semi-formal and formal forums	The wellbeing of citizens is greatly deliberated throughout the planning process	Citizens of different skills, interests and background participate in different forums
User's committees	Stakeholders	Consensus-basis	The larger benefit of stakeholders lies at the center of these committees	Non-elected representatives of ordinary citizens hold key positions
Sectoral management boards	Leaders of communities and ordinary people	A combination of consensus and majority-basis	Users of certain policy area are considered as the main beneficiaries	Citizens with relevant expertise dominate these committees hence limiting scopes for ordinary people
Community-based organizations	Household representatives in a given neighborhood	Consensus or majority-basis	Social values and norms are considered the fundamental driving forces to operationalize these organizations	Lay people have chances to participate in such organizations

Source: Authors' own construction



### 4.3. Local councils (Sabhā in Nepali) offer formal space to participation

There are 753 local councils in Nepal. Depending upon their locality, density, level of infrastructural development, and internal income, the councils are categorized as metropolitan, sub-metropolitan, and municipal (rural and urban) councils. A typical local council is formed of members of the executive board led by the mayor, chairpersons, and members of ward committees. The size of the council depends upon the municipal structure, number of elected representatives, and demographic diversity in terms of minority communities. In addition to the representation of political parties in the council, council members represent social clusters such as the Dalit community, gender-related issues, and other minority groups who belong to diverse social, linguistic, and religious communities (Bhusal & Breen, 2021). Although the representation in the council is political, its decisions are not necessarily only of a political nature. Members representing diverse social clusters bring socialist-leaning approaches to public policy problems, with the possibility—though not certainty—of adopting such approaches as the basis of making decisions. This provides a research opportunity to review the council as a sociological institution, with implications for sociological studies, though councils are designed as a representative political entity at the local level (Government of Nepal, 2017).

Council-level decision-making remains the most contested issue because of two contrasting approaches, though none is explicitly mentioned in any legislation that covers Nepal's local governments. The first relates to the electoral/representative politics approach. Practitioners and critics often argue that local councils are the most proximate political spaces for people's local representatives to make decisions. Political contestations in the form of majority-based voting in councils produce decisions that genuinely reflect what most people want of the council. Political ideologies such as communism or capitalism are guiding mindsets on which local councillors (in other similar settings) base their decisions (Barber, 2003), but we have no plausible evidence of Nepal's local decision-making that would reveal the degree to which local councillors rely on their respective political "isms" while participating in or working towards decision-making processes.

The second approach concerns consensual decision-making. Although it varies across municipalities—particularly in rural and urban settings—Nepal's local councils designed after the promulgation of new federalist constitution in 2015 are devised to promote consensual decision-making (see Byrne & Shrestha, 2014, for instance). Nevertheless, the implementation of local councils in the first five-year tenure (2017–2022) produced mixed results (Bhusal & Acharya, 2023), with significant implications for the studies and practices of local democracy in Nepal. It appears that not one council has made decisions only by majority (or voting), nor that has adopted "consensus" as its fundamental principle of making decisions.

For sociologists, the implications of the institution and processes of local councils in rural or urban communities are fairly insignificant. In circumstances where councillors really try their best to make consensus-based decisions, and make efforts to convince their fellow councillors to consider social values and norms while making decisions, these may not always be the basis of the final outcomes because councillors are elected not on the basis of social values or norms but of political affiliation. Social values and norms, nonetheless, play key roles in local elections across many local governments in Nepal. A similar impression is

observed in the empirical studies of participatory governance literature (Bhusal & Breen, 2021). Although local councillors claim that they represent communities and societies of varying types, the institutional design and decision-making processes are not open to all citizens. When citizens cannot directly enter into participatory processes, there is a question of whether we can call these participatory (see Dacombe & Parvin, 2021, for details on how participatory processes can create inequality among ordinary people).

#### **4.4. Participatory planning blends formality and informality**

Participatory planning is an annual and recurring decision-making process that involves citizens of different types, interests, and capacity in the making of (a) local public policies; (b) small-scale development programmes; and (c) reforms to improve the way local public services are delivered. It involves three diverse but interrelated bottom-up participatory-deliberative stages in which nine different activities are carried out. In the first step activities are organized at the neighbourhood level where citizens assemble mostly in informal settings. Ordinary people bring forward fringe issues based on their social rather than political needs. Demands prepared in these settings are forwarded to the second stage of the planning process, where comparatively educated, socially recognized, and politically informed participants deliberate. With the close facilitation of municipal officials, deliberation in the second stage considers issues such as budgetary ceilings, policy and programme guidelines, and immediate social needs in making decisions. The shortlisted policy recommendations, programmes, prescriptions, and public service demands are escalated to the third stage of the planning process. This stage is narrower than previous two as it offers the possibility of participation only to selected individuals, though these individuals claim to represent a range of social, economic, professional, and political groups within the given municipality. Decisions made at this stage are subject to the Council's approval.

Analysis of these three stages or nine activities suggest comparable decision-making styles, with significant implications for both sociologists and participatory governance scholars. Unlike local councils, citizens are free to participate in any activity of the annual planning process where they can raise any issue that characterizes common social problems. At the lowest level—also known as *Tole Bhèla*—planning forums offer unrestricted spaces for people of diverse identities, capacity, interest, and communities. Free speech and people's simple expressions reflect the need to advance social values through municipal interventions. They do not aim for big transformations but present their daily needs, and which will strengthen bonds among their fellow neighbours. These aspirations are then structured by the organizers with the hope that the upper-level activities in the planning process will consider them in making decisions. A step above the *Tole Bhèla* is the *Ward Bhèla* which is relatively formal, although citizens are not prohibited from participating. The role of ordinary people in this particular forum is somewhat reduced because of the mandate of this semi-formal forum, in which experts, activists, and technocrats dominate deliberations, giving full consideration to the proposals forwarded through *Tole Bhèlas*. Although deliberation in this forum aims to negotiate between municipal officials and ordinary participants, experts and other lobbyists broker these processes. Eventually, some form of consensus is required to take the proposals up to the Integrated Planning Forum, where only invited members can participate. In the final stage of the planning process, proposals are

further considered in the hope that citizens' voices raised in Tole Bhèlas and refined in Ward Bhèlas are recommended to the Council.

From sociological perspectives, the entire planning process enables ordinary citizens from diverse backgrounds to sit together in municipally recognized platforms. The subject of their deliberation can be anything relevant to their neighbourhood; however, observations of many municipal planning processes suggest that participants of all three planning forums concentrate their discussions on their public livelihoods. In other words, the development of their society appears to be their main concern during public deliberation in Tole Bhèla, Ward Bhèla and the Integrated Planning Forum. The collective outcome of such forums, however, remains questionable particularly from a sociological perspective because there seems to be no mechanism in the planning process that would ensure that participants' voices are adequately heard. The participatory governance analysis of the planning process brings the insight that as it progresses upwards the less ordinary people are able to participate, deliberate and thereby influence decision-makers.

#### **4.5. Users' committees emerge from social values**

Local governments in Nepal have been making and implementing decisions through users' committees for over 40 years. The early years of these users' committees show that only a few policy areas such as irrigation projects (Shivakoti & Ostrom, 2001), community forestry (Varughese & Ostrom, 2001), and small-scale infrastructure projects (Messerchmidt et al., 1983) attracted local government officials. Reformers of the post-1990s local governance introduced relatively robust methods to incorporate ordinary citizens in users' committees, making these (a) more participative; (b) able to capture broader policy areas; (c) accountable to stakeholders and local government; and (d) responsible for overseeing the projects even after their completion (Ministry of Local Development, 2003). The agendas of social inclusion in such committees have more recently become a prominent social development phenomenon (Ministry of Local Development, 2011).

The analysis of institutional design, objectives, and their processes suggest that users' committees genuinely inherit sociological attributes. Placed at the lowest level of local governance, they have very specific yet double-edged social roles. On one edge, their task is to work closely with municipal authorities in improving the quality of very specific services in which they are involved. On the other, they are expected to continuously guard the beneficiaries of certain municipal services. In between these two edges is the role of community mobilization for which users' committees in Nepal are considered effective, especially in rural municipalities.

Such committees feature two prominent aspects of participatory governance: presence and voice (Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, 2018). The presence aspect is interpreted as a mechanism by which people from diverse individual and social backgrounds participate in users' committees. The prevailing legislation requires municipalities to form such committees when small-scale development works or other local public services worth 0.6 million Nepali rupees are to be implemented in and by communities. The legislation stipulates that executive members of the committee must be selected by consensus, ensuring the participation of women and other marginalized communities. Most important of all is that at least one woman must be selected either as chairperson or the treasurer of the

users' committee. The second aspect of participatory governance refers to how members of this committee express their voice that (re)shapes decisions. Although the connection between participants and municipal decisions is generally questioned in many participatory settings (Font et al., 2016, for instance), users' committees in Nepal are relatively exceptional. Observations made when conducting this research found that users' committees have considerable delegated discretionary power to make and implement decisions within the budgetary limitations and specified policy guidelines. Unlike other participatory platforms at the local level in Nepal, users' committees operate in a narrow space which enables the committee members to make implementable decisions.

#### **4.6. Sectoral management boards offer cautious inclusion in local governance**

Sectoral management boards are non-elected entities of local governments. A range of policy areas are managed by such boards in which diverse social groups in the given area participate as decision-makers. Unlike users' committees, sectoral management boards are represented by beneficiaries of a particular service (for which the board is created), as well as relevant individuals such as local politicians and technocrats. A typical sectoral management board comprises nine to eleven members, each carefully nominated to ensure the inclusion of socially diverse communities. The leader of the sectoral management board is generally appointed by the local council. Other members include ex-officio local government personnel, socially reputed individuals, technical experts, and service beneficiaries. Local government public health institutions are very popular in terms of how health management boards have been formed over the last 50 years (Regmi, 2010). Community forestry is another policy area in Nepal which successfully adopts such boards (Schusser et al., 2016), as do other sectors such as sewage management, water-supply systems, and schools.

The involvement of beneficiaries in the management of local public services has been a longstanding service-delivery strategy in Nepal. In the early years of its conception in 1950s, the strategy aimed to temporarily maintain the delivery of local services by local people. The purpose does not seem to offer actual participation opportunities to local citizens but to hold local public office in the absence of local bureaucrats. As part of devolution reforms in the 1980s, followed by democratic reforms in the 1990s, the idea of creating management boards gained a momentum with the expansion to diverse policy areas at the local level. These reforms brought significant interventions of the then-central government in terms of delegating decision-making power to the board executive committees, hence deepening participatory management in the delivery of local public services (Ministry of Local Development, 2002).

What is the difference between local public services being delivered by the regular local bureaucratic apparatus as opposed to management boards? Unlike extended local units of the central government, management boards can appoint their own staff, set the rate of service charges, procure the necessary logistical support, and introduce reforms to change problematic processes in delivering services. To a sociologist, this distinction provides insights into how social values and norms are considered in exercising these powers. Interviews with a group of members representing local hospital management committees in Lumbini province in western Nepal revealed that they constantly keep an eye on how staff behave among those seeking a role in public service. Their efforts are always focused on

reforms to improve service-delivery mechanisms so that beneficiaries with special needs, such as socially disadvantaged, elderly, and differently abled people are adequately met. In contrast, a participatory governance enthusiast would interpret the structure and processes of management board as the principal participatory social platform to offer a meaningful opportunity for local participation. Although restricted to some socially reputed individuals and to experts in the relevant policy field, management boards genuinely offer local people the chance to have their say in the way a particular public service is charged, managed, and delivered.

#### **4.7. Community-based organizations bring diverse sociological perspectives**

The social history of Nepal shows the richness in terms of both the pervasiveness and adoption of community-based organizations (CBOs) across all ethnic groups (Pandeya et al., 2020). In a country with over 100 ethnic communities, each ethnic group has its own unique CBO. This indicates that CBOs in Nepal are not uniform and that their purposes differ from one community to another. Yet the fundamental structure and decision-making procedures show various common features. The first is that almost every household in a given territory is represented in their CBO. Some communities are more progressive in sending women to participate, while others are frustratingly behind in this regard. Traditions, beliefs regarding gender roles, and the capacity of individual family members are observed to be the reasons behind why some communities have a better gender balance in their CBOs. The second attribute of CBOs is how they select their leaders. Unlike democratic societies where elections are considered vital to select leaders, Nepali CBOs are unique in that their leaders are chosen by consensus. The elders, those who are more vocal, and often elites frequently lead such organizations. Nevertheless, the degree of acceptance of such leaders and their decisions is found to be high among the CBO members. The third and perhaps most important aspect of CBOs in Nepal is that their objective is to advance the quality of their social values rather than fostering or undermining political subjects. Each member of the CBO is considered to be apolitical, which ensures that they tend to address non-political issues.

Two types of CBO in Nepal must be distinguished for the purposes of this article. The first refers to those organizations whose institutional design is influenced by the traditional beliefs of the community in question, and that their purpose is to serve a specific cluster of the community. Such clusters may have explicit or implicit connections with a certain religion, caste, gender, or geography. In contrast to other social organizations, they do not tend to be registered with local governments, although local governments can monitor their activities. Traditional CBOs play several informal roles in making and implementing local public policies. These include mobilizing community members to participate in local decision-making processes as well as drawing on them to implement small-scale projects devised by municipalities. The second type of CBO features modern forms in terms of structure, processes, and objectives. The prevailing Local Governance Act envisages having Tole Lane Organizations (TLOs) as the modern form of CBOs, in the hope that such organizations will be useful in partnering with municipalities to perform a range of local activities including but not limited to sewage management, street-lights maintenance, open markets management, and maintenance of small-scale infrastructure (Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City, 2018).



To the studies of both sociology and participatory governance the message is clear. Conventional CBOs follow the approach more systematically as their primary focus is limited to the welfare of their community members. This is why such organizations are often blamed for having narrow perspectives on social development (Messerschmidt, 1986). Modern organizational forms, on the other hand, focus on participatory governance as their guiding theoretical underpinning. The concern of this latter group is to provide participation opportunities to those who can and wish to participate in local decision-making processes. The design of these organizations features attributes of democratic governance through which organizers aim to widen and deepen the participation of underprivileged communities in making local public policies, determining development programmes, and service-delivery mechanisms (Huntington et al., 1999).

## 5 Sociology and participatory governance: are they compatible?

At first glance, both disciplines put “ordinary people” at the centre of their studies and practice. Pragmatic modern sociologists support social welfare policies that are ultimately “... anti-elitist, generous, [and] empathetic” (Spector, 2002, p. 112). Practitioners of participatory governance also seek a conducive institutional atmosphere that will enable and encourage ordinary people to participate in making policies that affect them (Fischer, 2016). What is particularly interesting is that both disciplines believe that ordinary people are not simply the objects of their society, but the shapers of their neighbourhoods, governing principles, institutions, and decision-making processes. Social values and norms are of course guiding philosophies for sociologists, yet they are also reflected—albeit in more democratic and rights-based approach—in the works of participatory governance scholars. If sociology and participatory governments are indeed compatible, then it is also possible to analyse any participatory processes that generally operate with, for, and by ordinary people from a sociological perspective.

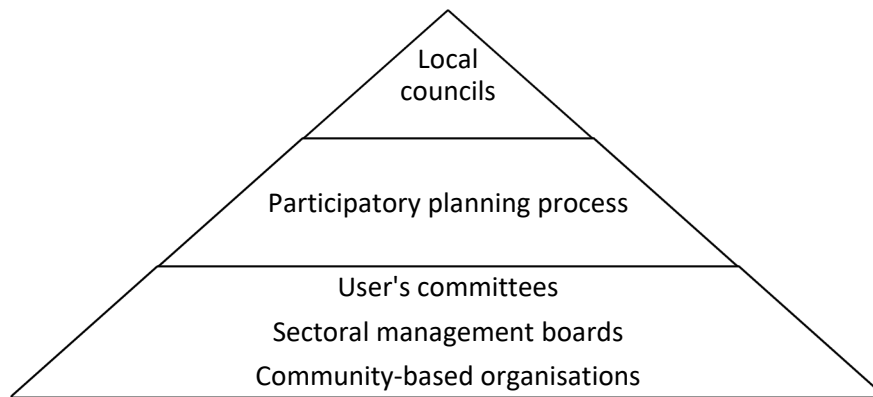
This article has identified five diverse local decision-making mechanisms that define the extent to which Nepal’s local governance is participatory. The analysis indicates that these mechanisms are not only designed to make decisions in a participatory atmosphere, but also to prioritize issues that are sensitive to human needs. Citizens in a given neighbourhood are not only passive spectators in the participatory platforms, but also seek to influence decision-makers through their expressions—both individual and collective. What is important is that, as we saw above, individual efforts to influence decision-makers rest upon the person’s expertise, ability to voice their concerns, linguistic knowledge, and perhaps intellectual socio-political capacity. Collective attempts to influence decision-makers build upon participants’ social values, norms, and customs. Both approaches are officially—though variably—intended to enable citizens of diverse identities and communities through the participatory decision-making platforms.

The implications of these participatory platforms to both disciplines are noteworthy. For participatory governance scholarship, the analysis above clearly suggests that the more formal the participatory processes become, the fewer chances the ordinary people find to participate and have their say in the available participatory forums (Figure 1). This can be an interesting angle to see the linear processes of participation through the eyes of sociologists.



It is possible that sociologists believe that as participatory processes become more formal, the chance of bringing “social values, norms and needs” becomes less important. These insights thus produce a common message to the studies of participatory governance and sociologists: formal decision-making processes can possibly narrow the participatory opportunities of ordinary people, hence limiting the chances to bring social values, norms, customs, and other beliefs (religious included) to bear in actual decisions.

**Figure 1. Decision-making process at the local level in Nepal**



Source: Author's own construct based on Local Self Governance Act (2017).

The pyramid-based structure of Nepali local decision-making is analytically important for both sociologists and participatory governance scholars. The lowest level in the pyramid is the users' committees, sectoral management boards, and CBOs, because these three different types of participatory platforms operate mostly informally at the neighbourhood level. The type of participants and their objectives are to foster their individual and collective values and beliefs, rather than only to support municipal decision-making. They find these forums more comfortable than in other mechanisms such as the participatory planning process, which are higher up in the pyramid. In other words, participatory platforms in the upper levels of the pyramid are comparatively less attractive to ordinary people.

The analysis of individual platforms offers the same insights: structured spaces limit the presence and voice of ordinary citizens. Social values and norms are abandoned in unstructured environments which, in turn, may frustrate participants. To begin with CBOs, the analysis suggests that such organizations are great at offering participation opportunities everyone in a given community. They are extremely useful for citizens to explore, develop, and raise their individual and collective wishes. The formalization of their aspirations remains fragile, however, as formal municipal mechanisms may not necessarily recognize the CBOs' activities. Where CBOs are more formalized and useful in mobilizing communities, the possibility of linking their decisions in the municipal handbooks becomes higher (Butwal Sub-Metropolitan City, 2018).

The case of sectoral management committees and users' committees function better in terms of both sociological and participatory governance perspectives. Both forums offer unrestricted spaces for ordinary people to bring up sector-specific issues, and are empowered with decision-making authority. The design and processes of both committees

resemble with what Goodwin (1983) asserted long ago of the four key variables of sociology: social values and norms, activists-based, grounded in critical sociology, and inclusive to those who are marginalized for whatever reasons. Our analysis confirms that these four characteristics are undoubtedly present in the institutions and processes in sectoral management boards and users' committees formed by municipalities in Nepal.

As we saw in the case of participatory planning process, discussions developed in Tole Bhèlas are mostly abandoned where they originate. In most cases, Tole Bhèlas are organized by CBOs, and municipal officials rarely turn up at their deliberations. When there is no municipal authority present in the spaces where social values and norms are explored, developed, and deliberated by ordinary people, there is little chance of escalating the issues discussed to formal channels (Bhusal & Pandeya, 2022). A similar fate can be observed in the deliberation of management committees, although they have slightly better chances of influencing decision-makers.

For the purposes of this article, the institution and processes of municipal councils have been presented rather strictly, if not negatively, from both participatory governance and sociological perspectives. The participants of local councils are democratically elected representatives who claim to bring up social issues put forward by ordinary people (through diverse mechanisms of local decision-making) in the council meetings; yet, the councillors are obliged to abide by technical obligations such as budgetary ceilings, policy guidelines, and their own political manifestos. Although councillors are supported by several auxiliary participatory wings such as the budget committee, their efficacy remains fairly questionable from the viewpoint of sociology. Research confirms that the mandate given to these wings is not on how social values and norms are brought into formal deliberation in councils but to concentrate on aligning proposals with technical requirements.

## 6 Conclusion

The insights presented in this article neither aim to criticize formal structures of local decision-making nor to instinctively appreciate informal gatherings at the neighbourhood level. Rather, the aim is to cautiously claim that informal gatherings feature better social spaces for ordinary people to think, refine, and raise their social values and norms to be reflected in actual municipal decisions. Participants in informal settings participate because they have the feeling of belonging, of being a valued member of their society. That feeling motivates them to stay active in informal platforms rather than in formal deliberations, with the hope that their voices regarding their own social values and norms will be heard and escalated upwards. However, as the research on public deliberative forums has consistently pointed out, there remains the question of whether voices heard in informal forums of any public decision-making are adequately transmitted to formal mechanisms (Boswell et al., 2016).

These discussions help us to carefully establish compatibility between the two diverse fields of study: sociology and participatory governance. The objective of these two fields is same: to involve individual citizens in the process of advancing their values in the society they foresee as their future. However, the way citizens participate in such processes greatly differ from the type of participatory institutions and their internal working procedures, as we noted

in the case analysis. Traditional forms of participatory platforms are more concerned with social values, customs, and norms as their fundamental objective. Modern institutions, on the other hand, are tilted towards increasing and deepening the democratic participation—preferably in representative models—with more focus on technocratic elements.

Although the subject of this research may have narrower implications for establishing any causal connection between participatory governance and sociology, it signals the need to conduct robust and relatively large-scale comparative research by developing an analytical framework bringing components from both disciplines. Another prospect is to conduct large-scale research to compare rural and urban municipalities with the same question as this research endeavoured to answer.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This research has not used any quantitative data. The primary data sources were generated and collected using qualitative techniques. Fieldnotes, and official publications that the research has used are available in the Nepali language. Interview materials were also noted in the Nepali language. Such notes can be available to the relevant authorities associated with this journal upon their request.

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## ETHICS STATEMENT

This paper reports analysis of primary data. The persons from whom data was collected gave their free, prior and informed consent, their data has been kept confidential and has been used anonymously.

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